

Hermitage sees surge in laypeople who want a monastic experience

by [Kate Olson](#) in the [May 10, 2017](#) issue

When Paula Huston first met the monks of the New Camaldoli Hermitage, a Benedictine monastic community perched on cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean, she was in her late thirties and considered herself an atheist.

“I don’t think I’d ever even talked to a priest before, much less seen a monk, and here were these monks, and they were dressed in their interesting and strange white robes, and it just struck me so hard that this was really a radically alternative way to live,” she recalled.

Huston is now one of hundreds of oblates, or people who affiliate with the monastic community while living in the world. They follow an ancient rule by St. Benedict that continues to guide daily living for monks and oblates alike.

When she first came, Huston noticed the “deliberate kindness” of the monks.

“After having gone through a divorce and divorce court, I was used to a much different attitude from people in my life,” she said. “It was also the first time I had to look inside of myself. . . . What was I so angry about, and what had I been missing for years and years and years?”

The oblate program was launched in 1984 at a sister location in Berkeley, California, called Incarnation Monastery. At first there were only 15 oblates. By 2002, the numbers had swelled to over 350 oblates affiliated with both the monastery and the hermitage, which is in Big Sur. Now the number is around 700.

By comparison, a total of 24 monks in the community have taken full vows. While the number of monks and nuns at many monasteries and convents has declined dramatically in recent years, there has been a large increase in the number of laypeople who want to associate with religious communities.

“People know intuitively that there’s something missing from their diet,” said Father Cyprian Consiglio, who is prior at the hermitage. “What’s really starving is our souls. We keep trying to fill it up on the outside, not realizing that there is this fountain

inside.”

Consiglio described how Benedict’s rule lays out the day for the monks with proportion and balance among three activities: prayer, work, and study. The monks combine solitude and community, living as hermits in individual cells and gathering for prayer throughout the day.

“It’s not about escaping ordinary life,” Consiglio insisted. “It’s about coming back to ordinary life and realizing God was in this place, too, and I just didn’t see it before.”

The shared commitment of monks and oblates to live by an ancient rule may not only ensure the survival of monasticism but also bring its way of life to a wider world.

“We’re living a life with our staff and our friends and our retreatants, beside the inner core community of monks, and hopefully we are modeling a way of life, modeling a different way to be in the world,” he said.

The monks practice *lectio divina*— listening for the voice of God speaking through scripture or other texts.

Columba Stewart, a scholar of monasticism and a Benedictine monk at St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, explained that what Benedict meant by “listening with the ear of your heart” is “paying attention to what’s inside and what’s operating at depths below the level at which we conduct most of our day-to-day lives.”

“The real dynamic of the rule is to move from the self to the other,” Stewart said. “What Benedict is doing is providing a charter for making a community that really endures and that can encompass a variety of people. They’re all there for some purpose that’s really beyond themselves, this spiritual quest, and they recognize they can’t do it by themselves.”

Time in solitude and silence at the hermitage helped Huston face anxieties that had gripped her since childhood.

“I was so busy, so stressed out all the time, always in a rush, never on time, way too many things on my ‘to do’ list,” she recalled. “I consciously handed that lifetime of anxiety over to God and said, ‘I can’t get rid of it on my own.’”

Longing for a deeper relationship with God, Huston adapted the teachings and practice of prayer followed by the monks to her life outside the monastery. Huston prays at home in the morning and evening and practices *lectio divina*. And, as St. Benedict recommended, she spends time every day doing physical labor, working on the land. Huston's writing studio now doubles as a modified hermit's cell, where [she combines writing and prayer](#).

"I used to see what I was doing as my path to the Pulitzer Prize," Huston said. "That is long gone. Now it's my way of serving." —*Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*