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Monastic Form-of-Life Out of Place: Ritual Practices among Benedictine Oblates

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Abstract: Although ritual participation in Christian churches is decreasing in the Netherlands, one of the most secularised countries in the world, monasteries are increasingly attractive to people not committed to a life in an abbey, but who rather transfer monastic practices to their personal life. Guesthouses are full, reading groups conduct meditative reading, and monastic time management is applied in professional arenas. Obviously, the ritual practices conducted beyond abbey walls have a different character than the ritual repertoire of monks and nuns. The ritual transfer is a challenge, as monasteries are secluded spaces, separated from the world. In its history, monasticism has turned out to be especially capable of this process. What does the transfer from one context to the other imply when people ritualise prayer, reading and everyday practices without being monastic? A specific group of people who conduct this transfer intensively are Benedictine oblates, laypersons affiliated to a particular monastery. This article addresses the following main question: which monastic ritual practices do Benedictine oblates in the Netherlands perform, and how do they transfer these to their personal context? To explore this question, the results of a qualitative research among 53 respondents are presented—oblates of three Benedictine abbeys in the Netherlands. The results demonstrate experiences on a new ritual field, with practices that seem to be 'out of place' but are highly vivid to the practitioners.

Keywords: form-of-life; monastic spirituality; ritual practice; ritual transfer

1. Introduction

Monastic practices turn out to be attractive for many abbey visitors, even in a secularised country like the Netherlands. Although the majority of the Dutch are not affiliated with any denomination and do not participate in ritual practices regularly or not at all (Bernts and Berghuis 2016, pp. 21–29), guest houses of abbeys are full and often have long waiting lists. People who are not necessarily practising Catholics participate in the prayer services; groups are formed at various places who practice sacred reading; and professional organisations benefit from applying a monastic time rhythm to organise work and leisure time (Quartier 2015, pp. 115–17). All these practices are originally constitutive for the ritual form-of-life led by monks and nuns (Quartier 2017a, pp. 61–63). In recent years, philosophical analyses have pointed out once again that monastic life is ritual in its very essence, as there is no practice conducted by monks and nuns which is not determined by a rule that provides life with structure and meaning (Agamben 2013, pp. 65–72). However, there is a shift going on. As monastic communities are crumbling rapidly in the Netherlands, the appeal of the form-of-life for people who are not monastic is growing. Monastic convents often play an active role in promoting parts of their lifestyle (Jewdokimow 2020, pp. 207–24). The impact of the spiritual tradition might be different for those who do not live within the overarching context of a monastery but still engage with the ritual lifestyle. The structure of the practices might be experienced differently, and they may also have a different meaning (Quartier 2017b, pp. 97–99). For a better understanding of this spiritual shift,

exploring experiences of rituals with those who actually perform them can prove an appropriate lens (Post and Sparks 2015).

The meaning of the form-of-life for monks and nuns is determined by their Christian faith, based on Holy Scripture. In Western monasticism, St Benedict of Nursia (480–547), wrote a rule that became extremely influential and aims at a life according to Divine commandments. The purpose of this form-of-life is: "Never swerving from his [God's, TQ] instructions, but faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom" (Fry 1980, Prol 50). This theological meaning aims at a different ritual context than the context of guests participating in monastic practices. The structure provided by the secluded space of monastic life has a different character when moved to life in a profane setting. The practitioners conduct a "ritual transfer". This concept has been established to analyse "the transfer of a ritual from one context to another, or—more generally—a change of context surrounding the ritual. Processes of transfer can take place within time or space" (Langer et al. 2006, p. 1). What does the ritual transfer of monastic practices exactly entail and who conducts it?

It is important to realise that monastic life in particular has turned out to be especially capable of ritual transfer in its history. Already by the Middle Ages, members of religious orders were engaged in a twofold exchange with the world: first, they "incorporated, investigated and criticised the knowledge of the world within their search for God", as Melville points out in his excellent summary of studies on medieval monasticism. Examples include "scholastic techniques that helped to proof the validity of rational argument and to break it open with mystical experiences, at the same time" (Melville 2012, p. 311). Second, they enriched their religious way of life by striving for a good education for monks and nuns: "Education helped religious persons to deepen their path to salvation". Here the examples of "grammar, rhetoric, and logic or dialectics" are mentioned (*trivium*), which coloured monastic life intensely (Melville 2012, p. 314). The interrelatedness of monasticism with its cultural context led to very different forms of monastic observance. The need for religious experience changed prayer life, and the possibility for study was interwoven with sacred reading. One interesting example of how this weave with culture influences monastic life is termed "monastic experiment" by Evans: "By the end of the eleventh century, suddenly, adults were choosing to enter monasteries which had previously received many of their future monks as child-oblates". That led to significant "changes which were social as much as spiritual" (Evans 2016, pp. 134–36). The changes strengthened monasticism in that time, as those who were familiar with recent developments in the world joined communities. Still, you need to be aware that "the relationship between monasticism and culture is inherently complex, since it is universally characterised by a degree of separation from ordinary human activities (*fuga mundi*)", as Pfeifer summarises investigations of the relationship from various disciplines (Pfeifer and Nouzille 2013, pp. 12–13). You should by no means get the impression that the contemporary shift going on with regard to the social position and identity of monasticism is a new phenomenon in its history. For this reason, monastic groups form a particularly interesting case in today's secular society.

However, there is a certain shift that has also been important for the dynamic development of monasticism. This is in its relationship with "lay spirituality", a form for which "historical research has not developed a framework in the sense of a 'secularised spirituality'", as Waaijman states (Waaijman 2007, p. 42). Again, it was in medieval times that oblates were not only small children (*pueri oblati*) but also those in the world who offered themselves to God by affiliating their life to a particular monastery (Koller 2009, pp. 98–100). Today, the word "oblate" has a different meaning to the one Evans mentions. It refers to groups in the "Order of St Benedict" (OSB) who live a life under guidance of the rule of the founder, without taking monastic vows in the strict sense. They number over 25,000 worldwide (Koller 2009, pp. 283–84).

Especially in the secularised Netherlands, where membership of religious communities seems to be diminishing, the number of oblates affiliated to the three male Benedictine abbeys in the country is

growing.[1] This is surprising, as, although they do not take monastic vows, oblates still commit lifelong to one and the same abbey. Societal trends are exactly the opposite: flexibility and variation. Only a very small minority of these lay members live within the cloister ("regular oblates"). The majority spend their lives within society, often with a family and a job, just like any other citizen ("secular oblates"). They receive spiritual guidance from the abbey, visit regularly, and—most significantly—share in the monastic practices of Benedictine life. These groups illustrate the dynamic development of monasticism and its paradoxical interrelatedness with its cultural context.

The Archives of the Benedictine Confederation describe this form-of-life as follows: "Oblates of St. Benedict are Christian individuals or families who have associated themselves with a Benedictine community in order to enrich their Christian way of life. Oblates shape their lives by living the wisdom of Christ as interpreted by St. Benedict. Oblates seek God by striving to become holy in their chosen way of life. By integrating their prayer and work, they manifest Christ's presence in society" (Archives OSB 2020). The context in society seems to contradict the context of the cloister, which exists to give shelter from societal mechanisms and duties. To be able to participate fully in this contemplative life according to the Gospel, you need to transform your identity, as Casey points out: "It asks us to take on a new identity and to be reshaped according to a different culture. This refashioning must come from within" (Casey 2005, p. xi). Although the transformation is not necessarily bound to the territory of the monastery, you can ask whether a performance of monastic practices outside this context is not at odds with the basic idea that monastics are "strangers to the city", as Casey puts it.

It might be that the form-of-life of oblates is "out of place", happening in unexpected places and moments (Grimes 2006, pp. 101–2). Not only do oblates usually not live in an abbey, they are also engaged in social networks which monks and nuns, ideally speaking, are not. The Constitution of Italian Benedictine Oblates from 2000 provides the following description, taking into account the societal embeddedness of oblates: "The Benedictine oblate is a lay or clergy Christian man or woman, who, leading a normal way of life, acknowledges and accepts God's gift and His call to serve Him in conformity to the potentialities of baptismal consecration and to the needs of his social status" (Constitution 2000, article 2). Of course, this is a different way of life than Casey's view on culture. Still, the otherness of life might be established by ritual practices: mainly prayer, reading and everyday practices.

In recent years, research has been carried out on the structure of monasteries, their presentation to the world (Jonveaux 2018), the internal organisational processes within contemporary abbeys (Hochschild 2013) and the perception of liturgical services by monks, nuns (Quartier 2016) and abbey guests (Quartier 2014). Yet, until now, there has been no data available on the ritual practices of oblates. For this reason, this article will explore the experiences of Benedictine oblates in the Netherlands with ritual practices of spirituality. The key question is this: which monastic ritual practices do Benedictine oblates in the Netherlands perform, and how do they transfer these to their personal context?

To answer this question, a qualitative questionnaire was disseminated among Benedictine oblates in the Netherlands. It contained open questions on the chief practices to be found in the Rule of St Benedict (Quartier 2011a) and provided space for the oblates to give personal answers and to describe individual experiences. There was no theoretical or empirical evidence on how oblates perform these practices, what their attitude is, or how they experience the ritual transfer to their own personal context from the specific context of the abbey to which they are affiliated. Therefore, the chosen method is as open as possible (Grimes 2014, p. 47). We did not use theoretical concepts and operationalize them in the questionnaire, but rather chose to ask about major topics and let the respondents freely share their personal experiences. A total of 53 respondents shared their experiences and attitudes by returning the

[1] The focus is on the male abbey, as the female abbeys in the Netherlands do not have oblate groups. However, the groups mentioned here consist of both men and women.

questionnaire.[2] Their answers have been divided into quotes and coded. In a first step, specific topics the respondents mentioned in their answers were translated into sensitising concepts. An example of this is 'morning prayer' or 'evening prayer'. In a second step, these sensitising concepts were merged into codes on a more general level—in the example mentioned, into 'Liturgy of the Hours'. After that, the major categories within the codes were distinguished, for example, 'Prayer', to form a code group. This allowed the experiences of the respondents to be compared, whilst keeping the codes from the earlier round visible. In what follows, the general code groups will be shown and, later, the codes that were the result of merging the sensitizing concepts.[3] As a result, codes and quotes were found to shed light on the following research questions, which will hopefully be answered in the following sections:

(1) What is the monastic and personal context of Benedictine oblates in the Netherlands?
(2) Which monastic ritual practices do the oblates perform and how do they experience these?
(3) How do respondents experience the ritual transfer of monastic practices?

2. Ritual Contexts: Spiritual and Ritual

The first research question (1) reads: what is the monastic and personal context of Benedictine oblates in the Netherlands? The ritual context of monastic life establishes the otherness of the individual and the institute. It can be understood as liminal in a twofold sense: first, the cloister provides a liminal space for the individual monk because he continuously lives in ritual sequences and is in permanent transformation. This state was coined as liminal in rites-of-passage theory (Van Gennep 1960), and later broadened to ritual phases or moments in multiple settings (Quartier 2019a, pp. 121–25). The spiritual self is in continuous motion, in a permanent phase of liminality (Waaijman 2002, p. 426). Second, the monastery takes a liminal position towards society by not being caught up in the common patterns of social interaction. The members of the convent do not have a social status in the world; they are "structurally invisible." To provide this institutional "anti-structure", a ritual structure is required within the monastery (Turner 1967). Both forms of liminality are established by the ritual practices provided by the Rule of St Benedict. The ritualised nature of monastic life implies that all activities go beyond the functional realm of social and economic life. The monastery offers a secluded space where this ritual spectrum can cover the life of a community. But what happens when a ritual transfer takes place and people engage with parts of the spectrum in a different ritual context?

Waaijman includes members outside the spiritual centre of the monastery in this liminal state of life, because, in the development of a spiritual tradition, it is "an important step that people can acquaint the basic intuition in their own way" (Waaijman 2002, p. 116). This means that oblates not only consume the ritual life provided by monks but enact their own ritual repertoire in their own personal context. They possess their own attitude towards ritual practices in relation to their form-of-life. The idea of double liminality—towards the outside and towards the inside—could also be characteristic for the ritual fields that oblates discover. It might be the case that they live discrete from their context by praying. Perhaps they prevent themselves from being caught up in social competition by ritualising everyday practices, and reading possibly helps oblates find meaning in the structure they give to their life.

In the Netherlands, there are three Benedictine abbeys, which each have a group of oblates affiliated to their monastic community. They are all contemplative houses but belong to different congregations within the Benedictine Confederation. St Willibrord Abbey in Doetinchem belongs to the Congregation of Subiaco-Montecasino, St Adelbert Abbey in Egmond to the Congregation of the

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[2] In total, 200 questionnaires were sent out; this represents a response rate above 25%. The questionnaire contained six open questions, with sub-questions, on their affiliation with the abbey (1), personal background (2), practice of prayer (3), reading (4) and work (5). Finally, respondents were asked about the problems they experience in practising their form-of-life (6).

[3] Atlas.ti (Version 8.4.15) computer software was used. Quotes were merged in such a way that respondents were counted once by being given a code. The techniques used were "merge codes" and "form code groups". To be able to compare respondents, we used the function "form document-groups".

Annunciation, and St Benedict Abbey in Vaals to the Congregation of Solesmes. St Willibrord[4] has a special characteristic, insofar as it is largely open towards oblates. Until recently, secular oblates were even buried in the cemetery of the abbey, something entirely exceptional. Furthermore, the abbey has decades of experience in interreligious dialogue, especially with Eastern religions. Numbering 110, the current group of oblates is large relative to the 10 monks of the abbey. They meet twice a year for oblate days. St Adelbert[5] has a comparable openness towards oblates, but the building is larger, so the distance between monks and oblates is traditionally greater. The abbey runs a journal which is read by many oblates, and regularly organises retreats. In addition, the abbey operates a shop that serves the community, the local area and beyond. The present group of oblates numbers 90 and is comparable to the first group, but the number of monks is larger at 16. They come once a month for oblate days. The St Benedict Abbey[6] has the smallest number of oblates, 40, with 12 monks living in the abbey. The group is separated from the monastic community, which is more closed in character due to a traditional strict observance. The oblates usually come twice a year for oblate days. In all the abbeys, oblates arrive at the guesthouse as individual guests and are spiritually supervised by one of the monks, the oblate rector or other members of the community.

To understand how their own personal context and that of the abbey the oblates are affiliated with relate to their practices, the respondents were divided into groups. This allowed the groups to be compared.[7] Concerning the monastic context of the abbeys, 32 questionnaires were received from St Willibrord, 15 from St Adelbert and 6 from St Benedict. The ages of the respondents and their church affiliations were closely examined in regard to their personal context. Seven respondents were under 50, 26 were between 50 and 70, and 17 were over 70. Thirty oblates participating in the research were Roman Catholic, nine were Protestant, and eleven had another ecclesial affiliation. The relationship of the respondents with the monastic context of the abbey differs when considering how often they physically visit the abbey. The largest group (22) visit between five and ten times a year, some visit less than five times (14), and some visit more than 10 times (11). Of the respondents, 33 were male and 20 were female. Concerning their education, nearly all the respondents had completed higher professional education or academic study; only six had not.

3. Ritual Practices of Oblates

The second research question (2) reads: which monastic ritual practices do the oblates perform, and how do they experience these? Monks and nuns should at all times of the day enact their spirituality, as is stated in the Rule of St Benedict in his chapter on humility, one of the basic virtues of a monk's life: "A monk always manifests humility in his bearing no less than in his heart, so that it is evident at the Work of God, in the oratory, the monastery or the garden, on a journey or in the field, or anywhere else" (Fry 1980, vol. 7, p. 63). The ritual form-of-life shapes the attitude of monks and nuns, not only at particular moments or in specific places. Interestingly, this also applies to life outside the monastery ("on a journey"). Still, there are concrete, embodied practices that help to develop this attitude: "Whether he sits, walks or stands, his head must be bowed and his eyes cast down" (Fry 1980, vol. 7, p. 63). According to Casey, it is important to note that Benedict is "descriptive and not prescriptive" in these sentences. For him "humility is a habitual disposition which results from the repetition of the appropriate actions" (Casey 2001, p. 57). The right moral behaviour, according to this perspective, is exercised in ritual practices which help monks focus on the contemplative basis of their life.

There are basic practices that help to develop and maintain such an attitude, and also help avoid losing the symbolic impact that a ritual has on your life, namely prayer, reading and work (*ora*, *lege* et

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[4] For more information, see the website of the abbey: www.willibrordsabdij.nl.
[5] For more information, see the website of the abbey: www.abdijvanegmond.nl.
[6] For more information, see the website of the abbey: www.benedictusberg.nl.
[7] Atlas.ti offers the possibility to compare groups of respondents with "Code Document Tables".

labora). Benedictine life is strongly characterised by seven daily prayer services, starting with Matins in the early morning and ending with Compline. They provide structure and form the angle of monastic life, as St Benedict says: "Indeed, nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God" (Fry 1980, vol. 43, p. 3). Around these services, monks are busy with the two other practices: "Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labour as well as for prayerful reading" (Fry 1980, vol. 48, p. 1). Reading and work are not merely functional; the soul benefits from both. This means that their benefits go well beyond merely gaining information or producing goods. All three practices can be interpreted as belonging to the ritual spectrum of monks (Quartier 2011a). Prayer happens in a liturgical way, but reading and work are also enacted with structure and meaning, the basic characteristics of ritual (Quartier 2017b, p. 95). Not all the oblates do professional work anymore, whilst the Dutch word for "labour" ("werk") mainly applies to employment. Therefore, it was decided to ask for "everyday practices" to invite the respondents to share their experience on what Benedict indicates as "manual labour".

The main source for understanding these practices in a monastic sense is the Rule of Saint Benedict, which becomes visible in the formation programme for candidate oblates. In the cases we observed, they take part in a programme consisting of several retreat days over a single year. The topics of these days are all taken from the Rule: humility, obedience, silence, prayer, reading, work. "Oblates receive a copy of the Rule in ceremony at the beginning of their noviciate, and we try to help them read and understand the Rule during that year," one of the oblate fathers explained during the preparation of the research presented here. Commentaries and studies on the Rule are used by the monk who presents the topics to the oblates for their preparation. This is why the focus is on the primary text of the Rule of St Benedict in this article. Where necessary, commentaries or earlier published examples are added (Quartier 2011a, 2019b).

Oblates make their own choices in reading about the Rule or taking part in additional courses. About half of them regularly follow the basic program of the monastery (retreat days), the remainder depend on personal preference. The three code groups that resulted from the analysis, corresponded with three core-topics from the Rule and demonstrated differences between groups of respondents.

Three background characteristics of the respondents demonstrated significant differences: their monastic background, their age and their church affiliation. For the questions discussed here, no significant differences were found with regard to gender and level of education. For that reason, these have not been included in the presentation. The first groups were about the monastic context and included respondents for St Willibrord, St Adelbert and St Benedict, as shown in the following table (Table 1). The percentages indicate the number of merged codes for each of the three abbeys that formed the monastic context of the research:

Table 1. Code groups and monastic context.

Code Group	St Willibrord	St Adelbert	St Benedict	Total
Prayer	35.7	32.8	32.8	34.7
Reading	26.3	28.1	27.5	26.9
Practices	38.0	39.1	39.7	38.3

n = 53; numbers: relative number of merged quotes in %.

Care is required when interpreting these figures. They do not necessarily indicate (the level of) agreement and are by no means representative for the entire population of Dutch oblates. The only conclusion to be drawn is that experiencing Benedictine spirituality within everyday practices is mentioned most frequently by the respondents, followed by prayer, and finally by reading, which is mentioned least often. The differences between the groups of oblates from the three abbeys are not very great. The transfer of the ritual practices from the monasteries happens in the first place by implementing it into personal everyday practices, independent of the abbey oblates are affiliated to.

These practices are mentioned even slightly more often than prayer. The accent in Benedict's Rule is the other way around: there, prayer is most imperative.

When it comes to the personal context of the respondents, the sample is divided into three groups. Those above the age of 70 mention the integration of their rituals in their daily life more often than the average respondents. Respondents below the age of 50 talk more often about their reading activity. Middle-aged oblates talk about prayer most often (Table 2).

Table 2. Code groups and personal context—age.

Code Group	50 or Younger	51–69	70 or Older	Total
Prayer	34.0	36.4	32.8	34.7
Reading	29.1	26.7	26.3	26.9
Practices	36.9	36.9	40.9	38.3

n = 53; numbers: relative number of merged quotes in %.

It is probably easier for oblates who have already retired to reflect on the symbolic meaning of their everyday practice than for those still busy with a job. They mention more often that they consciously make time for reading. The explicit activity might fit better into their daily schedule. Middle-aged oblates are perhaps more used to the habit of daily prayer than their younger brothers and sisters.

Besides the three age groups, the respondents were also divided into three groups concerning their church affiliation. Only two oblates had no formal church membership, but both were still engaged in Christian networks. Remarkably, the Protestant respondents talked much more often about prayer than the two other groups. The reason might be that Protestants who feel attracted by a Catholic monastery feel a stronger need for prayer than they find in their original denomination. The second remarkable detail is that the members of small ecclesial groups ("other") talk much more often about everyday practices as being a ritual than the other groups. The reason might be that these groups offer a stronger cohesion and penetrate more fields of life than larger churches (Table 3).

Table 3. Code groups and personal context—church affiliation.

Code Group	Catholic	Protestant	Other	Total
Prayer	34.3	40.3	32.5	34.7
Reading	27.2	25.4	25.8	26.9
Practices	38.5	34.3	41.7	38.3

n = 53; numbers: relative number of merged quotes in %.

This general overview already reveals that it is important for oblates to integrate ritually their form-of-life into their concrete situation, as their everyday practices are central in their answers, as well as being considered rituals. This also relates to their personal context, as age and church-affiliation play a role in several ways. The next paragraphs will look more closely at the three practices, searching for dimensions of what respondents say about prayer, reading and everyday practices and, once again, what the relation is to both the monastic context they are affiliated with and their personal context.

3.1. Dimensions of Prayer

Prayer is the top priority of monks in their daily schedule, in a temporal and spatial sense, as Benedict states: "On hearing the signal for an hour of the Divine Office, the monk will immediately set aside what he has in hand and go with utmost speed, yet with gravity and without giving occasion for frivolity" (Fry 1980, vol. 43, pp. 1–2). The promptness of following the signal, even running (currere) may be surprising because of the calmness that seems to be a characteristic of monastic life. However, there is a theological meaning in this command. By training the strictness of the prayer rhythm, "monks prepare themselves for the ultimate signal at the end of times", as Böckmann comments on this passage (Böckmann 2013, p. 507). This is a rule that seems unrealistic in almost all circumstances

outside the monastery. According to a commentary on this passage for lay people, "the lesson of this chapter is this: when the time has come for doing something we must immediately do it, whether it is setting off for our afternoon fresh-air exercise or getting out of bed when we intend. [. . .] These are little, unspectacular opportunities for self-control and for doing God's will, fitting in with his design" (Cary-Elwes 1992, p. 115). Still, the question remains how oblates enact this prompt readiness and how they maintain the attitude of being ready for the signal to prayer, albeit symbolically, in their life.

Three types of prayer were found in the oblates' experiences: the Liturgy of the Hours, creative personal forms, and spontaneous moments of prayer during the day. How are these forms understood ritually? The Divine Office, as described in St Benedict's Rule, can be interpreted as a "rite", a traditional and rule-governed model of prayer that has to be strictly followed (Grimes 2000, p. 24). In different circumstances, the Rule offers some flexibility. Monks should adhere to the rhythm of their brethren, but are sometimes able to do this in a more flexible form: "Brothers who work so far away that they cannot return to the oratory at the proper time—and the abbot determines that is the case—are to perform the Work of God where they are, and kneel out of reverence for God" (Fry 1980, vol. 50, pp. 1–3). Benedict prescribes a ritual transfer that adheres to the rite, because the brother "may not neglect their measure of service" (Fry 1980, vol. 50, p. 4), but gives freedom at the same time. Oblates, it can be assumed, apply creative solutions when confronted with this conflict on a daily basis. They might use ritual elements from the Office said by the monks and implement these individually in their own way. Ritually speaking, this could be called a "ritualising" process (Grimes 2000, p. 25). Still, this implementation will imply that prayer becomes part of the daily routines and connected to them. It can even be so familiar that it is not mentioned or planned separately. But, if you reflect upon it, it can be interpreted as a ritual prayer. This third dimension can be called a "ritualization" (Grimes 2000, p. 25). The following figure provides two representative quotes from the respondents for each type (Figure 1):

Dimension	Quotes
Rite	- I pray the Office of the brothers at home every morning and evening - The Liturgy of the Hours as given in the Breviary helps me to pray
Ritualising	- In meditative moments, I find my own prayers of silence - I use different texts in the morning to contemplate and pray
Ritualization	- At unexpected moments I have a feeling that I'm praying - Prayer is a way of doing everything in the presence of God

Figure 1. Dimensions of prayer—quotes.

The respondents usually pray at home, mostly in a place set aside in their house with an icon and candles. They use all the elements of the rite of the Divine Office of the monks, which in all three monastic contexts is the most important praying activity (Table 4). Most frequently, oblates mention "the Breviary" (liturgical book for the liturgy of the Hours of the Roman Catholic Church), smaller editions by monasteries, and online tools such as prayer apps that provide the psalm texts of the hours together with the biblical lessons of the day. Most also mention the morning and the evening as ritual moments. The groups affiliated to the three abbeys differ regarding the creative invention of prayer. This is much stronger than average in St Willibrord. As already mentioned, the abbey has a large group of oblates and a tradition of using new techniques such as meditation. This may be the reason that the respondents from that group talk more frequently about ritualising processes such as finding personal moments of meditation or making up personal prayer texts. The ritualization is mentioned more than average by the respondents of St Benedict Abbey, which implies that prayer is a self-evident ingredient in their daily routines. One reason might be that this abbey represents a stricter rhythm of prayer, which may motivate oblates to work on the link between their prayer and their daily activities.

Table 4. Dimensions of prayer—monastic context.

Code Group	St Willibrord	St Adelbert	St Benedict	Total
Rite	49.5	50.0	50.0	49.6
Ritualising	27.3	17.9	10.0	24.1
Ritualization	23.2	32.1	40.0	26.3

n = 53; numbers: relative number of merged quotes in %.

The different age groups displayed interesting differences, too (Table 5). The rite of using the official form of the Liturgy of the Hours was mentioned most frequently by middle-aged oblates, whereas young oblates talk more often about creative adaption. Perhaps the middle-aged respondents are in the midst of their professional life and are at the same time still familiar with the idea that liturgy is given by the church. Older oblates talk much more often than average about making prayer a self-evident daily routine. The reason may be that their daily schedule offers more possibilities to do so than with the other two groups.

Table 5. Dimensions of prayer—personal context—age.

Code Group	50 or Younger	51–69	70 or Older	Total
Rite	41.7	53.5	44.7	49.6
Ritualising	33.3	25.4	15.8	24.1
Ritualization	25.0	21.1	39.5	26.3

n = 53; numbers: relative number of merged quotes in %.

Finally, church affiliation was considered an important element of the personal context of oblates (Table 6). It was found that the members of mainline churches—Catholic and Protestant—talk more often about the rite, which is the ecclesial form of the daily prayer. The Protestant oblates are more explicit about the creative manner of praying. The reason might be that the Catholic form is not their original form of prayer, therefore they are inclined to think about adjusting it. The members of smaller ecclesial groups—other affiliations—mention most that daily prayer becomes a part of their routine, and that all the activities during the day can also mean an occasion for prayer. It seems that their engagement is more overarching in this respect than with respondents who belong to mainline churches.

Table 6. Dimensions of prayer—personal context—church affiliation.

Code Group	Catholic	Protestant	Other	Total
Rite	51.1	50.0	44.4	49.6
Ritualising	26.6	28.0	18.5	24.1
Ritualization	25.3	24.0	37.1	26.3

n = 53; numbers: relative number of merged quotes in %.

To summarise the dimensions of prayer distinguished in the answers of the respondents: generally speaking, the most frequently mentioned manner of praying for all is the rite of the Divine Office. Half of the oblates mention this. A quarter of them also talk about prayer becoming a daily routine, whilst another quarter mention creative adaption and invention. The monastic context demonstrates parallels between the ritual accents of the abbey that the oblates affiliate to. Concerning their personal context, it was found that their age and church affiliation highlighted differences among them, as would be expected.

3.2. Dimensions of Reading

When Benedict encourages the monks to read, this is more than just spiritual advice. It belongs to their duty, which becomes especially clear when the Rule talks about Lent: "During this time of

Lent, each one is to receive a book from the library and is to read the whole of it straight through" (Fry 1980, vol. 48, p. 15). The book given to each individual brother is a bible book, and the time is spent continuously reading it during particular hours of the day. The reading is enacted ritually; thus, its performance is not merely functional but meditative. The form of the reading is as important as the content. Benedict wanted to ensure the discipline of reading by giving clear rules and guides, namely older brothers who control the observance: "Their duty is to see that no brother is so apathetic as to waste time or to engage in idle talk to the neglect of his reading, and so not only harm himself but also distract others" (Fry 1980, vol. 48, p. 18). Sacred reading is a collective activity, it offers a structure that can be filled with meaning, both temporally and socially.

The aim of monastic reading is not to gain information or to be entertained but to run through the classical steps of reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation (*lectio divina*). Yet, these steps are again a ritualising structure that can be helpful but can never be reduced to predictable results. Rather, the insight is received, never achieved actively, as Casey points out: "The prayer latent in meditation on Scripture is released unpredictably later when engaged in an entirely different activity. Some people combine reading, reflection, and prayer in a single 'exercise', others separate them in time and space" (Casey 1996, p. 59). This interpretation already implies some flexibility in giving form to the practice of reading. Within abbeys, how sacred reading is practiced can indeed be different. Some Trappist abbeys (who also follow the Rule of St Benedict) still have collective reading. In Benedictine houses today, monks usually practice individual reading in their cells, but they do this at fixed moments during the day for approximately one and a half hours.

As well as daily time spent on its practice, sacred reading depends on an attitude of reverence and receptiveness, as Casey describes: "It is reverence that makes us assiduous and persevering in our exposure to God's word. We recognise the limitations of an existence without God and we want to provide as many openings as possible for God to enter our life and to influence our living of it" (Casey 1996, p. 27). How can this attitude be developed if you do not live in a monastery where moments are reserved for opening up to God? Do oblates succeed in practising sacred reading daily?

Next to their own experience, they were asked about the amount of time they spend reading. 39% read 2 h or less during a week, another 39% read between 3 and 6 h, and 22% read 7 h or more. The second question asked was whether they follow a particular method when reading: 68% read without a specific method, and 32% follow a method, mostly the four steps mentioned above. What were the dimensions of reading, the respondents mostly talked about? Four dimensions were found in the respondents' answers. The following figure (Figure 2) provides illustrative quotes:

Dimension	Quotes
Bible	- I read the Bible every day, mainly the Gospel and the Psalms - The Lessons of the liturgical calendar are my daily reading
Monastic	- Mystical texts from monastic tradition inspire me to read - I read texts of ancient and contemporary monastic authors
Time	- I reserve an hour for reading at least three times a week - Reading daily gives me inspiration for the things I need to do
Attitude	- I try to be as open as possible when I read an inspiring text - Sometimes a sentence touches my heart and motivates me

Figure 2. Dimensions of reading—quotes.

These dimensions are not to be understood as a conceptual structure of reading, as they clearly relate to two different areas. We present them in the same tables to get an overview over the most prominent topics in our questionnaires. The first two dimensions relate to the texts read. The most-read text is the Bible (Table 7). The respondents mainly talk about reading the lectures of the day according to the liturgical calendar, the psalms or the Gospel. The second type of text frequently mentioned is texts from monastic tradition, including the Rule of St Benedict and texts by medieval and present-day

monastic writers. Related to the monastic context the oblates belong to, it is noted that at St Willibrord there is less mention of the Bible. The reason could be that there is a tradition of reading several types of spiritual texts from various sources, including texts from other religions. Another difference is that, at St Benedict, the oblates focus on the texts from monastic tradition. Probably, the climate in the abbey, which is strongly influenced by traditional monasticism, influences the way respondents enact their own reading. Concerning the time spent on sacred reading, the oblates of St Willibrord talk less about this than the two other groups. Obviously, they are less concerned about the amount of reading time. Their percentage of reading as an attitude is higher than average. The oblates of St Benedict talk less about the underlying attitude. Perhaps the strict observance of the abbey, again, makes them focus on the concrete practice.

Table 7. Dimensions of reading—monastic context.

Code Group	St Willibrord	St Adelbert	St Benedict	Total
Bible	22.2	29.3	28.6	24.7
Monastic	21.2	14.6	28.6	20.1
Time	24.2	31.7	28.6	26.6
Attitude	32.3	24.3	14.3	28.6

n = 53; numbers: relative number of merged quotes in %.

Concerning age, oblates show a stronger interest in the Bible among the older and younger than among the middle-aged respondents (Table 8). The renewed interest among the oblates of 50 years of age or younger also applies to texts from monastic tradition. They are less focused on lectio as an attitude than average. Could this be a new generation of oblates who more consciously deal with concrete practices and texts from the Christian and monastic tradition?

Table 8. Dimensions of reading—personal context—age.

Code Group	50 or Younger	51–69	70 or Older	Total
Bible	26.1	20.2	30.8	24.7
Monastic	26.1	22.6	15.4	20.1
Time	26.1	25.0	28.2	26.6
Attitude	21.7	32.2	25.6	28.6

n = 53; numbers: relative number of merged quotes in %.

Finally, differences revealed between respondents of different church affiliations were investigated (Table 9). They reasonably concur when indicating the texts read, but when it came to the frequency of mentioning the time for the lectio, the members of small ecclesial groups talk of their concrete practice much more frequently than the members of mainstream churches. Attitude, on the other hand, is far more often mentioned by Catholics; it is mentioned less frequently than average by Protestants. Perhaps the Catholic tradition is less exclusively scriptural and focuses more on the underlying process, whereas smaller groups with a high commitment and many common activities are more concerned with concrete practising time.

Table 9. Dimensions of reading—personal context—church affiliation.

Code Group	Catholic	Protestant	Other	Total
Bible	24.1	26.1	24.2	24.7
Monastic	20.7	21.7	21.2	20.1
Time	25.3	26.1	30.3	26.6
Attitude	29.9	26.1	24.2	28.6

n = 53; numbers: relative number of merged quotes in %.

To summarise the findings regarding dimensions of sacred reading, it can be said that the Bible forms the central source for reading, followed by texts from the monastic tradition. Generally speaking, reading as an attitude is mentioned more often than the exact time spent on it. However, the monastic context influences this; for example, when it has a stricter observance. The transfer is, again, influenced by the abbey, but also by the personal context of the oblates. Young oblates show a surprising engagement with regard to tradition. Members of small churches focus on the time spent reading, which is less the case among the members of mainline churches.

3.3. Dimensions of Everyday Practices

In Benedictine life, everything has a "liturgical" character (Quartier 2011a). When Benedict talks about the cellarer of the monastery, the monastic father stresses that everyday practices presuppose a liturgical attitude: "He will regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar, aware that nothing is to be neglected" (Fry 1980, vol. 31, p. 10). This liturgical attitude implies not only a certain style of treating goods and other persons, but—even more importantly—a moral claim, as Michaele Puzicha comments on this chapter: "Sharing of goods, sensible use of property and care for the poor belong to the duties mentioned here" (Puzicha 2002, p. 295). Thus, the attitude of the cellarer is not only applicable to economic circumstances, but needs the virtues related to himself, the other and God (Quartier 2011b). Further on in the chapter, it says: "Above all, let him be humble. If goods are not available to meet a request, he will offer a kind word in reply. [. . .] For he must remember what the Scripture says that person deserves who leads one of the little ones astray" (Fry 1980, vol. 31, pp. 13, 16).

The virtues of humility and generosity are founded in the responsibility of the monk towards God. St Benedict refers to the Gospel of Matthew, here: "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Mt 18,6). The negative motivation to avoid the ultimate punishment by God becomes a positive one in the liturgical life of a monk, by giving his everyday practices a structure open to the meaning of being responsible for himself and the other because of the dedication of his life to God. The transcendent motivation for moral behaviour is not only a question of an inner conviction, but also of outer ritualising actions. The formal attitude of acting everywhere and at every moment, such as in the liturgical setting of the Eucharist ("sacred vessels of the altar"), reminds the monk of the deeper meaning of everything he does.

Even in the context of the monastery, it is difficult to keep the meaning of your everyday practices concerning yourself, the other and God open. This is the reason why Benedict quotes such a harsh passage from the Bible. Outside the monastery, where there is not a given frame of behaviour and a rather small community, it must be even more difficult to enact symbolic practices that express personal humility and generosity. For example, as Rosa points out, a calm and peaceful manner, often understood as purely directed for the benefit of personal wellbeing and a salve against the "acceleration" of life, has both a "functional" and an "oppositional" meaning in society. It contributes to a climate of social responsibility and solidarity (Rosa 2010, pp. 50–51). Monastic life forms a counterpoint of social life in a world continuously speeding up and harming the individual, the social relations and the relationship with God. The ritualization of everyday practices is a manifestation of a responsible and empathetic way of life. How is this manifestation of a religious consciousness enacted and experienced by oblates, who often live in the midst of the acceleration and alienation of themselves, the others and God? Three dimensions were found in the answers: self, other and God. Illustrative quotes are provided in the following figure (Figure 3):

Dimension	Quotes
Self	- Being peaceful inside helps me to live my Christian life - Attentiveness to myself belongs to my practice of being an oblate
Other	- I try to focus myself on the people who need my attention - To feel compassion with others belongs to my daily experiences
God	- God is present in everything I do and safeguards me - I listen to what God says to me in every situation, every day

Figure 3. Dimensions of everyday practices—quotes.

Generally speaking, it was discovered that the oblates mentioned their responsibility towards God most frequently as the content of everyday practices (Table 10). In their answers, they largely describe the support and safety they experience from God. Second, they talk about their responsibility for others, especially being open to the other and receptive to his or her presence. The third motive is being responsible for themselves. Hence, differences emerge depending on the monastic context the respondents are affiliated to. Self-related meaning is found to be much stronger among the respondents of St Benedict Abbey. It may be that the classical monastic paradigm of being on your own finds its echoes in how the oblates talk about their everyday practices. The other-related meaning is stressed most strongly by oblates of St Adelbert. It might be that the community and its service for people via the shop and the journal influences how oblates understand Benedictine everyday practice. In St Willibrord, the God-related dimension is mentioned more frequently than average. The offer of meditation and other programmes by the monks probably has an influence here.

Table 10. Dimensions of everyday practices and monastic context.

Code Group	St Willibrord	St Adelbert	St Benedict	Total
Self	28.7	31.1	35.7	29.9
Other	33.9	37.8	35.7	34.5
God	37.4	31.1	28.6	35.6

n = 53; numbers: relative number of merged quotes in %.

When the frequency of mentioning self-related meaning of everyday practices related to the personal context of the age of the respondents is considered, younger oblates show a much higher number of merged quotes than the other groups (Table 11). Those who are 50 or younger might be more concerned with giving shape to their own life, whilst they still have the opportunity to do so. The same applies to other-related meanings, although the difference with middle-aged and older respondents is smaller. The God-related content of everyday practices is more often mentioned by respondents above 50, even more frequently above 70. An explanation could be that, at a later stage in life, the reliance of God in life becomes more explicit.

Table 11. Dimensions of everyday practices and personal context—age.

Code Group	50 or Younger	51–69	70 or Older	Total
Self	39.1	28.1	29.4	29.9
Other	39.1	34.8	31.4	34.5
God	21.8	37.1	39.2	35.6

n = 53; numbers: relative number of merged quotes in %.

Finally, the differences among respondents with different church affiliations were striking, especially among Protestants (Table 12). They mentioned self-centred meaning much more often, which may be explained with the duty ethics dominant in their religious education. They are less

oriented towards others and God but see their own responsibility first. Catholics and members of smaller ecclesial groups do not differ that significantly from the average.

Table 12. Dimensions of everyday practices and personal context—church affiliation.

Code Group	Catholic	Protestant	Other	Total
Self	28.0	37.0	28.9	29.9
Other	35.5	29.6	35.6	34.5
God	36.5	33.4	35.6	35.6

n = 53; numbers: relative number of merged quotes in %.

To summarise the everyday practices with regard to their structure and meaning, it can generally be said that oblates talk mostly about God-related meanings, even more so when they are older. Protestants refer to self-related meaning more than other groups; for them, this is the most important category. When asked about the specific monastic meaning of the everyday practices that the respondents acquire from being an oblate, it is remarkable that the theological basis for their moral attitudes covers all three dimensions: self, other, and God. A frequently given response is that "God is present every moment of the day and in everything you do". The differences concerning the monastic context show how oblates are indeed influenced by the spiritual accents of the abbeys they are affiliated with. It was also observed that their attitude towards their everyday practices is formed by the personal context they transfer the ritual to.

4. Ritual Transfer

In the last paragraphs, it was seen that the Dutch oblates who participated in this research indeed ritualise their spirituality in prayer, reading and everyday practices. By splitting the population into groups, it was also observed that the monastic context has an impact, as does the personal context, which has then been coded with regard to age and church affiliation. Although the results are only explorative signals, they can still suggest that oblates form a group who actively engage in the ritual transfer of monastic practices. Their form-of-life seems "out of place" in a secular world at first glance, but, perhaps in these unexpected positions, there exist creative initiatives for new ritual fields (Grimes 2006). Among oblates, a combination of old practices and new life circumstances can be observed. However, it would be strange if there would not be problems in the experiences of the oblates, as the transfer is always a result of trial and error, negotiation and compromise.

After all the different dimensions, it is time to finally explore the third research question (3): how do respondents experience the ritual transfer of monastic practices? The problems they actually experience was scrutinised. As they are directed to God, the most frequently mentioned problem that oblates experience in transferring monastic practices from the monastery to a secular setting is the alienation they feel among colleagues or family members who do not believe. Another issue is the difficulty in finding a temporal and social structure for prayer. Illustrative quotes are provided in the following figure (Figure 4):

Dimension	Quotes
Belief	- In my surroundings nobody understands what belief in God means - I often feel alienated because I cannot share my belief
Prayer	- I often miss a community to pray with, like it is in the abbey - The discipline to maintain the regularity of prayer is difficult

Figure 4. Problems of ritual transfer—quotes.

It is problematic to experience God as a foundation of the oblate's belief and to bear witness of that experience in a secular society (Table 13). The less traditional the monastic context, the more oblates of

that particular abbey talk about this problem. The second problem is prayer, especially concerning the regularity and the lack of a praying community. Here, the relation with the monastic background is exactly the other way around. The more open the abbey the respondent belongs to, the less mention there is of the structure of prayer being a problem.

Table 13. Problems of ritual transfer—monastic context.

Code Group	St Willibrord	St Adelbert	St Benedict	Total
Belief	48.9	60.0	66.7	53.0
Prayer	51.1	40.0	33.3	47.0

n = 53; numbers: relative number of merged quotes in %.

With regard to the personal context of the respondents, two problems again show an opposite relationship: the experience of God in a person's life is largely an issue for older oblates, who feel alienated in the world. The structure of prayer is more problematic for younger respondents. Obviously, they are more occupied by the obligations of employment or family and do not easily have the opportunity to find a ritual structure in their daily routine (Table 14).

Table 14. Problems of ritual transfer—personal context—age.

Code Group	50 or Younger	51–69	70 or Older	Total
Belief	40.0	51.4	60.0	53.0
Prayer	60.0	48.6	40.0	47.0

n = 53; numbers: relative number of merged quotes in %.

Finally, the church affiliation once again shows two opposite pictures concerning belief in God in everyday life (meaning) and form of prayer (structure). Alienation because of a belief in God is mostly experienced by members of small ecclesial communities (Table 15). It could be that those oblates, who identify more fully with their church, find it more difficult to experience God in a secular society and give witness to this experience. Those more loosely bound to their church find this less problematic. The structure of prayer is found most challenging by members of mainline churches, less by members of small communities. An explanation could be that the less a person is socially involved in an ecclesial context outside the monastery, the more difficult he or she will find it that there is no given structure of prayer and no praying community.

Table 15. Problems of ritual transfer—personal context—age.

Code Group	Protestant	Catholic	Other	Total
Belief	40.0	51.3	62.5	53.0
Prayer	60.0	48.7	37.5	47.0

n = 53; numbers: relative number of merged quotes in %.

To summarise the problems oblates experience: the ritual transfer can be difficult in a secular setting when concerning the belief in God in a person's practices, especially for oblates from the most traditional abbey, for those embedded strongly in their church community, and for older oblates. The structure of prayer in the sense of discipline and community is also experienced as difficult, but more by oblates who belong to the most open abbey, younger ones, and those more loosely embedded in ecclesial groups.

5. Conclusions

This article started with the following main question: which monastic ritual practices do Benedictine oblates in the Netherlands perform, and how do they transfer these to their personal

context? After having answered the research questions in the previous paragraphs, ritual prayer, reading and everyday practices can be identified as constitutive ritual practices for Benedictine oblates' spirituality. Although they do experience issues when transferring practices from the monastic context they are affiliated to into their personal context, they still report positively on their ritual form-of-life.

When the first World Conference of Benedictine Oblates took place in 2005 in Rome, the Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Confederation, Dom Notker Wolf OSB, explained his motive for stimulating an exchange about this form-of-life as follows: "The treasures of the Rule of St Benedict should not be hidden inside monasteries. Our societies should be rooted in Christ, again, and become a huge family, in mutual love and respect" (Koller 2009, p. 283). Of course, the research cannot indicate what impact the life of oblates exerts within their own personal context. But in each case, it can be concluded that they are well aware of the task the general superior formulated. The unique ritual character of Benedictine life makes the lay members of the order different from lay members of other Christian orders and congregations. Their liminal form-of-life is in the first place enacted by practices relying on their monastic context and integrated into their personal context, without fully being a part of the social mechanisms the oblates are confronted and obliged with in the world (Quartier 2020).

The self-reports of the Dutch Benedictine oblates have shown that there is a high degree of reflection among the oblates, thus the practices of monastic spirituality outside monastery walls can form an interesting ritual field. Practically, it is hoped that the findings will help people—oblates and others—to reflect on their ritual life as a source for spirituality. For ritual studies, it is also hoped that this article demonstrates that a further exploration of monastic life can be a source for discovering ritual fields related to Christian churches, but which stem from a different tradition, and which can relate to the secular environment in a nuanced way. Because—although all the respondents are Christian—they differ in the way they experience their religion. Oblates, often a forgotten group in research, can help with further reflection on the relevance of monastic practices in a substantial way.

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