

## A Ministry of Encouragement

Almost twenty years ago, while I was a vicar on a depressed housing estate in the East Midlands, and buzzing around from one project to another, I was thinking seriously of becoming a Third Order member of the Society of St Francis. Until the age of thirty, I had been an Augustinian Recollect priest, and had left to become a worker priest in the Church of England. But the call of a Rule of life remained strong, and the Third Order Franciscans seemed like just the ticket. While I was in the process of discernment, I picked up a book called "The Oblate Life" by Dom Augustine Morris, an Anglican Benedictine, and something clicked into place. Within eighteen months, I had made my Oblation at Elmore Abbey, and a new kind of living began for me and for my family. It was as though God had grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, and said to me: "Gerry, sit down and shut up. I want to talk to you!"

I was led deeper into prayer, and rediscovered the mystical treasures of the Christian tradition. I was also making deeper contacts with many people inside and outside the Churches, who felt a deep yearning for silence and a listening ear towards God and their fellow humans. Thus began afresh a ministry of listening, encouragement, and accompanying people in prayer. This coincided with deterioration in my wife's health, which culminated in retirement two years early. This left even more time for prayer, study, spiritual direction, and increasingly a ministry of quiet days and retreats. I have become increasingly aware of the hunger for God, and for learning about contemplative prayer in so many people who don't seem to be able to find it in the normal life of their churches. As an Oblate I am supported by St Benedict's intent to form a little school of the Lord's service, and by the prayers and silent witness of so many monks and nuns whose lives are inspiring people to seek God in community, service, and silence in ways they find more appropriate to the twenty-first century. So I have found my Oblate vocation to be one of 'being alongside' – a ministry of encouragement.

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