

A profound personal and communal conversion: our Oblate Mission

June 3rd, 2011 - Encounter of ongoing formation for young European Oblates in their first 15 years of ministry

There is a question in our Chapter document, "Conversion", from the Report of the Superior General to the 35th General Chapter: "Today, do we discern God's will as to our congregational mission to evangelize the poor or just keep doing by inertia what we are used to?"

This question could be forgotten and passed over quickly. It calls for attention in light of the profound conversion to Jesus Christ to which we have been called. Here I look at the five phrases, but not in order:

Do we discern God's will?

- As to our congregational mission?
- To evangelize the poor?
- Or just keep doing by inertia?
- What we are used to?

1 - Are we operating out of inertia? Here is the definition of inertia: "A tendency to do nothing or to remain unchanged: 'bureaucratic inertia'."

What a terrible word! This is the exact opposite of our Founder's zeal and goes against the very Gospel. This means we are no longer on fire with the life of God, with the Gospel, with forming the community of Church. Inertia is death. Is this our reality today? What are some examples of inertia? What causes inertia? What is the antidote for inertia? Joel 3: 1- Do we no longer dream dreams or have visions? Luke 4:16- Do we not drink from the well of the Spirit who has anointed us? 2 Tim 1:6- "I remind you to stir the flame of the gift you have received..." The Mission is God's. As missionaries, we are simply called and sent in life-giving interaction with a passionate God. We may have retreated into inertia by a sense of being overwhelmed with the reality of the poor today, the power of mass media over society, the seduction of technological globalization and the indifference or antagonism toward religion/Church/God in our society. We must rekindle our faith in small things done with God's power which topple Goliath or the walls of Jericho. Our faith sees the effect of the small mustard seed, the yeast in the dough and the power of the cross. Do we believe?

2 - Are we simply doing what we are used to doing? This is not mission at all. There is no vision, passion, energy or imagination. A missionary is in dialogue with God, with those around him and with the reality. He responds to needs, but not impulsively, without reflection or discernment. Saint Eugene's heart embraced the poor and whenever he saw needs, he began to act and organize a response. His heart belonged to God and so it belonged to the poor, the suffering and the needy. His heart kept on giving of itself to his Oblates, his diocese and his people. We are called to a profound conversion, breaking out of old patterns and envisioning new responses to new situations of the poor. Being in touch with God through a living relationship with him will empower us as missionaries, called and sent, moved to embrace deeper, more committed missionary actions, to greater love and courage. It will be anything but the same old routine. Think of the calls of Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Mary. How have we left the known and familiar, to cross borders, as recent Chapters have called us?

3 - Do we discern God's will? If we believe in a living God, and if we are in relationship to God, then we need to listen to him, to take direction and allow ourselves to be called by him both communally and personally. The Spirit's Gift of Courage enables us to stand back and question what we are doing, why we are doing it, to evaluate our action and spend time in prayer to ask God, "Lord, what do you want of me, of us?" The call to a profound conversion made to us by the Chapter of 2010 is the Spirit's call to become men of discernment, in dialogue with God, listening together as a community and as individuals to discover God's mission, how we can cooperate with God and be missioned by him. A danger is to take it for granted that we know God's will without the hard work of prayer, discussion,

study and reflection. This is hard work and it is also a source of life and joy to be in dialogue with God and to be lead on a journey. A temptation is to presume that we are doing God's will because we are doing good work and religious actions. We have lost the sense of mission when we do the same thing we have done for years because we like it, the people like us, it's going well, etc.

4 - The congregational mission: our Constitutions and Rules give us the great missionary vision of Saint Eugene in contemporary words. We have general directions which give us an orientation and a framework for evangelizing the poor. Each Province, Delegation and Mission must be a discerning community which takes time together to listen to God's voice speaking in the Scriptures, in our Constitutions and Rules, through the local Church and in the reality of the poor. As we listen to these voices in a prayerful attitude, we are allowing God to lead us so that we are participants in his mission. Together, with the Spirit's light, a Province of Oblates makes a project with priorities through the listening, prayer and discussion of all the members. Everyone commits himself to be available for the common project and enters into a dialogue with the leadership to discern how each Oblate might best serve. The vow of obedience lived in generous availability makes one a missionary. The congregational mission is extremely challenging, absolutely necessary and its "success" (in Gospel terms) depends upon its being planned and lived, in and through the community.

5 - To evangelize the poor: The whole objective of our lives is to evangelize the poor and to grow in holiness. Who are the poor today that are abandoned? Whom are we called to serve in this context? The courage to enter into a discerning dialogue with God and then the freedom and courage to leave what is known and familiar will lead us to those whom God wants us to serve today. We see new forms of poverty and the many faces of the poor question us. We must discern priorities and we will evangelize through small Gospel actions in favor of the poor. I am convinced that such evangelization is in and through the witness of a discerning community. Evangelizing the poor requires a community of Oblates who cultivate a living relationship with God, a life shared in common marked by simplicity and a commitment to pray, listen and discern. This apostolic community is the light of Christ shining in the darkness, a bright proclamation of the Gospel that evangelizes and draws people to follow Jesus. To participate in God's mission to evangelize the poor, we ourselves must journey in a continual process of profound conversion. A community of missionaries that witnesses by its life that God is All holds (in earthen vessels) and radiates the power of God's life/love. It irresistibly evangelizes and draws the poor by God's grace.