Shared solitude: My life as an oblate

by Deborah Smith Douglas in the April 5, 2005 issue

Becoming an oblate—literally “one who is offered”—means joining a particular Christian monastic community as a kind of lay associate. An oblate takes no vows but does affirm the intention to live by a modified version of the order’s rule, while continuing one’s “ordinary life.”

Oblature is a tradition that dates back to the ninth century. In 2000 Catholic News Service reported that there were more than 25,000 lay associates of U.S. Catholic religious orders—which represented a 75 percent increase in five years.

The community in which I am an oblate, New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur, California, is made up of some 20 monks and more than 500 oblates. Perhaps in a time of steadily declining monastic vocations, oblature will be a way for the Rule of St. Benedict to flourish.

The increasing interest in oblature suggests that many Christians—Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Lutheran and Mennonite as well as Catholic—are finding in a relationship with monks and nuns, and in an adapted fidelity to monastic practices, a depth of prayer and a strength of support for social witness that is unavailable elsewhere.

All oblates have their own stories about how they made their way to the particular community that feels like home to them. In *The Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris recounts her experience at St. John’s Benedictine Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. Others have been drawn to the Dominicans, with their characteristic gifts for scholarship and preaching; to the Franciscans, for their joy in God’s creation and identification with the poor; or to the Carmelites, for their insight into suffering and salvation. For many, the Benedictine charism of stability, hospitality and conversion of life is key. The Camaldolese Benedictines seem to attract those drawn not only to Benedictine values but also to contemplative prayer.

My own road to New Camaldoli, while apparently as winding as the drive that connects the hermitage to California’s spectacular coastal Highway 1, in retrospect

seems straight and clear. As a young wife and mother, I read Esther de Waal's seminal *Seeking God*: *The Way of St. Benedict*, which opened the treasure chest of Benedictine wisdom for laypeople. For more than 20 years, first as a Presbyterian and then as an Episcopalian, I have made annual silent retreats in many different settings in North America and Britain, usually among Benedictines. So when I first visited New Camaldoli several years ago, I had already acquired a taste for silence and solitude, and had long practiced an attenuated form of Benedictine spirituality.

In choosing New Camaldoli, I was hoping only for the familiar grace of a week's retreat, with the added bonus of a view of the Pacific. I had no idea what "Camaldolese" implied, or what a difference it would make to me.

Though I had a nodding acquaintance with St. Benedict, I had never heard of St. Romuald, the founder of the Camaldolese branch of the Benedictine family tree, begun early in the 11th century (some five centuries after Benedict). As a Benedictine abbot with a singular gift for solitude, Romuald valued not only the communal life of the monastery, but also the greater solitude and freedom of the hermit. Honoring both the Rule of St. Benedict and the ancient tradition of Egyptian anchorites, Romuald devised a way for hermits to live a monastic life, alone together, under the Rule and in obedience to a superior.

This respect for solitude and silence permeates the hermitage in California's remote Santa Lucia Mountains. Even the architecture reflects it. The monastic enclosure contains not a traditional cloister, but a collection of tiny round houses in which individual monks live: they are alone, together. The guest accommodations (nine private rooms and five more distant hermitage-trailers) are designed to honor the solitude of those on retreat. Consequently, the silence and the invitation to contemplation are extraordinarily deep.

This commitment to shared solitude is also evident in the daily practice of silent meditation after Vespers. When the final office of the day has ended, those who wish to remain file in silence from the chapel into the vaulted rotunda beyond, which is empty except for a central altar holding the consecrated host. Monks and guests take small rugs from a stack and arrange themselves among cushions, Zen fashion, on the stone floor. After a moment of settling in, with the sound of prayer beads being taken out and shoes shuffled off, the lights are extinguished, except for a single candle. People sit and pray in total silence. At the end of 30 minutes, the prior strikes a single bell-like note on a singing bowl. People stand, bow toward the altar,

put on their shoes and leave, still in silence.

That half hour of wordless adoration is my favorite part of the beloved hermitage day. I love the sense of time-out-of-time, and the space itself—round and empty as a bowl, resonant as a bell. It is an inhabited emptiness, a living silence. A shining darkness, as St. John of the Cross might say. The rotunda reminds me of the hold of a ship, a large enclosed darkness beneath a turbulent surface. Sitting there reminds me that we are pilgrims, fellow travelers, holding still but heading home, moving purposefully through deep darkness. Alone, together. Immersed in God (as St. Catherine of Siena put it) “as a fish is in the sea and the sea is in the fish.”

An increased desire for contemplative silence and the interior spaciousness and strength that contemplation both offers and requires is the gift that New Camaldoli and its monks continue to give me—not only during my retreats, but in my life at home. As Sister Joan Chittister reminds us, “Contemplation is not a private devotion, it is a way of life. It changes the way we think. It shapes the way we live.”

The oblate connection, like any relationship based on Christ, partakes of the mystery of the Trinity itself. Grace sustains it. Silence and solitude give it space. It is not that Camaldolese oblates are always running off to the hermitage, or (God forbid) constantly asking the monks for advice and direction. Oblature is not about intimacy but about community—a microcosm of the communion of saints, the kingdom of God.

Deep habits of prayer, strong disciplines of hospitality and simplicity, ascetical practices (such as fasting) that have been too much for me to sustain before—even with the help of an exceptional spiritual director and the support of the Eucharist—are possible now through the borrowed strength of the Camaldolese Rule and community. Because of the oblate bond, I am able to stay more firmly rooted in my own promises and praxis: I can remain more peacefully in God’s presence, motionless in silent adoration in the hold of that ship even as I move out, heading ever further into God’s own sea—alone and together with the whole communion of saints.