

**Letter from the Superior General
on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception,
December 8, 2013**

Blessings to all my brother Oblates and Associates on this Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary! We begin our Oblate Triennium with this wonderful feast, and enter into a time of expectancy and preparation as we look toward the year 2016 and the bicentennial of Saint Eugene's decision to bring together a group of missionaries to preach the Gospel to the most abandoned people in Provence.

A vital ministry

As we open the Oblate Triennium, I would like to draw attention to the vital ministry of inviting new members to join our Congregation as priests and Brothers. I do this because, aside from the importance and urgency of continually drawing new life into our Congregation, I have been frequently and insistently asked to speak to the Congregation on this matter, especially by young Oblates from different parts of the Congregation during my visits. Also, the two International Oblate Youth Encounters in which I participated (Malaga, Spain 2011 and Aparecida, Brazil 2013) brought this request to me, as did a letter from the young Oblates of the Conference of the Region of Latin America (CIAL) in February, 2013.

An important charism

It is with real joy that I respond to these requests and affirm the need for this ministry in every Unit of the Congregation. I promise my full support and that of the Central Government and the General Administration to everyone engaged in inviting young people to become Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Brothers and priests. I do this not just because I am concerned about declining numbers in the Congregation, but especially because I have seen who we are in the Church and how vital our presence is for the poor. We are fired by a charism that is unique and special in the Church, one that makes us very close to the poor, the rejected, the forgotten, the people that society ignores, and the people who don't feel accepted in church. We show a very human face of Jesus to the world, one full of compassion and solidarity. I would go so far as to say that our charism lies at the heart of the Church and indeed at the heart of the Gospel itself. We

would be remiss if we did not enthusiastically and boldly continue to invite young people to live as consecrated religious missionaries, priests and Brothers, within our charism. Hasn't Pope Francis captivated the world by doing what Oblates have done for 197 years?

It does not diminish the importance of other vocations

There are, of course, concerns I sometimes hear from Oblates. First, some feel that by highlighting the uniqueness of a vocation to religious life we are somehow denigrating the vocation of the laity. However I do not see that danger in our situation. As Oblates we have always worked for vocations in the widest sense. We have a long and proud history of working with laity and helping them discover and have access to their rightful ministry in the Church and society. We have worked with couples, single people, lay missionaries, and Oblate Associates. I do not believe it is a question of one vocation somehow opposing the other, religious life versus laity. I invite us to think and to act as "both/and." Oblates have always been dedicated to both, the formation and participation of lay people in the Church and to our Congregation's ministry and future by specifically inviting new members. These are complementary vocations; they are not competing with each other. Our ministry includes both helping lay people discern their specific vocation and also working to invite young people to become missionaries in the charism of St. Eugene as priests and Brothers.

Some Oblate vocation promoters have emphasized that their ministry is to help everyone find his or her vocation, but so far no one has chosen to become an Oblate! It would be a great omission on our part to reduce vocation ministry only to helping young people prepare for marriage, single and/or professional life without actively encouraging them to consider the option of priesthood or brotherhood as Oblates. We owe it to the young people we work with to help them to see clearly how their baptism ordains them to minister in Jesus' name, even outside the canonical structures of priesthood and religious life; but we also only serve them truly and fully if we invite them to consider whether perhaps they are called to a vocation inside religious life or priesthood. Religious life and priesthood are a call, an invitation. That has been true from the time of Jesus to this very day. We must invite, freely and graciously, but we must invite. An invitation is not coercion; it is a gift for which one is grateful.

It is not to the detriment of the mission with the poorest of the poor

A second concern some Oblates give voice to is the danger that in putting energy and personnel into seeking vocations, we are forgetting the mission and the needs of the poor, and turning unhealthily inward. While it is understandable that any energy turned in upon ourselves can seem self-serving, reality demands that we take a longer-range view: Without new members we will not survive for long and the poor will no longer be served by our charism. Also, to work specifically to invite new members to our religious family is to believe in our future and the importance of our work and ministry. It is when a family no longer believes that it has a worthwhile future that it stops welcoming new life into itself. We believe we have a family worth welcoming people into. We believe that we are worthwhile. And we believe that we have a future. We need to welcome in new life – with joy and confidence. This is another instance of both/and: We need to spend ourselves for the mission to the most abandoned, even as we dedicate some energy and some personnel to seek young men to continue this mission which is so needed in the Church.

Do we still have faith?

There is an axiom that says: *Every congregation gets the future it deserves!* I believe we have a future as a Congregation and that our death is not something ordained by God or by circumstance. We will die to the extent that we no longer believe that God's Spirit is able to move the hearts of young people and to the extent that we no longer believe that our charism has relevance to the poor, the Church and to the world. We will die to the extent that we no longer believe in the generosity of young people and their desire to serve, to give of themselves, and to be willing to sacrifice. We will die when we stop believing – in the power of the Gospel, in the generosity of young people, in the value of our own charism, and in ourselves. I believe it is a sign that we have become overly-secularized and lost faith when we say young people are unable to be attracted by the power of the Word and by Jesus' life.

I believe we are weak in faith when we too glibly cite "demographics" and "secularization" as the causes for so few young people responding to the call to be missionary priests and brothers. Do we no longer believe in the power of the Spirit to raise up new members? Do we believe that the Gospel no longer works? When we cease to invite young people to join our family because of demographics and secularization, we unwittingly help fulfill our own prophecy that there are no

longer any youth interested in our way of life. Then we will get the future we deserve. But, our faith calls us to see more deeply, to act differently, and to choose to be prophetic rather than despairing. We, each and every Oblate, are called to challenge the dogmas of demographics and secularization and step out in faith to invite young people to an alternative and radical way of life. Let us meditate on the words of Constitution # 52: “Jesus never ceases to call people to follow him and to proclaim his Kingdom.”

Even in the Units where vocations are numerous

I write to you, not only concerned about the Units in which vocations are very sparse or non-existent. Where vocations to the Congregation are abundant in certain places of the world, we cannot take this gift for granted. We must also have a solidly organized vocation ministry which is proactive, inviting and helping young people discern their vocation and be formed in their faith. At times I worry that we are too passive and content in simply admitting those who come to us without an organized pastoral ministry of vocations which actively seeks out, invites and then accompanies these men in their discernment to become missionaries. The Units blessed in attracting new members could become complacent and even be forgetful about prayer for vocations. These Units also must be strong in prayer, expressing their gratitude to God for the new members who come to them and asking the Lord for vocations in solidarity with the Units who are facing serious challenges.

“And what did our Lord Jesus Christ do?”

What do we learn from Jesus? Jesus’ life incarnated a full integrity: His life witnessed to the Good News that he preached. Jesus was a prayerful man: living out of a deep communion with his Abba, impelled by the Spirit, he prayed before choosing his disciples and told us to pray for laborers. Jesus called others by name to be with him, to follow him, and he formed them. Might that not be a template for our own ministry of Oblate vocations? Our lives must witness to the Good News we preach as we were so powerfully called by the 2010 Chapter on “Conversion.” We must be men of prayer, contemplatives in loving communion with the Father, the Son and the Spirit. We must pray for vocations. (Recently Pope Francis said that vocation ministry is a ministry of the knees, of prayer, rather than programmatic strategy.) We must invite young men by name to follow Jesus as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

The way is not easy and there are no fast solutions. We need a great deal of patience, faith, prayer and Oblate perseverance. Units need to develop a permanent community outreach to young people that is respectful and careful of the whole person, courageous in inviting and proposing our way of life, and the common commitment of all the Oblates in the Unit. We need to invite young people into our communities for experiences of life and mission. We need to invite them to pray and share faith together with us. Whether we are in an environment in which there are few young people choosing a religious vocation or in one that is favorable and conducive to vocations, it is necessary to dedicate full-time personnel and financial resources to a serious, intentional and organized vocation ministry.

The reality of young people who are different from us

Sometimes the present reality of young people is very different from what it was for us who are older. For instance, they might arrive asking about our particular religious clothing, the habit. They might ask about saying the Rosary or having Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. They have their own unique way of uniting concerns for the poor, for justice, and for the environment with devotions and more traditional signs of Catholicism. This can make some of us feel uncomfortable with these young people. But our personal comfort is not of paramount importance here: we need to rise above our own preferred ecclesiologies and welcome these young people, listen to them, learn from them, and humbly help them journey in the spirit of the Church today. We cannot demand of them our spirituality, especially right from the beginning. It is crucial to welcome and walk with them, beginning with where they are, looking at them with love as Jesus did.

Mission with youth and the vocation apostolate

When we speak of our responsibility to invite young men to consider our Oblate life, we must also remember the crucial connection between our ministry with youth and our ministry with the laity. Both of these instances are natural places where we find active Catholic young men to whom we may propose the option of our missionary religious way of life. We do not “use” these ministries simply to find vocations, but these are the logical places to encounter young men who participate in the sacraments, actively live their faith and seek to grow it. Oblates who are involved in education and formation ministries with youth and laity should always be interested and happy to extend an invitation to a Catholic young man to spend some time in community with us, to make

a vocational retreat or to invite them on mission with us, etc. Like Jesus, we must be proactive and call others to follow the Lord as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

Our need to convert, to pray and to hope

As we begin the Oblate Triennium, I ask you to contemplate and follow Jesus' vocational ministry. We need, all of us, to work on conversion in the five areas of our religious missionary life (see the 2010 Chapter document, "Conversion") so that we live with more faithful integrity the following of Jesus. Hence, we need to give substantial effort to prayer in our local communities and in our Units, asking God to send us men whom we might receive and welcome as new members. I invite you to discuss the vocational reality of your own Unit. Please do this not as victims of statistics, demographics and secularization, but as men of faith. Hope, as you know, does not look at demographics and then form a judgment. Hope rather looks at the Gospel and waits for the demographics to change!

For an organized approach to this ministry

I invite each Unit to organize a pastoral ministry of outreach for new members, insisting that every Oblate has responsibility for vocations and designating an Oblate priest or Brother as full time coordinator. The **General Norms for Oblate Formation** is a helpful instrument to begin to organize a vocation ministry and discernment process for welcoming new members into our midst: *"There is an urgent need for a well-planned vocation apostolate in every Unit of the Congregation. It consists of two ministries: 1) that of making known the Oblate charism, and 2) that of accompanying a prospective candidate until he enters a pre-novitiate program. While each of these two ministries has its specialists, every Oblate is called to perform the first and any Oblate may find himself called upon to exercise the second (cf.R.53a)."* (GNOF, p. 19 # 79). This is a very concrete appeal to conversion in the spirit of the Chapter of 2010.

Mary Immaculate is the model and guardian of our consecrated life (C#13). We entrust our renewed efforts toward inviting new members to join us through a prayerful ministry of vocations to her intercession and tender care for us.