



## MISSIONARY OBLATES OF MARY IMMACULATE

### The Superior General

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L.J.C. et M.I.

Dear Brother Oblates,

Happy feast day to all on the day we celebrate the Immaculate Conception of Mary!

"They are convinced that if priests could be formed, afire with zeal for men's salvation, priests not given to their own interests, solidly grounded in virtue – in a word, apostolic men deeply conscious of the need to reform themselves, who would labour with all the resources at their command to convert others – then there would be ample reason to believe that in a short while people who had gone astray might be brought back to their long-unrecognized responsibilities."<sup>i</sup>

Saint Eugene's Preface is a moving call, expressing the solid conviction that if apostolic people were truly intentional about their formation under God's grace---transformation--- and deeply aware that in order to preach the Gospel, they themselves need to be reformed, then there would be a significant awakening to the faith among the people. This appeal that inspires us in the Founder's Preface is echoed by the Chapter of 2010: the call to a profound personal and community conversion to Jesus Christ is a summons to welcome anew and more profoundly the Good News in our own lives for the sake of the mission. The evangelizer's own life is the best way to preach the Gospel.

On this feast of the Immaculate Conception, we are beginning the second year of the Oblate Triennium in preparation for the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the Congregation as the Missionaries of Provence. The Triennium, with its faith-sharing sessions and signs of conversion, is offered as an instrument to help us open our lives to the transforming power of God's grace.<sup>ii</sup> This second year is focused on "A New Spirit: Formation as a Lifelong Process" and on the Vow of Poverty. The faith-sharing sessions will help us understand that all Oblates are called to an entire lifetime of formation under God's grace. God is an artisan, touching our lives and opening them, moulding us and helping us grow in the mystery of the Person of Jesus Christ. Constitution # 47, under the title of '**Ongoing Conversion**', states: *"Formation is a process which aims at the integral growth of a person and lasts a lifetime. It enables us to accept ourselves as we are and develop into the persons we are called to be. Formation involves us in an ever-renewed conversion to the Gospel and a readiness to learn and to change in response to new demands."*<sup>iii</sup> Through sharing our faith as brother Oblates and expressing conversion in concrete gestures, we hope to strengthen our commitment to a lifetime of growth in grace.

The second year of the Oblate Triennium also invites us to consider how we live the Vow of Poverty. Recently, I asked a lay missiologist whose life is inspired by the Oblate charism to give me a word of wisdom about mission and evangelization. He immediately said, "*Louis, effective evangelization will take place through your witness of the vow of poverty. People who have lived the spirit of poverty have always been the evangelizers and reformers in the Church.*" Submerged

in a society of materialism, our hearts are hungry for the consumer items marketed to stimulate our needs and enhance our egos. We ask God for the grace to embrace prophetic evangelical poverty, so that God alone will be our treasure. (Mk 12: 30-31; Mt 6:33; Mt 13:44-46) As we did last year, so in this year of the Oblate Triennium, we hear each other's experience of God's call to conversion in our faith-sharing encounters, and we seek ways to respond to God's grace through concrete signs of conversion in our lives.

Brother Oblates, I am convinced that God is showing particular favour to our Congregation and that we have been granted special opportunities of grace through the General Chapter of 2010 and the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our Congregation. Although the members of the 2010 Chapter did not have the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Congregation on our minds, the Spirit was leading us as we confirmed the theme that had been proposed by the Interchapter of 2007: 'the call to a profound personal and community conversion to Jesus Christ.' This call is the mandate of the 2010 General Chapter to the Central Government and to the entire Congregation! What could be more essential, more fundamental, more life-filled for our consecrated missionary lives than this call? By calling us to conversion, the Spirit is leading us and preparing us to be faithful to our missionary vocation.

As explained to us in the 80's by Fathers Elizondo and Sullivan,<sup>iv</sup> at this time in the history of our Congregation, we have before us the choice to die, to stagnate, or to be reborn. The General Chapter of 2010, by affirming the call to conversion, has made the option for the rebirth of the Congregation. We are called to say no to death and stagnation, and, through the Spirit who makes all things new, we are to be revitalized in the Oblate charism, ready and available for difficult, and in today's context, I intentionally say "dangerous" missions among the poor and most abandoned.<sup>v</sup>

It is true that we are living presently all three of these realities: death, stagnation and rebirth.

1) The Congregation is dying in some localities where Oblates have accepted our disappearance and death. The whole Congregation is in solidarity with Oblates who face the disappearance of the Congregation from an entire country. We give thanks to God for the Oblate life and mission that once shone brightly and now is fading. We value the history and the missionary dynamism that characterized Oblate life in these places. As I wrote on this feast last year, I do not accept the 'death theory' that proposes in certain places that we have done our work, that we are no longer needed in the Church and so we can die in peace.<sup>vi</sup> The Church needs consecrated men living the Oblate charism, because the poor and most abandoned continue to be with us and need to hear the Gospel. We do this in collaboration with others who live the Oblate charism such as Oblate Associates, the Friends of St. Eugene, the Friends of the Oblates, the Mazenodian Family, the Missionary Association of Mary Immaculate, and many others.

2) Some Oblates and Units have entered into the second and easiest option, stagnation. It is a comfortable option which maintains the language of Oblate life without the missionary content, and it makes friends with the spirit of the world. This is the option of mediocrity at its worst and it attracts a trickle of half-hearted members to continue joining us looking for a comfortable refuge from real life. The choice to stagnate is first of all identified in relation to mission. In his report to the 2010 Chapter, Father Steckling, Superior General, used a devastating word to describe this situation: "inertia."<sup>vii</sup> When a Unit no longer has a common commitment that is known, articulated and owned by its members it is stagnant.<sup>viii</sup> There are several signs which are consequences of this lack of missionary thrust: the predominance of maintenance ministries,

personal projects and strong individualism. Because there is no common missionary plan with priorities, individual interests, chosen without discernment and without reference to the charism, prevail. The lack of missionary identity in a stagnant Unit also has the negative effect that ministry is used for the advantages of personal financial remuneration and other personal properties that are not given to the Oblate community. Often, an Oblate seeks his own work in a diocese which provides these personal benefits, or, he takes on a profession such as teaching to establish a highly autonomous life. Careers are planned and the Congregation is used as a stepping stone to a materialistic life imbued with the spirit of the world.

In an address given to the Inter-Chapter Meeting in Rome on May 10, 1984, Father Jetté said these very words: "The Congregation is not a springboard for achieving one's own personal charism and individual projects. On the contrary, when we enter the Congregation, we must be ready to put ourselves entirely at the Congregation's disposal, to carry out the evangelizing work it will assign to us."<sup>ix</sup> Unfortunately, I have witnessed that these words of Fr. Jetté are still valid for us today and they are a sign of stagnation among us. We see in these words how vital the vow of obedience is to counteract stagnation and contribute to a common missionary plan.

Besides the missionary outlook which is in a stagnant state in this second option, we can also see that the commitment to religious life is likewise abandoned. We can see this as the result of a lack of missionary zeal and, at the same time, a lack of clear identity about religious life. The core values of the consecrated life are the four vows, the life of prayer and life in apostolic community.<sup>x</sup> In stagnant Units, vows are professed but there is no prophetic witness and even at times a scandalous counter-witness is permitted; personal and community prayer disappears because of various ideological reasons or even from a lack of faith; community life is reduced to 'hotel living' or living alone in parish houses or in apartments. Stagnant members and Units either don't understand consecrated life or have lost the appreciation of consecrated life, often the consequence of the crisis of faith among us since the 1970s. The core values of our vocation disappear without a struggle because of the spirit of the world and for what appears to be efficiency, expediency and activism. Personal success and gratification, centered on one's own likes and preferences ("I feel good in this ministry"), are more important than a common missionary plan, apostolic community and obedience. The religious is self-referential,<sup>xi</sup> absorbed in himself and in pursuit of his personal projects.

There are many other signs and consequences of stagnation. Oblate life in a stagnant Unit degenerates into a loose association of autonomous priests and brothers. Stagnation breeds indifference, and even hostility to vocations, because the Congregation and religious life are not esteemed or really loved. There is indifference to the vocation of Brothers because the vocation of Brothers, consecrated to God for mission, is not understood.<sup>xii</sup> In his recent letter for the World Day of Missions, Pope Francis wrote some very challenging words which should provoke questions in us: "*Many parts of the world are experiencing a dearth of vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life. Often this is due to the absence of contagious apostolic fervour in communities which lack enthusiasm and thus fail to attract. The joy of the Gospel is born of the encounter with Christ and from sharing with the poor.*"<sup>xiii</sup>

Stagnation is also characterized by a very fragile sense of belonging to the Congregation. The Oblate in this model has the attitude that he should receive and even take from the Congregation everything that he is able to get for himself. He is never generous toward the Congregation nor considers how to help support the Congregation. In this model, the Congregation is usually spoken of as "they" not "we", and the individual is absorbed by what "they owe me." It is really

hard to hear an older Oblate say, "All my life I have done what they wanted me to do. Now I'm going to do what I want to do." The anger, hurt and bitterness in this statement is crying out for healing and help. When there is a fragile sense of pertaining to the Congregation, members remain with us while they receive what they want. When they are called to give of themselves or are challenged in their way of living Oblate life, they leave us or find a way to live on the margins, doing their own thing.

It is very sad. Yet, in spite of the call to conversion by the 2010 General Chapter and made again by the Central Government, some Oblates and some entire Oblate Units have not responded and have already entered into stagnation and death, or are drifting steadily toward this kind of life.

3) There is a third and wonderfully graced option before us: to be reborn in the Oblate charism of Saint Eugene. The Spirit is driving us, groaning within us like a woman in the pains of labor to give new birth. This call is transforming Oblates and Oblate Units who are allowing God to shepherd them to a consecrated missionary life faithful to the charism, to a prophetic witness of our four vows, to a significant life of fraternal communion, and to a genuine life of personal and community prayer. The 2010 Chapter Call to Conversion is the Spirit driving us, urgently impelling us to reject complacency, inertia, and indifference, in order to revivify the Congregation with a new heart and a new spirit, so that we become available for the most difficult missions. The Spirit is pouring out St. Eugene's charism upon us, drawing us to participate in God's mission, leaving nothing undared, "*...ready to sacrifice goods, talents, ease, self, even their life, for the love of Jesus Christ, the service of the Church, and the sanctification of their brethren...*"<sup>xiv</sup>

In many places, the Congregation is witnessing signs of a rebirth of the charism. It is especially life-giving to see younger Oblates who are calling middle-aged Oblates and elderly Oblates to rediscover together the power and beauty of the charism, and who themselves are committed to live it. There are some Units whose leadership is involving all the members in a participative and challenging process to establish a common missionary plan inspired by our charism and having a positive focus of only several priorities. This process is demanding on leadership, and often heavily criticized, because it involves making choices about leaving ministries, shaking up the so-called 'sacred cows', and calling all Oblates to cross borders, to leave personal ministries and comfort zones to become missionaries. Units which have a common vision and commitment to a limited number of priorities are Units with life and zeal; there is meaningful apostolic community life, there is joy and there are vocations. Oblates in these Units are really serving the poor and the most abandoned. They are moving ahead to find new areas of outreach for missionary presence. Responding to the call to conversion in the area of mission, these Units also have a broader sense of evangelization, integrating concerns for justice, peace and the integrity of creation with Catholic spirituality, the traditions of the people and genuine piety.

There is again the spirit of rebirth in Oblate apostolic communities when this is fostered by leadership. It must be remembered that, while a rebirth of the Congregation is the responsibility of every Oblate, the charism of superior has a key place in renewing our Oblate life.<sup>xv</sup> The superior has the charism to enliven the local communities, calling Oblates to live their religious commitment. He encourages Oblates to recognize the beauty and joy of a deeper way of being together as brother Oblates, and this is life-giving for mission. Oblate apostolic community is being rejuvenated with a profound sense of the communion of life reflected in the basic values of religious life, living together under the same roof, praying in common, taking meals together, having recreation with each other, etc. There is no doubt that we are truly hungry for a more

significant way of living together as brother Oblates in spite of the challenges. Young Oblates are among those who are calling us to live this and challenging our lives. This is a gift of the Spirit!

The call to conversion is also helping us discover anew the profound sense of consecrated life in each of its three dimensions (the four vows, the life of faith and apostolic community).<sup>xvi</sup> With respect to the vows, we have gone through and we are still are passing through a crisis in relation to the vow of chastity. This vow is fundamental to our rebirth because it is all about love. The Holy Father has challenged us, asking us whether we religious have become bitter and cynical bachelors or are becoming life-filled, generous, joyful men at God's service in our ministry to the poor and in our apostolic communities. We are rediscovering the mystical dimension of the vow of chastity, and are being entirely renewed in a life centered on a deep relationship with Jesus Christ as the center of our lives. Chastity, as a free and joyful response to a special invitation from Christ,<sup>xvii</sup> is nourished by the contemplative dimension of prayer and engenders an authentic sense of oblation. This bears missionary fruit, because the relationship with Christ makes Oblates generously available for difficult missions and able to live together with other Oblates in an apostolic communion of life.<sup>xviii</sup>

The Spirit is also attracting Oblates to a deeper commitment to the vow of poverty, a rich source of renewal and new life. The conversion to a simple life of evangelical poverty, of sharing all with the community and of identifying with Jesus, is constantly brought to our attention by the Holy Father. Poverty expresses our solidarity and interdependence with each other and is essential to apostolic community. Poverty, as we see in Jesus who emptied himself on the Cross, is also closely aligned to the vow of obedience. This vow, when lived as a response to conversion to Jesus Christ, generates life and freedom. It energizes Oblates who make themselves available, with the audacity of Saint Eugene, to cross borders, letting themselves be stretched for new challenges when they are called and sent to mission. This is difficult; sacrifice is involved and yet happiness and surprising new life have been the experience of Oblates who have dared to live the vow of obedience as the oblation of self.

I have been very blessed to hear the witness of aged Oblates who have courageously and faithfully lived the vow of perseverance, a particularly Oblate vow. Their lives of loving fidelity are prophetic, and a deep blessing for the entire Congregation. Thank you to each and every Oblate who has persevered in the grace of your vocation in spite of many difficulties! With Fr. Jetté, I too lament with sorrow that Oblates do not have a deeper sense of faithfulness in persevering in their religious life. We continue to see so many Oblates who simply abandon their commitment in spite of the vow of perseverance.<sup>xix</sup>

Signs of a more Spirit-driven life among us, and we are keeping it a secret, are the young people across the globe who are connecting to the Oblate charism with creative energy and passion. The spirit of Saint Eugene is setting their hearts on fire! The dynamism and vitality of the Oblate charism is also being embraced and lived by many lay people, laity of secular institutes, and religious. I have been privileged also to meet diocesan priests and bishops who find meaning for their ministerial lives in the Oblate charism! The love for St. Eugene among the young people and laity, and their witness to the charism, is having a transformative effect on us, renewing Oblates who have been tempted to stagnate. Eugene's conversion process, the encounter with the Savior in the cross and his passion for Jesus, his closeness to the poor, his devotion to the Church and to Mary, are some elements which draw people to the Oblate charism like a strong magnet.

Oblates and those Units who are fostering new missionary directions and communal apostolic life are also committed to vocations and are reaching out in creative ways to young people. Wherever I have seen joyful, fraternal Oblates living in apostolic communities, close to the poor and with genuine spirituality, there are others who wish to join us or who wish to collaborate in the mission. I am not speaking here in terms of numbers, but of men of integrity who hear God's call and who are not looking for a comfortable nest, but a challenging life of love and service consecrated to God.

The 2016 General Chapter will be a great milestone for the life of the Congregation. Is it a "coincidence" that it falls within the year in which we celebrate the 200 years of our foundation? I believe it is a real sign of God's very special love for St. Eugene and the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Please keep the 2016 Chapter in your prayers so that it will be a Spirit-filled event, with a good, challenging and inspiring theme for our missionary lives. This will be the Chapter of the Jubilee, and from this Chapter we hope that new life will spring out.

My brothers, Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, let us wake up to the call to a profound personal and communal conversion to Jesus Christ! Let us reject death and stagnation. Let us choose blessing and life. May the courageous call of Saint Eugene to leave nothing undared to extend Christ's reign bring us out of complacency and inertia to zeal and passion.

On this feast day we entrust the Congregation to Mary Immaculate. She smiles upon us as we begin the second year of the Oblate Triennium. She inspires us to hope that the Spirit working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine in our lives and in the Congregation (Eph 3:20-21).

We ask Mary to intercede for us, so that we will neither die nor stagnate, but open our lives to God's grace to be reborn in the fire and passion of Saint Eugene's charism. This will be the best preparation for our 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary!

Praised be Jesus Christ and Mary Immaculate!

*Louis Lougen, O.M.I.*

Father Louis Lougen, OMI  
Tamatave, Madagascar, Feast of All Saints 2014

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<sup>i</sup> OMI CC&RR, Preface, 1825 Manuscript

<sup>ii</sup> Letter of S.G. to the Congregation, Dec 8 2013

<sup>iii</sup> OMI CC&RR #47

<sup>iv</sup> Sullivan and Elizondo, Oblate Animation Manual, p. 24

<sup>v</sup> see Acts of the 35th General Chapter, "Conversion" 2010

<sup>vi</sup> Letter of S.G. to the Congregation, Dec 8 2013

<sup>vii</sup> Report of Superior General to 35th General chapter, p 24 (English edition)

<sup>viii</sup> see rule 7 d; Conversion, p.7

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<sup>ix</sup> published in OMI DOCUMENTATION, no. 127/84, June 1984, p. 1-18 and in Fernand Jetté, OMI, The Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate. Addresses and Written Texts, 1975-1985, Rome 1985, p. 347 - The title of this address is "Reflections on the Congregation's current life and future".

<sup>x</sup>OMI CC&RR # 11-44

<sup>xi</sup> Pope Francis, address for World Mission Sunday 2014

<sup>xii</sup> Letter to Congregation on Brothers, February 17, 2014

<sup>xiii</sup> Pope Francis, address for World Day of Missions, 2014, paragraph 4

<sup>xiv</sup> OMI CC&RR, Preface

<sup>xv</sup> Acts of the 35th General Chapter, "Conversion" , 2010

<sup>xvi</sup> OMI CC&RR #11-44

<sup>xvii</sup> OMI CC&RR, C#14

<sup>xviii</sup> OMI CC&RR # 15 & 16

<sup>xix</sup> F. Jetté, The Apostolic Man, p. 184