Quiet, please: Silence hard to find in our world

“You kids are so loud that I can’t think straight!” My mother’s exasperated complaint echoes down the years as a simple example of a common experience: having one’s concentration shattered by intrusive and loud noise.

It is no accident that peace and quiet are so closely linked, nor that Benedictine spirituality values silence so highly. One reason is its power to facilitate prayer and meditation. Another reason, which appears in Chapter 6 of St. Benedict’s Rule, is that talking too much is morally dangerous. For both these reasons, monks “ought to have a zeal for silence at all times” (Chapter 42).

Clearly, these are valuable lessons for those outside as well as inside the monastery. Yet contemporary American attitudes toward silence seem oddly self-contradictory. On the one hand, no fewer than three books have been published recently that seek to define silence, extol its value and lament its absence.

On the other hand, at least in urban areas, noise pollution has become an increasingly irritating fact of daily life that seems to lie like a feather on the consciences of the self-absorbed, rude perpetrators.

The latter include, to mention only a few familiar examples, boisterous party guests who bring their drinks outdoors and treat public neighborhood space as their own private domain; cell phone users who loudly broadcast their (sometimes intimate) conversations in public; drivers with windows down who blast others with their stereos; restaurant patrons whose raucous conversations swamp other diners’ attempts to converse; and loud, chattering airline passengers who plague a captive audience.

Moreover, some people actually seem to fear silence. The compulsory background music in many commercial spaces, to which few really listen (acoustical wallpaper), taken together with ubiquitous earphones blocking the hearing of people everywhere, suggest a flight from silence. Perhaps there exists a certain anxiety about the emptiness of interiority, but it clearly produces obliviousness about the external world.

People who must always be engulfed in sound are distracted, but so much distracted that they do not recognize their distraction or what they are missing. As T.S. Eliot put it in his Four Quartets, they are “distracted from distraction by distraction.”

By “silence,” I do not mean the complete absence of sound, which could occur only in a vacuum. Even...
Silence from p. 1

in as silent as possible an environment, we still would hear internal noises such as ringing in our ears and blood pounding in our heads.

Rather, the silence that I believe St. Benedict praised, and what I mean here, is non-distracting and non-disruptive sound. It would be better phrased as quietude, such as the steady rhythm of waves washing up on a beach, sunrise over a lake on a summer morning or the soothing Gregorian chant of monks at prayer.

Silence understood as quietude is not an emptiness, but rather a fullness. It does not close us off to others and to the world around us, but instead opens us up. It can help lead us through religious humility and wonder to discover more intimately the presence of God.

And how is that presence revealed? The story of the prophet Elijah provides an invaluable clue. After fleeing to Mount Horeb, where God had revealed the original covenant to Moses, Elijah took refuge in a cave. Then he heard a Voice: “Then the Lord said, ‘Go outside and stand on the mountain before the Lord, the Lord will be passing by.’”

God’s voice was not in wind so strong that it crushed rocks, in an earthquake or in a fire. However, following the fire, “there was a tiny whispering sound. When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went and stood at the entrance of the cave” (1 Kings 19:11-13). The imperceptible God reveals Himself in the imperceptible rather than in cataclysmic natural disasters.

If Elijah were alive today, he would certainly not listen for the divine voice in loud speakers (human or mechanical), blaring radios or in what W.H. Auden referred to as “the windy trash that important people speak” (September 1, 1939). Just as human lovers whisper to each other, the Divine Lover whispers to us. In blessed silence, Elijah could perceive the Lord and listen. Both become much more difficult for us in the cacophony of modern life.

William Hamrick, oblate
St. Louis, MO

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A POINT TO PONDER FROM THE RULE

“Monks should diligently cultivate silence at all times, but especially at night. Accordingly, this will always be the arrangement whether for fast days or for ordinary days.”

Rule of St. Benedict, Chapter 42, Verses 1-2

We live in a noisy and chaotic world. The deafening noise creates an invasive bombardment of the tympanic membrane of the inner ear. Prayers, especially personal prayers, require silence.

The natural world quiets down for the night, but we do not. St. Benedict realized this when he established time for Compline, a nighttime prayer, and absolute silence from Compline to Matins (approximately 7 p.m. to 6 a.m.).

We, too, may want to establish a quiet time for prayer and for recollection of the day. It can also be a time of thanksgiving for all of the gifts of the day. If there are children present in the family, this can be a way to slow down the hectic pace of the day and become a ritual in the prayer life of oblate families.

Pray
for
Vocations

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Artist presents day of recollection

On the first Sunday of Advent, 51 New York Chapter oblates met for a day of recollection at St. Ignatius Retreat House in Manhasset, Long Island. Joining the group from Saint Meinrad Archabbey were Fr. Brendan Moss, OSB, and Br. Martin Erspamer, OSB. The day included an opportunity for the sacrament of Reconciliation, the investiture of oblate novices Patrick Hanley and Christopher Brennan during Mass, and two informative conferences by Br. Martin.

A gifted artist and liturgical design consultant, Br. Martin presented “From the Rising of the Sun to Its Setting, Praised be the Name of the Lord.” Some of the information he shared with us included the following:

- The Psalms: We pray the psalms, giving voice to all the emotions in our heart.
- Sunrise: Creation waits for the sun to revive the world.
- The Call to Prayer: There is nothing I am doing that is more important than praying. We stop and join the community in prayer; we have made the commitment to pray. The function of prayer is not to establish a routine, but to establish a relationship with God.
- Work: Work is prayer if approached with the right attitude. Whatever work people undertake, if they persevere they will attain it; but prayer is a battle to the last breath.
- The prayer of St. Benedict is humble, scriptural and communal. If you are humble, you will know who you are as a person as well as your relation to God.
- Sunset: The evening calm; brilliant color fades.
- Vespers: Psalms that recall God’s saving deeds, as well as psalms of praise.

We express our thanks to Fr. Meinrad Brune, OSB, for enlisting Fr. Brendan and Br. Martin for this day, and to Paul and Irene Muhs for their generous service to the New York Oblate Community.

Jane Massimino, oblate
Farmingdale, NY

Chapter prepares for Advent season

The Louisville Oblate Chapter prepared for the Advent season on November 28 with a Thanksgiving potluck dinner at the home of Cheryl and Richard Zoldak. The 14 attendees enjoyed the hospitality, capping the evening with Vespers.

Fr. Vincent Tobin, OSB

To Pray as Jesus Prayed: The Psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours

Oblates of Saint Meinrad Archabbey gathered for the annual December retreat to hear Fr. Vincent Tobin, OSB, present conferences on “To Pray as Jesus Prayed: The Psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours.”

Seventy-five oblates attended the retreat, despite a predicted snowstorm for departure day. Archabbot Justin DuVall, OSB, welcomed the oblates with a short message on the significance of Advent and that attending the retreat is a wonderful way to prepare for Christmas.

Fr. Vincent opened the first conference with Psalm 1, explaining why the writers put this brief and eloquent psalm at the head of the Psalter. In content, this psalm is a Wisdom psalm that affirms the traditional axiom of “it pays to be good” and the wicked will be repaid for their wickedness.

According to Fr. Vincent, Psalm 1 is a preface to the rest of the Psalter. The good man will flourish for he lives by God’s law. The wicked will be scattered and lost, blown away like the chaff (the ancient way of winnowing grain by tossing it into the air against the wind).

Fr. Vincent Tobin, OSB

see Oblate News, p. 4
To the Greeks, the word flesh meant body and matter and spirit. To the Israelites, there was no division of the body. There was no concept of afterlife for the people of the Old Testament. It took the Greeks to say, “This is the body and this is the soul.”

Fear in the psalms is a reference to reverence for God and it does not often refer to being afraid. The word Yahweh appears numerous times in the psalms. It derives from the verb to be or to exist. It is Yahweh in the Old Testament and Father in the New Testament. Fr. Vincent illustrated the importance of knowing the word language of the psalms to truly understand them.

In the fourth conference, Fr. Vincent focused on Psalm 23 about the Good Shepherd. Likening God as a ruler to a shepherd was commonplace in this pastoral culture. This psalm uses this metaphor of simplicity and concreteness. The picture of a shepherd still strikes a chord with most people, even though they may live a highly industrialized or non-agrarian society.

He mentioned that St. Ambrose warns against rigidity in interpreting the psalms. Fr. Vincent said to avoid non-scriptural interpretations and, instead, use the tradition of the Church as a guiding light.

He also used Psalm 27 as an example. The Lord is there to help me in times of danger. He is my light and my salvation. The Lord is the stronghold of my life and will keep me safe from attack. Again, words and metaphors must be understood to grasp the meaning of the psalm.

The fifth conference summarized the previous conferences. It was shortened because of the snowstorm, and many oblates left early due to the weather.

New secretary in the Oblate Office
Brenda Blackgrove is the new executive secretary in the Oblate Office, as of mid-December. She comes with work experience in three different hospitals, the most recent being Memorial Hospital and Health Care Center in Jasper, which is sponsored by the Sisters of the Little Company of Mary Inc. We welcome Brenda and look forward to her service and interaction. She takes the place of Joan Lasher, who has a full-time position as secretary to the vice president for development of Saint Meinrad, and she is wished the best in her new position.

Oblates enjoy Christmas potluck
A group of nine, including two new novices, enjoyed a Christmas potluck dinner on Saturday, December 18, at the home of Sharon and Oliver Ogden. A dishwasher fire, some illnesses, and other last-minute cancellations kept the group small, but it was a great time with great food.

Oblate celebrates 102nd birthday on December 24
Oblate Alice Schnellenberger celebrated her 102nd birthday with a party at The Waters nursing home in Huntingburg, IN. Alice was invested as an oblate novice by Fr. Gerard Ellspermann, OSB, oblate director, on March 3, 1985. Fr. Meinrad Brune, OSB, received her oblation on May 10, 2002, in Jasper, IN. On February 6, 2011, Fr. Meinrad visited Alice, and her son, Tom Schnellenberger, and daughter, Vivian Fischer, were present for the visit. A delightful visit was held and pictures were taken.

Oblate turns 100 years old on January 3, 2011
On January 7, 2011, oblate Rosemary Conrad and Fr. Meinrad Brune, OSB, visited Elsa Parker. Elsa has lived at Mercy St. Theresa Health Center in Cincinnati, OH, for 10 years. She chose this assisted living center because daily Mass is offered. Elsa was invested as an oblate novice on August 18, 1943, by Saint Meinrad’s Abbot Ignatius Esser, OSB. Her mother, Rose Mary Kress, also was an oblate, and Elsa would come with her mother to visit the Hill. Elsa lived three counties away from Cincinnati and thus was unable to attend chapter meetings. She raised four daughters and one son. We wish Elsa many blessings from God for her centennial birthday.

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October 18, 2010, Investiture—Rev. David Nowak of Griffith, IN.

November 4, 2010, Oblations—Mr.
Michael Giles Rippy and Mrs. Margaret Ann Elizabeth Rose Rippy of Louisville, KY. Note: Mr. and Mrs. Rippy were listed in the Winter 2011 issue as taking their final oblation in October 23, 2010. We apologize for the error.

November 17, 2010, Oblation—Rev. Dr. Joseph Francis Phelps of Louisville, KY.

November 18, 2010, Investiture—Ms. Kelly Sollinger of Marysville, OH.

November 18, 2010, Oblation—Mrs. Helen Mary Sexton of Columbus, OH.

November 20, 2010, Oblations—Dr. Kimberly Elizabeth Ann Seton Lyle-Ippolito of Anderson, IN, and Mr. John Anselm Wallhausser of Berea, KY.


November 28, 2010, Investitures—Mr. Christopher Brennan of Mastic, NY, and Mr. Patrick Hanly of Mattituck, NY.

November 29, 2010, Investiture—Mr. David Sears of Delaware, OH.

December 6, 2010, Oblation—Mr. James Robert James Sauer of Ewing, KY.

December 9, 2010, Investitures—Rev. David Bailey of West Chester, OH, and Rev. David Halt of Bloomington, IL.

December 11, 2010, Investitures—Mrs. Helen Burrey of Loogootee, IN; Mrs. Sally Gravatte of Ferdinand, IN; and Mrs. Catherine Russell of Patoka, IN.

December 11, 2010, Oblations—Mr. Richard Thomas More Biery and Mrs. Sandra Scholastica Biery, both of New Albany, IN; Mr. Michel Rene Thomas Frappier of Carolina, RI; Mrs. Michele Michael Reffert of Evansville, IN; Mrs. Jeannetta Faye Lydia Stickford of Waldron, IN; Mrs. Debra Monica Webb and Mr. Vance Benedict Webb, both of Clarkson, KY; and Mr. Earl John Paul Walton of DeMotte, IN.

December 18, 2010, Investiture—Mrs. Joan Dilger of Sellersburg, IN.

December 18, 2010, Oblation—Mrs. Patricia Martha Longfellow of Clarksville, IN.

December 26, 2010, Investiture—Mr. Nick Barth of New Albany, IN.

December 28, 2010, Investiture—Mr. Matthew Sprauer of Centerville, OH.

December 29, 2010, Oblation—Ms. Saundra Monica Duffee of Jeffersonville, IN.

January 2, 2011, Investiture—Ms. Jacqueline Notter of Evansville, IN.

January 6, 2011, Investiture—Mr. Stephen Bailey of Bloomington, IN.

January 6, 2011, Oblation—Mr. Richard Benedict Messick of Lewis City, OH.

January 7, 2011, Investiture—Mr. Lawrence Barnes of Muncie, IN.

January 13, 2011, Investiture—Mr. Timothy Smith of Owensboro, KY.

January 23, 2011, Oblation—Deacon James Athanasius Wilson of Rossville, GA.

January 31, 2011, Oblations—Mr. Robert Joseph Searcy and Mrs. Hubertina Monica Searcy, both of Fisherville, KY.

February 3, 2011, Investitures—Mrs. Pamela Couper and Ms. Muriel Kdan, both of Bloomington, IN.

February 7, 2011, Investitures—Mr. Kent Druvesteyn of Ada, MI, and Mr. Mark Schmidt of Preston, IA.

February 11, 2011, Oblation—Mr. William Anselm Richards of Pickerington, OH.

DEATHS

Mr. Joseph Brady of Dekalb, IL, died April 3, 1987, and Mrs. Phyllis Brady of Dekalb, IL, died January 30, 2009. We recently received notice of their deaths.

Mrs. Cornelia Boehman of St. Meinrad, IN, died January 28, 2011.

Mr. Edward Ryan of Amityville, NY, died January 31, 2011. ◆

UPCOMING EVENTS

May 21, 2011—For the Ohio day of recollection in Cincinnati, Br. Zachary Wilberding, OSB, will present the conferences on the Liturgy of the Hours.

June 13-16, 2011—Oblate Study Days, Monday evening through Thursday morning, will have as its theme “A Closer Look at the Holy Rule” with Fr. Harry Hagan, OSB, presenting the talks. This will be held at Saint Meinrad.

July 1-6, 2011—The North American Association of Benedictine Oblate Directors will hold its biennial meeting at Saint Meinrad Archabbey. About 90 or so oblate directors plan to attend. Speakers have been selected, and the cadre of volunteers to assist at the meeting is being assembled. The theme of the meeting is “Embracing Creation with Reverence and Hospitality: Listening to Scripture and Rule Speak.”

July 11, 2011—A day of recollection for oblates at Saint Meinrad will feature Fr. Noël Mueller, OSB, as the presenter of “Serving under an Abbot and a Rule,” a servant-leadership reading of the Rule of St. Benedict.


September 10, 2011—The Lancaster, PA, day of recollection in the Amish country will have Br. John Mark

see Upcoming Events, p. 10
An interview with Brother Martin Erspamer, OSB, monk and artist

Saint Meinrad Archabbey is blessed with many talented and creative monks, and Br. Martin Erspamer is no exception. Br. Martin is a multi-talented artist who works in a variety of art forms. He is truly a Renaissance man who contributes a great deal to the aesthetic environment of the monastery and also to the oblate program.

He has illustrated several books of poems written by oblates of Saint Meinrad Archabbey, and his art appears in the new Liturgy of the Hours book for oblates. He has created a beautiful piece of art in the new oblation investiture ceramic plaque that features St. Benedict. New oblates will be proud and honored to display it in their homes.

In addition, Br. Martin presents retreats that use his many artistic gifts and talents with retreat participants. Being familiar with the monastic and church art in France, Br. Martin co-hosted a Benedictine Heritage Pilgrimage to France with Br. Maurus Zoeller, OSB, this spring.

Q. When did you discover your talent and love for creative activity?

I don’t know exactly when the creative part of my life really kicked in. I remember, as a kid of 2 or 3 years old, that I was always into ways of making something. To me, making things out of old lumber, cardboard boxes, paper, sand, mud, clay, scrap wood and old buckets of paint was really playing. We didn’t have art supplies, and we made do with whatever was available, turning it into something else. It wasn’t a discovery—I just did it.

Q. Describe your early background.

My parents were from Norway, MI, a small town located on the Upper Peninsula. I was born in Iron Mountain, MI, in 1953, as Norway did not have a hospital. My Dad was in the Air Force, serving in Korea about the time I was to be born, so we, along with two older brothers, went to live with my Mom’s parents during that time. We had lived all over the United States—Omaha, NE, and Washington, D.C., for a short time, and the last place we landed was San Antonio, TX, where my Dad retired from the Air Force.

Catholic education was very important to my parents, who were strong Catholics, and they enrolled me in both elementary and secondary Catholic schools. My secondary schooling began in San Antonio at Central Catholic Marianist High School. Right after high school, I joined the Marianist community in 1971, when I was 17 years old.

The Marianists who taught in the high school were good role models, and they were young and very influential. They were doing something good with their lives and were not shy about asking students if they were interested in a religious vocation. They were not pushy about it, but simply asked what we thought about the idea. If interested, they would invite you to spend a few days living in a Marianist community.

The community that I went to was at the University of San Antonio. It was in a new building at St. Mary University, and there were many Marianist artists who had been invited to do creative things while they were on the campus. It was a great influential experience to be surrounded by all of this artwork produced by the Marianist artists. I was already taking classes in art while I was still in high school. My undergraduate study was at St. Mary University in San Antonio, and my graduate degree was from the Art Institute in San Antonio.

Q. What and who were some of the early influences and experiences contributing to your development as a creative artist?

When my college work ended, I went to work in a Marianist art studio in St. Louis, MO. Initially, my work there was in education and culture formation. There were five full-time artists assigned to work there who had a real influence on me. I asked to join them and work with them, and I worked for eight years at the art studio.

My provincial asked if anyone was interested in doing missionary work in India. I volunteered and was in India for 2½ years—1979-1981. I started working in the area of employment as it related to art. There were a few villages in the north of India that had young men who were interested in the religious life. We went to a little village in northern India that had no electricity or water and we started the first novitiate. Today there are approximately 120 young men all under the age of 40 who are in the novitiate.
Being a potter was a low-class job in north India, so I ended up doing other things. A friend helped me get work in a government art studio on the outskirts of New Delhi. I was the novice prefect for the novices for the rest of the time I was in India. Returning home to St. Louis, I set up my own studio.

Six months later, the Masters Guild, located only a few miles down the road, asked me if I was interested in doing a job for them. They were looking for a new designer to work with stained glass windows. They were pleased with the job that I did, and in 1983 they asked if I would do another job for them.

The jobs increased in number and were exclusively in stained glass windows. Most of the glass came from Germany. I became acquainted with Saint Meinrad Archabbey during the renovation of the Abbey Church when I was hired to work there from 1995-96.

Q. Your career in art has taken many turns over the years. Can you trace for us how your career began and the various career moves that affected your development as an artist?

I did graduate studies and post-graduate work at Catholic Theological Seminary in Chicago, and most of my work there was in liturgical design. The Marianists were generous and kind to me, letting me have the opportunity once a year to travel to Europe and photograph churches and monasteries. Every day in Europe, I would drive to visit various churches and monasteries to photograph or sketch them. It was an eclectic and great way to learn.

One of the Marianist brothers with whom I studied stained glass windows gave me an itinerary to follow. He had studied stained glass windows in Europe and had connections with some of the people with whom he had studied.

I did a master’s degree in ceramics at Boston University that has enhanced my career as a monastic artist. Each career step was positive and forward moving.

Q. Your work was beautifully depicted in the book The Work of Our Hands: The Art of Martin Erspamer, OSB. How did this book come about?

The Work of Our Hands was published by Pastoral Press in Portland, OR, in 2007. Actually, I did not know about their interest in my art. One day Archabbot Justin [DuVall, OSB] called me into his office and said that he had received communication from Pastoral Press saying that they would like to do a book about my work. I agreed to work with the publisher to produce the book.

The abbot agreed to write the foreword and Fr. Guerric DeBona, OSB, agreed to write the preface. I wrote the captions for the artwork and helped with the selection of my artwork for the book. The book is very Benedictine in the concept of work and prayer. It reflects on ora et labora (prayer and work). After I complete some piece of artwork, I am finished with it. It has to stand on its own. I feel the same way about the book.

Q. What do you mean by, “When an artwork is finished, I am finished with it”?

As a monk, I have a vow of celibacy, and obviously I will never father children. I look at my artwork as my children. The stained glass windows, the pottery, the paintings will leave, and they will be placed where I may never have an opportunity to visit and see. Like children who mature and leave home to pursue their own lives, so does my artwork. Creativity must begin anew, for to replicate the artwork is to mass-produce it. This is not what a creative artist does.

Q. You changed your stability from the Marianist community to Saint Meinrad Archabbey and the Benedictine order. What influenced your decision? Has this decision been a smooth and easy one?

see Br. Martin, p. 11
Share the wealth—
About our chapters

Lancaster, PA, Chapter

Sharon and Oliver Ogden moved to southeast central Pennsylvania (Lancaster County) in the 1990s. They joined St. Joseph’s Church on Cabbage Hill (German area) in Lancaster city. Oliver first searched out a spiritual director and then started to inquire about whether there were any oblates in the area. At one time, when he lived in Farmingdale, NY, he was a member of the Farmingdale Chapter.

Where, though, do you find an oblate chapter in the middle of rolling hills and Amish farmland? The answer is you probably won’t find one. Unless of course, you do what Oliver did: call Saint Meinrad and ask for the oblate director! He was immediately forwarded to Fr. Meinrad Brune, OSB, and the rest is history. Fr. Meinrad said, “Well, why don’t you start one!”

In October 1997, Fr. Meinrad and Br. Kenan Kapina, OSB, made their first trek to Lancaster County. Msgr. Thomas Smith, senior pastor of St. Joseph’s, happily agreed to house them in the rectory that accompanies the “jewel of the city,” St. Joseph’s.

Unfortunately, Msgr. Smith was away at the time of their initial visit. As it turns out, he became the elusive Msgr. Smith, because for several years he always seemed to be in absentia when the “Meinrads” visited! Over the years, however, Fr. Meinrad and Msgr. Smith have become friends and Msgr. Smith has visited Saint Meinrad several times.

We held our first informational meeting and opened it to all the churches in the local deanery with bulletin announcements. Seventeen people joined us that first night and we were pleased. We had an informative meeting and the word spread. We decided at that first meeting to hold monthly chapter meetings (trying to target the third Thursday of each month).

Five oblate novices plus Oliver (who was already an oblate) began the chapter in Lancaster. We, however, had a unique situation. Several of the people who came to our meetings were already oblates of other monasteries. For instance, we have a significant number of them from St. Vincent’s in Latrobe, PA. One chapter member is an oblate of the Benedictine Sisters of Emmanuel Monastery in Baltimore and one gentleman from another Benedictine monastery attends regularly.

Because of the number of people from St. Vincent’s who were interested in our chapter, the St. Vincent’s oblate coordinator was contacted and agreed to visit our chapter once a year for a meeting. Fr. Meinrad graciously agreed to this unique situation, mainly because of the distance we are from Saint Meinrad (in perfect weather and traffic, it is a 12-hour drive) and knowing he could not be here every month.

The chapter has worked well. We begin every meeting praying the Office, then have a conference and follow that with a social. Monks from Saint Meinrad visit twice a year (September and March) and Fr. Donald from St. Vincent comes in April of every year.

During the other months, we enjoy a conference on DVD from one of the Saint Meinrad monks. Of course, when we have a “live” monk, our chapter attendance is the greatest. Twice a year, we have a potluck—during December and in the summer when we do not meet. We hold the potlucks in the homes of our oblates and always have a great time. Chapter members range in age from 40s to 92! We look after one another, love one another and pray for one another.

Several years ago, we convinced Fr. Meinrad to start a day of recollection for our chapter and we have had four successful days since then. We have had great turnouts for these days of recollection, and we open them up to the entire diocese. This last one produced three oblate novices. Our chapter continues to flourish under the guidance of Fr. Meinrad.

Considering the distance from Saint Meinrad, we are pleased that several of our oblates have been able to visit the monastery and attend workshops and Oblate Study Days.

Sharon and Oliver Ogden, oblates
Lancaster, PA
Michael Reffett is a Benedictine oblate of Saint Meinrad Archabbey and a resident of Evansville, IN. He is the coordinator of the volunteer corps that will be facilitating the North American Association of Benedictine Oblate Directors (NAABOD) conference to be held July 1-6 at Saint Meinrad Archabbey.

**Q. How did you get the responsibility for coordinating the volunteer corps needed for the NAABOD conference for July 1-6?**

Fr. Meinrad simply asked me if I would help with regard to the NAABOD meeting. I think that my proximity to the monastery by living in Evansville had something to do with it. Since I am close by, I would be able to attend the preplanning meetings and participate in discussions ensuing from the planning sessions.

**Q. What in your past professional work will assist you in the scheduling of the oblate volunteers?**

I ran a small business and also worked at two Fortune 500 companies. The various roles involved analytical and supervisory activities. With the business experiences came a realization that planning is instrumental for achieving positive outcomes. The last-minute “term paper approach” from the student days is not a good way to conduct an activity of this magnitude. But even with extensive planning, experience teaches that oversights and unforeseen circumstances will arise. During those times, you just try to adjust and do what needs to be done.

**Q. Have you personally asked oblates to be volunteers for the NAABOD meeting?**

This is one area that I have not had to be involved in. Fr. Meinrad has so many resources to turn to. Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove and Monastery Immaculate Conception in Ferdinand also have volunteered people to assist. Considering the three communities, plus a lot of council members and finance committee members, we have had a really good response. I think we will have about 35 or so volunteers during that five-day period.

**Q. Has your experience as a CEO of a business helped in organizing the myriad tasks involved in scheduling volunteers for the NAABOD meeting?**

To date, most of my efforts have involved organizing tasks and scheduling volunteers. Such duties are consistent with the business world. Another realization stemming from the business career is how vital a role the people play. Planning takes time but, ultimately, capable people, in this case the volunteers, and a good culture are foundational. Under Fr. Meinrad’s guidance, we are fortunately blessed with both in our community.

**Q. In your retirement, you have been involved in some community service projects. What are some of these projects and have they helped you in your responsibility as coordinator of volunteers?**

First of all, I think that retirement is not necessarily the case, because I stay pretty busy with some business consulting, watching grandkids and being involved with some volunteer organizations. I am on two committees with my diocese. I also spend several days a week at the Boys and Girls Club—primarily helping kids with homework. This latter activity does not correlate exactly with what I am doing here in this planning role, but it serves as a nice diversion for me to be around kids and to experience a difference from my work career. They are primarily first to fifth graders. Interacting with the kids is refreshing.

**Q. Were you involved in the preliminary meetings of the Planning Team for the NAABOD meeting?**

I was not involved much in the preliminary meetings of the Planning Team for the NAABOD meeting. Fr. Meinrad involved other oblates, including some who are oblate chapter coordinators or from the two other monastic communities that volunteered to help.

**Q. Once the meeting takes place in July, how will you supervise the volunteers with the many assigned tasks to ensure that things are running smoothly as a fine-tuned clock?**

I have not counted how many different responsibility assignments take place throughout the course of the

*see Michael Reffett, p. 10*
Upcoming Events from p. 5


September 14-24, 2011—Br. Maurus Zoeller, OSB, is hosting a “Benedictine Pilgrimage to Athens and the Greek Isles,” visiting Athens, Istanbul, Mykonos, Patmos, Ephesus, Rhodes, St. Nicholas, Santorini and Corinth. It includes a seven-day cruise to the Greek Isles and Turkey. A deposit of $600 per person (make check payable to Nawas International) will hold a reservation. The total cost (round trip from New York) is $2,449 per person. Contact him at Saint Meinrad Archabbey, 100 Hill Drive, St. Meinrad, IN 47577, phone (812) 357-6674, or e-mail mzoeller@saintmeinrad.edu for brochures and information.

November 27, 2011—The day of recollection for New York oblates will have Fr. Brendan Moss, OSB, as the presenter on “Following the Path that Leads to Life!”

December 9-11, 2011—The Oblate Retreat at Saint Meinrad is scheduled to have Archabbot Justin DuVall, OSB, as the presenter on “Under a Rule and an Abbot: The Human Face of Monastic Life.”

VOLUNTEERS APPRECIATED

Recent volunteers in the Oblate Office include Ruth Engs, Anushka Fonseka, Daniel Leal, Br. Elijah Luckett, OSB, Pat Reckelhoff, Mike Reffett, Tom and Joan Rillo, Matthew Scheeser, Dennis Skelton and Novice Timothy Wymore, OSB.

CHECK THE WEBSITE

Past issues of the Benedictine Oblate newsletter are available at www.saintmeinrad.edu.

Michael Reffett from p. 9

five-days. There are a lot! Unforeseen situations and needs will likely arise. Volunteers will need to be flexible. I have not been to a NAABOD conference, so other Saint Meinrad oblates who have done so will be a big help. I plan to help, but my first order of duties calls for striving to ensure everything goes smoothly and reacting to those unexpected situations. Of course, as with every oblate endeavor, Fr. Meinrad serves as the foundation with his insights, inspiration and guidance—as well as his prayers.

Thomas J. Rillo, oblate
Bloomington, IN
Virgin Mary in the sanctuary that is from the 17th or 18th century.

Everyone who has worshipped in the church has left a mark of his own and in his own time. This is important because it makes the difference between the cathedral as a museum or as a living center for a faith community.

Q. You have created a ceramic plaque as an investiture oblation gift for new oblates of Saint Meinrad. Why did you do this?

This oblate program appears to be the envy of many monasteries because it is well developed and supervised in an adequate manner. The resources that are extended to the oblates are to be admired for their scope, depth and contemporary relevancy.

I respect Fr. Meinrad Brune, OSB, for all of the good work that he has done in building an oblate program that is a model for other Benedictine monasteries to emulate. I volunteered to do a creative piece that oblates might have as a reminder of their fidelity to the Rule of St. Benedict and to their Benedictine vows. As a monk of Saint Meinrad, I wanted to give something back to the monastic community of the lay monks who are called oblates.

Thomas J. Rillo, oblate
Bloomington, IN

In 1996, I was commissioned to create two pieces for the renovation of the Archabbey Church of Maria Einsiedeln at Saint Meinrad Archabbey. That was eight years before I actually asked my superiors to transfer my vows to the monastic community of Saint Meinrad. I had visited Gethsemane Abbey in Trappist, KY, and I knew that the Cisterian order was not for me.

I would say that my transition was very smooth and easy, and I was made to feel very welcomed. Fr. Donald Walpole, OSB, my predecessor, was very warm and cordial. As he handed me the keys to the studio, he stated, “This is a great place to work, and it has a stereo and a refrigerator. Also it is far enough away from everything, and nobody will bother you.”

I have received great support from those who are interested in creative activity. They do so by choice. One has only to push people in a certain direction, and they take off on their own. Everyone has some creativity in them—some have more than others.

Q. You are co-hosting a Benedictine pilgrimage to France this spring. How did your idea for such a pilgrimage come about? What are some objectives for the pilgrims traveling with you?

About a year ago, I was giving a retreat here at the guest house. Each conference was based on looking at a piece of artwork as a departure point for reflection in the spiritual life. Each piece of art was from a European church. At the end of the retreat, four or five participants said that if I were to lead a group to Europe to study monastic and church art, they would sign up for it.

After the abbot gave me his approval, he suggested that I talk with Br. Maurus Zoeller, OSB, who had hosted many pilgrimages and knew the procedures for organizing a pilgrimage. After talking with Br. Maurus and the travel agency, I proceeded to write up the itinerary for the tour.

As for the objectives for the pilgrimage, we will be able to observe a diversified creativity and take in the culture and education of the people there. The Church teaches us through the theology and liturgy of the Church, but also through art and culture. There has been a church language of Catholic art that has been used for hundreds of years.

If you look at a stained glass window and read what is happening in the window, it can open up a lot of wonderful experiences in prayer and meditation. This has been a good thing for me in my life, and I feel it would be good for other people. For example, we will visit a cathedral that was built in only 50 years that is the best example of a well-preserved cathedral that has most of the original stained glass windows. The church has been a pilgrimage site for centuries, indicating there is something that every generation who worshipped there has left behind in that church.

The altar that is used for Mass today is very contemporary, and it is in the middle of a 1,000-year-old church. Somehow, it all works together. There you would see that the windows are 11th century, other parts of the church are 12th century. You can see a choir screen from the 14th or 15th century. You can see the statue of the

The ceramic plate Br. Martin created features St. Benedict and a raven.

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Thomas J. Rillo, oblate
Bloomington, IN

In this beautifully written book, spiritual director and retreat speaker Jan Johnson explores contemplative prayer and the lifestyle accompanying it. She describes a simple but challenging prayer life in which one sits before God, enjoying His presence and aligning oneself with His will, choosing to be a vessel of His good purposes.

Johnson divides her book into four sections. In “Beyond Asking,” Johnson describes her personal journey. Through the use of Scripture, God became her companion as she fixed the eye of her soul upon His greatness and allowed Him into the most hidden corners of her heart.

In “How Contemplation Works,” the author shows the reader the process of contemplation. It is a matter, Johnson argues, of learning to pay attention to God, and it is based in love. In silence and solitude, the two primary tools of contemplation, we become centered on God, God becomes more present to us and we become more present to others.

In the third section “Wisdom in Contemplation,” Johnson discusses questions that might arise concerning the contemplative lifestyle: recognizing the voice of God; the importance of community; and ways of living in God’s presence. Johnson concludes that “contemplative living is the normal life of the believer who wants to live in the presence of God.”

The final section, “What You’re Likely to Hear God Say in Contemplation,” reminds the reader that God responds to our prayer in a variety of ways: through basic truths about who we are, through confrontation, through challenge and through struggle. At the same time, God reveals Himself, and He grieves and is sometimes silent, but always intimate, if we allow Him to be.

In the final analysis, Johnson argues that the “radical and risky opening of self” necessary in contemplative prayer causes “soul-growth.” Reading her book causes the reader to seriously consider taking that step toward a fuller and more intimate journey with God, no matter the risk.

Catherine Byers, oblate
Nineveh, IN