

Oblates and Communities: Planning for the Future

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Topics to Cover

- Fundamental importance of communities
- Reality of declining communities
- Two possible approaches
- Expand membership - 1
- Expand membership - 2
- Develop independent Oblate institutions
- Conclusions

Fundamental importance of communities

- Benedictine spirit very much in sync with today's seekers
- Much of the growth and energy are with oblates and volunteers, plus retreatants and guests
- **Oblates and volunteers need a home community under the traditional model**
- Communities are shrinking and closing
- Need to find a way to preserve or supplement Benedictine communities

Reality of declining communities

- Traditional membership in decline
 - **No longer seen as intrinsically superior**
 - Universal call to holiness
 - Monastic life still valuable as school of the Lord's service
 - But it might be only as **part** of the Christian life
- Oblates alone cannot reverse the decline
 - No voice or vote in communities
 - Do not have any significant community responsibility
 - **Cannot sustain the community** without core members

Two possible approaches

- 1. Expand community membership, where possible, to create a new type of community.
- (But not all communities are willing or able to expand their membership.)
- 2. Make Oblates independent of the home community.

Expand Membership – 1

- Expand temporary vows indefinitely
 - Remove pressure to make a lifetime monastic commitment
 - Current theology requires any vow to be permanent
 - Easy to develop a new theology based on universal call to holiness
 - Main commitment is to the Christian life
 - Monastic life could be appropriate for some phases of one's life (or even most of one's life)

Expand Membership - 2

- Expand the role of **some** oblates and volunteers
 - Effectively become **associate members**
 - **Voice and vote on most matters**
 - **Real responsibility**
 - Financial arrangements, like tithing
 - More formation
 - Residence in monastery for periods of time
 - Create a new type of community
 - **Able to sustain the community as active members**

Develop independent Oblate Institutions

- Leadership of an oblate group - elect their own
- Formation – without relying on the community
- Connections – between oblates and leadership

- (See the December presentation by the oblates of St. Gertrude's Monastery in Cottonwood, ID.)

Conclusions

- **It is possible to expand membership in at least some communities**
- Just need to be willing and a little creative
- A new type of community
- Oblates can continue as now, focused on the community

- **Some communities will close**
- Oblates can develop independent structures
- Preserve the charism of the founding communities (their history, foundations, and special character)
- Monks in the world, monasteries of the heart

Related Articles

- Thomas Piazza and Felicitas Seisenberger OSB, “Trends in Membership for Benedictine Women in the American Benedictine Federations,” *Benedictines* LXX, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2017): 33-39.
- Thomas Piazza, “Membership Trends for Benedictine Monks in the American Benedictine Congregations,” *American Benedictine Review* 70, no. 2 (June 2019): 151-162.
- Tom Piazza, “Alternative Forms of Community Membership” *American Benedictine Review* 69 no. 3 (September 2018): 285-295.
- Thomas Piazza, “Monastic Possibilities,” *American Benedictine Review*: 72, no.2 (June 2021): forthcoming.
- Oblates of Cottonwood, ID, Presentation on Oblate Leadership:
https://www.beingbenedictine.org/sites/default/files/pdf_files/StGertrudeOblateLeadershipPresentationSlides120520.pdf