

THE CONFRATERNITY

The Confraternity of the Holy Cross consists of women and men who wish to have a link with the Community and live their lives according to the spirit of the Rule of St Benedict.

Associates are friends of the Community drawn to support us in prayer, which includes a commitment to use a set prayer daily. There is no ceremony of admission and the obligation can be terminated at any time. Sometimes being an Associate is a stepping stone to seeking oblation. Sometimes, by comparison, associate membership simply falls into abeyance. Those who can do so visit us periodically or otherwise keep in touch by letter, telephone etc. The Oblate Mistress maintains contact with them and they are invited to join in any special confraternity events.

Oblates are women and men seeking a more permanent commitment to God while continuing to live in their usual setting. The idea of oblates and oblation often begins with a real awareness of something beyond our natural life, a drawing towards God and a desire to make a total offering of oneself. This takes all sorts of forms as the backgrounds and education of people are very mixed. Therefore the desire, within a Benedictine context, is ultimately one of worship, and the Rule drawn up for each person, according to her or his capacity and circumstances, becomes the framework of day-to-day living.

Care obviously has to be given that spouses or other close and perhaps dependent family members, are able to give support to the vocation of the one concerned.

The ultimate stage is life oblation, but as in the Religious Life itself, there are various levels of commitment before then. The person concerned must have the approval of the Reverend Mother and Oblate Mistress, together with a testimonial from a priest, before embarking. Then a workable Rule of Life is drawn up with the sanction of the Reverend Mother and Oblate Mistress. A Rule can develop into a tyrant, but if approached with humility---the seed bed of the Christian vocation---becomes an aid which constantly assists the oblate to keep her goal, God himself, a reality. This will necessarily entail the normal catholic practices: Mass, Sacrament of Reconciliation, spiritual reading and prayer—including a minimum of Divine Office daily—good works, and if possible an annual visit to the Convent for retreat and assessment. It is also our custom to have an annual day for oblates and associates where as many as possible can meet up with each other, and when we have an invited speaker, or one of ourselves, to address them. Oblates also meet up locally if they can or come together for short visits to the Convent.

The initial stage for oblates is an open ended 'Postulancy'. It begins informally, but on a specific date. If all goes well, after a few months this is followed by a simple ceremony of 'Clothing' in the Convent chapel, when the Reverend Mother gives the oblate postulant the scapular. This is

a modest and symbolic version of the monastic scapular and is worn underneath outer clothing by the novice oblate. The 'novitiate' lasts for the minimum of a year. This is followed by Temporary Oblation which is for a period of three years or longer. Some oblates are ready for life commitment after the minimum three years and make their Life Oblation. Others need a longer period to discern what God is asking of them, while some decide that the vocation is not for them. The Temporary Oblation takes place in the Convent chapel and is received by the Reverend Mother.

Before an oblate makes a Life Oblation, he or she has to receive the consent of the Community. Life Oblation is made at the heart of the Eucharist and is received by a priest. Promises are made at both Temporary and life Oblation—ie. Commitment to live as far as possible according to the spirit of the Rule of St Benedict and, specifically, of the evangelical counsels. The personal Rule of each oblate ensures this. The promises are not binding in the same way as religious vows but are nevertheless a serious obligation not to be taken lightly. Most oblates persevere till death. Contact can be lost with some through old age and changed circumstances, while a small percentage, even after Life Oblation, ask to be released as they move on to other things. It is also possible for oblates to transfer their commitment to another similar community for valid reasons.

In the case of a priest or a former religious the probationary period may be shorter.

Oblates and Associates too, to a lesser extent, also have unwritten obligations towards the Community. It is a situation of giving and receiving on both sides, especially on the spiritual level. Some oblates may have a closer relationship than others with the Community—living along-side for instance for longer or shorter periods.

An oblate writes: 'It means a great deal to me to be an oblate—in fact more and more as the years go by as old friends and Father-Confessors die, leaving me to diminish alone. Then it is that I become increasingly thankful to have a discipline to guide me spiritually, and a knowledge that when times get difficult physically as well, as spiritually, there is upholding me a body of dedicated people devoted to a life of prayer and meditation and to the regular recitation of the Office. And it is in company with them that my feeble attempts at prayer are gathered up and offered daily, however ill or distracted I may be. Also, I am conscious that prayer is continually being offered by the Community on my behalf and that my spiritual welfare is a matter of concern to them, and that guidance is always available when I am in doubt or difficulty. The daily recitation of the Office as well as the time I undertake to give to prayer and meditation each day, ie. My own Rule, gives me a sense of being part of a body of people dedicated to serving God on earth to the best of their ability.'