

INTERCHAPTER MEETING

Mexico - October 7 to 20, 2001

Address of the Superior General

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I. Introduction

1. When Saint Eugene was making his retreat before taking over the diocese of Marseille, he tried to get an overview of his future diocesan flock, with whom he was already acquainted. Which people would come first to our mind if we think of our parishes and missions? The parish council? The Sunday congregation? I am struck by the fact that De Mazenod starts his review with the “multitude of Christians who are so only in name, and who want to remain strangers to the family to which they do not suspect they belong.” His first pastoral question as the new Ordinary is: “What can be done for this considerable portion of the flock?” and he muses about a possible response: “Pray for it and catch its attention by an irreproachable conduct, but that is not enough for men of this calibre, one would have to be able to attract them by striking virtues that one has rarely the occasion to practice”^[1]. Here we see our Founder’s missionary heart. It was his apostolic zeal and daring that have made him a saint. And today, what does our missionary heart suggest to us Oblates of the 21st century? This was exactly the theme of the last General Chapter: how must we be missionaries today, how to “*Evangelize the Poor at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*”?

2. At the present meeting of the Provincials with the Central Government^[2] I would like to bring into focus for you how the General Council sees the last three years of the Oblates’ evangelizing the poor. I also invite you to take a look at future perspectives^[3]. What I will say has been discussed with the whole General Council and represents its viewpoint. The meeting that lies before us is somewhat lesser in importance than a General Chapter since we do not have the responsibility for making decisions. It is nevertheless an important event. May it help us to find a fresh inspiration for the Congregation for the next few years. I hope the atmosphere of the meeting will let us feel very free to be creative and future oriented, open even to some colorful dreams about our future missionary and Oblate life.

II. Between Chapters - The Ongoing and the Unfinished Agenda

1. The Chapter Mandate

a. Evangelize the poor in new times

3. Our last Chapter was clearly about mission, just as the previous one had directly focused on community. If in 1998 we put our mission in the perspective of the new millennium we did not do so just because of a round number on our calendars. We were aware of the profound changes in our world and we tried to contemplate them *with the eyes of Christ*, we wanted to *see the world as God sees it*. And there was one inspiration that came to us. It is expressed in the word *HOPE* which the document repeats eight times: “This Chapter, even as it asks us to take stock of both the real pain that so often marks humanity today and of our limits, also brings to life in us an immense hope” (cf EPM 4-8).

b. Four imperatives

4. For the purpose of our reflection, I synthesize the 1998 Chapter in four imperatives that to my mind constitute the main thrust of its mandate. The Chapter has asked of the Oblates:

(i) a new **daring** for the Gospel^[4],

(ii) a reaffirmation of the **community** character of the Oblate mission^[5] and

(iii) a new internationality^[6].

(iv) To this is to be added the fact that the whole third part of our Constitutions and Rules was changed. In doing this, the Chapter has given us an implicit mandate to adapt **our structures and our finances** to the demands of Oblate work and life today.

2. How the Congregation has responded

5. To attempt an appreciation of how the whole Congregation has responded to our last General Chapter is a delicate thing. However, it is safe to say that the letter “Evangelizing the Poor at the Dawn of the Third Millennium” has been well received. This has happened because the Chapter obviously had expressed what was already in the air. Let us now go into more detail according to the four points mentioned above.

a. A new daring for the Gospel

6. The Chapter exhorted us: “The urgency of the mission should make us daring in opening new ways of evangelization” (EPM 17). This is certainly taking place in many instances, sometimes more strongly in situations that are less in the public eye. I think, e.g., of countries that suffer war and strife. It is also a sign of new missionary energy that numerous Oblate units are today reflecting on their mission. Provinces have held major congresses and study days on the subject. For many this reflection will tie into the Immense Hope project which encompasses the whole Congregation. A third positive sign is the readiness of many young and less young Oblates to give their lives to foreign missions. Thanks to this we have been able to strengthen six or seven of our smaller Oblate units^[7] and are even moving into three new countries: Romania, Belorussia and Vietnam.

7. A new daring in mission does exist, but there also coexists a certain amount of inertia. Different parts of the Congregation still might need to ask the more radical questions like: Are we seen by others as missionaries? – Are we investing in youth? – How fragile have we really become because of our ageing membership? – Do we allow the young Oblates to live out their missionary ideal? A key issue is every unit’s commitment to working with youth, especially in Western Europe and North America.

b. A commitment to community life

8. The general mentality of the Oblates is more in favor of community than before. There are fewer and fewer Oblates who say that we were not meant by our Founder to live together, even under one roof.^[8]

9. But Provincials know that often community building in the real world means a change of entrenched structures. Some Provinces have built up a local church and as a consequence, have reached a quasi diocesan set-up, with many Oblates living on their own in their parishes and being financially independent. To change this, determination and patience are needed. It is encouraging to observe that many Provincial administrations are working hard to create more community-friendly conditions. Certain places have been closed down, community-based ministries have been started anew. Under such improved conditions communities of apostolic work, e.g., parishes and missions, and religious community can be truly life-giving to each other. A good number of Provinces also promote a decidedly more consistent financial sharing which is the backbone of community life, as was already said at the 1986 Chapter.^[9] As a consequence of these efforts to reach healthier structures, common life and team work have generally improved in the Congregation.

10. A concrete difficulty for community living lies in the lack of commonly accepted models for living in small fraternities. Let me make a comparison. In the field of formation it could be said that after more than 20 years of experience, we now know better how to proceed. For local community life, however, we have not yet found the formula. Sometimes it is about very practical questions: How do we recreate and share our thoughts, how do we pray together, how do we coordinate our work, how do we deal with our finances? I have repeatedly affirmed: finding a practical way of local community life, according to the spirit and the letter of our Constitutions and Rules, is where one of our Congregation’s major challenges lies. We will have more to say about this further on.

c. Reflection on and practice of internationality

11. I have the impression that internationality, a new theme that appeared at the last Chapter, is being seriously considered all over. Wherever I have a meeting with Oblates, it is often the item that is discussed most. In the field, movement of Oblate personnel is taking place in new directions: from South to South and even from South to North. Some Provinces from the Western world are now asking for help from outside. An important area where we are becoming more and more international is initial formation. Overall the Congregation has started moving along on the lines of internationality, which is not something new for us but today takes on forms that are different from those of the past.

d. Reviewing structures and assessing financial changes

12. Important restructuring efforts are continuing and the Assistant General for Mission will inform you about the developments. The Chapter explicitly mandated the restructuring of the heretofore “Vice-Provinces,” a type of unit that has been abolished. This constitutes one of the major themes of the present meeting. I have the impression that we are moving forward in creating the structures we need today. The Rule says: “It pertains to the Superior General in Council to establish Provinces, to change their boundaries, and to suppress or unite existing Provinces. Before taking any such actions, the Superior General will consult those concerned” (C 98). My hope is that over the coming years and with the cooperation of all, we can reach appropriate and courageous decisions, not too soon but also not too late. Regarding finances, we have analyzed, for example, how our resources will mutate over the next few years; the General Bursar will brief you on our proposals for an appropriate response.

3. Our Service as Central Government

13. After this overview of the Congregation I now pass on to a deion of what we have tried to do as the Central Government of the Oblates. When we started our work three years ago, we began with a short retreat, dedicating one day to each part of the Chapter letter. The fruit of this was what we later called our *template of nine points*^[10] that would guide our principal decisions and our *planning document*. Basically, I will be following the content of our *planning document* in this effort to be accountable to you, though I adapt the order to our purpose.

a. A new daring for the Gospel

14. Under this heading, the most important effort undertaken by the General Council is the Immense Hope project (years 2000 through 2004). We see it as our chief response to the Chapter’s pledge to “review all of our missionary commitments in the light of our charism” (EPM 41).

Four other major endeavors are:

- the creation of the new Oblate Communications and Media service at the General House which wants to address the relationship between media culture and evangelization (year 2000),
- the establishment of the Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation service with a possible outreach to the U.N. (year 2001),
- the organization of two congresses on First-World Missiology (this is the working title) for the year 2002, and preparations for a conference on Interreligious Dialogue, set for Asia in 2003,
- a major step in assuring a solid financial basis for a congregation that is undergoing important demographic changes.

15. All these efforts are an expression of our own *daring* as Central Government to make the voice of the Gospel heard. We know that we could also have started with other initiatives, e.g., on interreligious dialogue, or youth ministry, or that we could have been faster in moving ahead, but this is what we have to offer. The project to which we have given most energy is the Immense Hope process. We will have occasion to speak about it.

b. Community animation according to the Oblate charism

16. The last Chapter repeated the directive of the previous one, to animate community and religious life. Our mission depends on the quality of our individual and communal living in Christ. Among a variety of initiatives we have taken to foster community life I mention the following: creation of an independent portfolio for ongoing formation; efforts to further improve the services at our International de Mazenod Center in Aix; giving attention to our own community life in the Central Government community; the visits we are making to the Provinces, Delegations and Missions and the different sessions we have organized to animate the larger community of the Congregation. There have been two sessions for new major superiors, one formators' session in Asia and a meeting of Oblate bishops, besides the meetings of the General Formation Committee and the General Finance Committee. We want to continue with these gatherings. Towards the end of our term, we also plan to convoke the 40 or so Oblate-related institutes. Regarding community animation it has become clear to us that the Congregation still needs to do more. One helpful move would be, for example, to make available to all the already existing resources. I will come back to the community question.

c. Internationality

17. In one way or another all our work as a General Administration has to do with fostering collaboration across borders. The Assistant General for Formation will report on related activities and proposals of his portfolio. One response to the Chapter's call for internationality were the first obediences and new obediences issued by the Superior General. They involve today an increasing amount of consultation. To facilitate mutual help, we have embarked, as a General Administration, on a rather modest endeavor that we call "*missionnaires sans frontières*" or Mission Personnel Pool. Several Oblate units and individuals have responded and have helped alleviate certain urgent situations regarding formation personnel. Then there is the Oblate Information Service which keeps the 75 Oblate units informed about each other. We have been looking for ways to modernize it, e.g., through a website and electronic mailing. Last but not least, international solidarity is also expressed through certain financial services of the General Administration: the Oblate Solidarity Fund, the First Formation Fund, the Capital Sharing program and the Oblate Investment Pool. Much of the financial solidarity is also channeled through bilateral help between Provinces. The need of international solidarity is increasing more and more.

d. Structures and administration at the service of our mission

18. The Chapter has asked the Congregation to consolidate its structures. The General Council is active in assisting all the movements of restructuring. Over the last ten years there is clearly a development towards larger Oblate units. At the center of the Congregation we are convinced that this development is a healthy one. We want to further encourage the creation of stronger Oblate units or other larger structures. We will speak more about this later.

19. In order to assist Oblates in exercising good administration, the General Council has reflected more than once on a so-called "special assistance" that certain Oblate units might need. We have made ourselves available for the animation of congresses and retreats, but we would like to become even more pro-active in the future, e.g., organizing special visitations (cf. R 138c.) One of our projects is also to find ways and means for the training of provincial councils. In the financial area we insist on the existence and functioning of the finance committee and the training of Province and Delegation treasurers.

20. A major task we saw before us was the reorganization of the General House itself. It is today a consolidated, compact structure and hosts the General Administration, the Studium and the International Roman Scholasticate which were during the 60s situated in different locations. For the General House we have even sought the professional advice of a consultancy firm, KPMG. The only special visitation we have done up to now has been to the three communities of 290 Via Aurelia. All in all, the remodeling of the structures in the General House has been slower than we thought. As a General Council of mostly new people, it has taken us about two years to get through even for ourselves the initial phase of our worldwide ministry. Now a number of changes are taking place. We thank the Provinces and Delegations who have made sacrifices of Oblate personnel and finances for the good of the services at the central level. Given the modern means of communication, could we with your help move some of the secretarial work to other places, e.g. translations? We apologize if our offices have

not always appropriately responded to your expectations due to our own human limitations; we think, however, that we are making some headway in the reorganization of the central services.

4. Pointing to the future

21. Concluding this evaluation I invite you to express any view that might enrich or modify our own perception. But we should not stop at looking back to the last Chapter. Let us now take a further step. Our meeting has also the task of preparing the next General Chapter and it is not too early to start. Are there some insights into the future that we can already now articulate, so that the capitulants in three years time will find their way better paved?

III. Between Chapters - Looking Towards the Future

22. For our outlook onto the future I shall begin with certain factual developments that one can distinguish in the Congregation and then I will complete it with a few intuitions that have come up in the General Council's contacts with Oblates and the people whom they serve. I will not try to start with an analysis of today's world and its missionary needs. This would exceed the space available for this message. What the last Chapter said about globalization and interdependence, poverty and solidarity, culture and dialogue may be seen as the background of my remarks.

1. Factual developments

a. Statistical data

For these statistics we have divided the Congregation into six sectors that are somehow homogeneous. These sectors are: Africa-Madagascar, Asia-Oceania, Canada-USA, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Western Europe.

(i) Vocation statistics

1) present numbers according to sectors

23. Three sectors of the Congregation are on the same level when it comes to the numbers of Oblates in first formation: Asia-Oceania, Eastern Europe and Latin America. They can boast of an average of 118 formandi. Africa-Madagascar doubles this number, with 238 students. The two western sectors together contribute 75 scholastics and Brothers. The percentage figures express the same reality: Africa-Madagascar and Europe-East have about 30% of their membership in initial formation; Latin America and Asia-Oceania 24%; Western Europe, Canada and the U.S. around 4%.

2) Oblates in first formation over the last nine years

24. This number has been slightly increasing since 1992, from 570 to 679 formandi, in spite of the decline in the total number of Oblates. While in 1992 only 11% of the Oblates were scholastics and Brothers in first formation, today that percentage is 15%.

(ii) Projected numbers of Oblates in future years

25. Aging is a reality which especially the western sectors have to take seriously into account in their planning. In Western Europe and Northern America now 60% of our members are 65 or older and in civil life would be retired. This figure will have increased considerably by the next Chapter. In the rest of the Congregation the percentage of Oblates over 65 years of age is only about a third of that figure, namely between 16% in Eastern Europe and 26% in Latin America and will increase only slightly. Already now, the numerical strength of our active work force (if we consider that as those under 65) puts all the six sectors, which in other ways are different, on an equal footing. The numerical strength is pretty much the same in all six sectors, averaging 450 Oblates in each, with only Africa substantially exceeding this number. For the totals, we expect the Congregation to continue decreasing by a small rate of 1.2 to 1.5% per year.

(iii) Obediences

26. Out of the 218 obediences^[11] I have given, 55 were issued to a unit other than that of origin. That means that 25% were to a mission *ad extra*. But one has to consider that at the same time 34 missionaries have returned to the places they came from. The proportion of *ad extra* obediences varies substantially according to different sectors of the Congregation. Eastern Europe is way above average (56% of all their obediences are *ad extra*), while the other sectors are below average (22% for Western Europe, Canada and the US; 17% for Africa-Madagascar, Latin America and Asia-Oceania.)

b. Developments that the statistics indicate

I offer for your consideration three conclusions that can be drawn from the statistics.

(i) While our total number is still slowly declining, dramatic changes are taking place: Some sectors of the Congregation are aging quickly and decreasing in strength, while others are growing considerably.

27. Comment: It is important to realize that these developments are neither good nor bad; the number (declining or growing) is not the most important thing. What matters is to help our young people to grow in the spirit of our Oblate vocation and to make our elders feel that they continue being missionaries. Concerning the numbers, we only have to recognize reality; “reality is friendly.” In times of substantial change, good planning is called for.

(ii) In the sectors where our vocations are numerous, foresight and effective organization are needed, as well as considerable help from outside

28. Comment: The needs are manifold: material structures, financing the running of the formation houses, preparing formators, preparing future leadership. Most formation issues call for a regional or sub-regional approach for a more effective organization. Financial help from the Congregation is regularly asked for, but our common funds are not sufficient. We have to join forces on all levels to address effectively the needs of formation in the growing sectors, especially in Africa-Madagascar.

(iii) We will need international movement of personnel, but in other ways than in the past.

29. Comment: We have been an international Congregation from the time of the Founder, so for Oblates to go outside their own country is nothing new. But over a period of about 150 to 180 years it was quite clear who were the sending countries and who were the receiving countries, and normally the direction was north-south. This will now change. Provinces that in the past were receiving missionaries need more and more to send out missionaries themselves. We need to change the way we conceive mission.

2. What is the Oblate Congregation being called to at the dawn of the 21st century?

30. These developments that are appearing on the horizon question us as missionaries. I put before you six intuitions which to my mind can be perceived as calls from the Lord. They are the following:

a. Through ongoing formation, the Oblates must further strengthen their identity as followers of Christ and sons of Saint Eugene de Mazenod.

b. We need to enter into a re-founding phase taking advantage of our internationality.

c. The quality of life in our local communities deserves our close attention.

d. We need to prepare personnel and develop programs for an initial formation that is clearly missionary.

e. We have to face up to the imminent financial changes.

f. Our decentralized structure calls for a stronger regional interdependence.

a. Through ongoing formation, the Oblates must further strengthen their identity as followers of Christ and sons of Saint Eugene de Mazenod.

31. We have heard it again and again: to be good missionaries we must become saints. A Provincial in the Western world expressed it very simply: We need saints at a time like this. One needs to be a saint in order to be counter-cultural. We also need to be united. The common point that will bring the Oblates together, besides our centeredness in Christ, is not a particular theology or method. As Oblates we have only our charism in common: *evangelizare pauperibus misit me*. To be truly centered in Jesus Christ, to be strongly united as Oblates, is a grace of God, but we can collaborate with this grace.

32. I think there is a call here to study the Founder, to strengthen Oblate community life, to design systematic renewal programs, to utilize to the full the De Mazenod International Centre in Aix. We could put this all under the heading of ongoing formation. The Oblates have not been very committed to this area of ongoing formation and there is the fact that only a few Oblate units have a clear policy regarding ongoing formation. Here lies a call for us.

I would like to add a hint about something that could help us. I suggest that much of our renewal will be done more effectively in contact with the different lay associations that have grown around De Mazenod. They are already reminding us of our identity.^[12]

b. We need to enter into a re-founding phase taking advantage of our internationality.

33. Founding and re-founding does not mean to re-invent the wheel and to start a new Congregation different from the present one. It means to go back to the original missionary inspiration of the Founder, to embody the Founder's missionary response according to the needs of God's people in today's world. This is also a call of the present time. As the statistics show, in some areas of the world we are thinning out, we are aging fast. In others we are expanding into new countries and missions. Both moves require being attentive to the voice of the Spirit as St. Eugene was. I trust that the *Immense Hope* project can open us up fully to this necessary re-founding.

34. Let us take advantage of the changes, e.g., in the Western world, by creating new international communities in a secularized environment; by backing up strongly the new approach to youth ministry as the U.S. and Europe intend to or as Canada is doing as it prepares for the next World Youth Day in Toronto. For the East, we seem to be called to be present in new ways in the former communist countries. In the southern hemisphere the sending of missionaries - South to South or South to North - can mean for the Provinces involved doing again what Saint Eugene did in Marseille when he sent his first people abroad; in other words, it can be like re-founding. All over the Congregation there could also be an exchange of expertise and experts in several areas: first formation, animation of congresses and retreats, leadership training, financial stewardship and ways of raising local income.

35. I would add a concrete suggestion. In this move of re-founding, should we follow the practice of other Congregations by appointing secretaries for mission in each Province? Mission promotion is badly needed in so many local churches. Each sending Province will also have to create certain support structures for its missionaries abroad, at least to keep contact, and perhaps for material help.

36. Re-founding means that the Oblates of Mary Immaculate as a missionary force have to be reawakened. I have the impression that some sectors of the Congregation are thinking too nationally or even too provincially. For many Oblates today re-founding is understood as having to do with internationality. International moves happen in the Congregation first of all through certain needs. One could call it an internationality of necessity. But an internationality of choice is also crucial. What is its rationale? We could simply say: We live in a global village and religious life in an international Congregation has a special message to give to this globalized world. The call for an internationality of choice is well expressed in *Vita Consecrata*: "In an age characterized by the globalization of problems and the return of the idols of nationalism, international institutes especially are called to uphold and to bear witness to the sense of communion between peoples, races and cultures" (VC 51.)^[13] I have found the Oblates, specially the younger generation, quite open to this

way of thinking. In some Provinces the majority of scholastics are asking for a first obedience to another country. Could an increased internationality be an important means to give new missionary hope to our younger Oblates, especially in those parts of the Congregation that are aging and where the young sometimes feel they cannot be truly missionary?

37. One must admit that the move towards internationality also brings about some tensions. The need for inculturation (becoming local) is also there and constitutes the counterbalance for the call to go beyond the local (becoming universal). We must not forget this other side of the coin. The two things – inculturation and internationality – do not necessarily contradict each other. The following can serve as examples of how they combine well:

- A team of missionaries in a new mission may find it easier to become inculturated in their host country if the composition of the team is international;
- There is a tendency among Oblate Provinces that already have found their cultural roots to call for the presence of missionaries from other countries; it opens them up and helps them to avoid many ethnic or regional tensions.

Many Oblates are ready for a re-founding in international terms. The General Administration feels compelled to respond to this call, doing our part to “mix” more the composition of our Provinces.

c. The quality of life in our local communities deserves our close attention.

38. It can be said that a new model of community based mission is appearing in some parts of the Congregation. In my circular to the young Oblates I quoted a letter from some student priests who propose more such foundations, and on an international basis. The practice of mission as a community depends a lot on leadership. Where it takes place, it becomes attractive for youth and gives life to the Province behind it. It is also considered an apt place for missionary agencies.

39. In contrast, the rather sad situation of many local communities, especially of the small local communities, constitutes a very special call. I read the following in Fr. Zago’s report to the 1995 Interchapter meeting in Bangkok and I wish to repeat it here because it depicts a good part of our reality even today: “Often men are fully occupied with their own work and are afraid to lose time and energy in getting to know and respond to community challenges. Some are afraid of returning to the past or of losing their independence. Others are persistently ignorant of the meaning of community life. ... There is neither programming nor decision making to promote this renewal. ... There are those who believe that it is sufficient to live under the same roof to establish a community” (page 4). In my letter to the young Oblates mentioned above I highlighted the need for community building.^[14] So here is a special call from the Lord.

40. Why community? Our charism, which has been community oriented since the time of the Missionaries of Provence, is reason enough in itself. A more modern motivation consists in the makeup of many of our younger people. They are fragile because of their personal history or because of our modern culture. They badly need the support of a healthy community, or else we will lose them. The deepest rationale can be found in our Christian faith which is *Confessio Trinitatis*. Living in community means witnessing in a privileged manner to a Godhead who in itself is family, is love. *Vita Consecrata* calls fraternal life “a form of witness to the Trinity” (41).

41. In practice, community building requires much effort. We will have to change certain patterns of working. Perhaps communities of only two people are too small, there should be three or four as some of our Oblate units have decided. It will be necessary to negotiate community living with the local churches that we serve and convince them that it will be to their benefit in the long run. Another requirement is the formation of competent local superiors. But we can be certain that every effort made for community will benefit our mission and ultimately the poor whom we serve.

d. We need to prepare personnel and develop programs for an initial formation that is clearly missionary.

42. In many Provinces another call from the Lord is very clear: they need to get involved heavily in formation and this formation today must be specifically missionary. One of the most compelling needs almost everywhere is to prepare formators. I frequently receive letters requesting staff for our seminaries. But can we find such people? This is first of all a question of our convictions. Just as Jesus gave time to preparing his disciples, and not only to preaching and healing, so we have to dedicate a good part of our resources to educating the young. If we take this seriously, it will mean planning 10 years ahead, foreseeing higher studies for some and a specific preparation for all future formators. We should also consider involving lay persons, including women, in formation, but even with that we will need, first of all, Oblate staff.

43. A second call in this field is for an explicitly missionary formation. It needs specific programming. Part of it can be done locally in each country, e.g., through a missionary orientation of the studies, through regencies, etc. But why not be more daring in the missionary exposure of our young? Sending young Oblates abroad or welcoming foreign scholastics and Brothers in our country will open us up to other cultures and will prepare an easy international exchange of personnel in the future. An overseas training program should be available at least as an option in each Province.

The need for quality formation of our young members as future missionaries has become such an important issue, and is at the same time such a complex question, that I wonder if in the future the Congregation should not reflect on it in a more extensive way.

e. We have to face up to the upcoming financial changes.

44. In which direction will the demographic changes of the Congregation lead us financially? Here again we can perceive a particular call from the Lord. How can we respond to it? The first answer is that we certainly will have to rely more on Providence. We will also have to live simpler lives. At the same time the generation of local income will become more and more important, even if we continue to rely partly on some investments. The issue of each Oblate unit moving toward financial sufficiency is a crucial one because we will not regularly have rich benefactors around as in the past, to fund our mission efforts. A further issue that is coming up concerns supporting the Central Services or Central Administration in the future.

45. A particular appeal we have to heed is that of preparing competent treasurers and administrators. It was a big step forward when the last Chapter made the provincial finance committee obligatory (C 157). Typically such a committee will involve lay experts. Besides the expertise of treasurers and experts, in a Province it is today necessary that the Provincial Council, and ideally every single Oblate, including those in first formation, have a fundamental understanding of the financial functioning of the Province or Delegation. We should choose and prepare our treasurers also in view of such an animation role.

46. To become convinced that finances (material resources) are essential parts of accomplishing our mission, it is sufficient to read St. Paul. Our mission will be less than it could be if we take its financial aspect lightly. Only with a discipline of long range planning around finances and our other material resources we will be able to face our mission in the 21st century.

f. Our decentralized structure calls for a stronger regional interdependence.

47. This last call is one we have discussed more extensively in the General Council. If we recognize that the Congregation is undergoing radical changes we can easily become aware that there is a call for stronger leadership and organization. The structural change that this will imply according to our view should be located at the regional level.

48. Before the last Chapter, a structures committee had worked for several years but the changes that finally resulted were not really substantial. Maybe that was what the Congregation could take at that time. New adjustments may be needed now, some years later, especially at the level of the Regions. Which adjustments are we talking about?

49. In our judgement, the main structural problem is located right within our very strength, the fact that we are so decentralized. More than one have noted this issue. Our system does have some advantages. For instance, it gives full responsibility to the local levels. Every Province is fully mature. Further, the system functions well when

communications are difficult, as has been the case, in many of our missions during the past. But it also has serious weaknesses.

- Complete autonomy can lead to isolation. Oblate units which were strong at a certain point of their history, with time can become too frail to respond to all the demands. We find them run down and under-funded, both in gifts for mission and ministry as well as financially. Their isolation prevents them from getting the help they really need, and they keep on struggling by themselves.

- The system has lead us to a high number of Oblate units. We have at the present time the same membership as in 1939, but with the difference that there are now 75 Oblate units (in 65 countries) compared to only 33 units (in 16 countries) then.

- Our decentralized structure does not favor strong Regions. It leaves major endeavors like important centers or the whole area of formation completely to the Provinces or even to the Delegations even if they do not have the means to handle them properly. Regional cooperation is not encouraged at the system level. It depends on the goodwill of the current major superiors. But the major superiors keep changing continually.

- The very unity of the Congregation is at stake. In a time when we are becoming truly multicultural and would need to build many bridges among neighbors, our organizational unity rests almost exclusively on the Superior General and his Council. The Superior General does have, through the Constitutions and Rules, authority over the Provinces. But in practice Rome is far away. For example, in many cases the approvals and confirmations by Rome as foreseen in our Constitutions can only be a formality. It is not really possible to understand the local situation in 75 Oblate units and the relationship between adjacent Provinces well enough so that one can ask more than a mild question once in a while. Does this correspond to the spirit of our Rule? In C 49 it says about formation: "Formation is vital to the life and mission of the Congregation and is, therefore, entrusted to the care and vigilance of the Superior General." With our present system this care and vigilance is not possible.

50. Maybe I have caricaturized a bit our decentralized structure. I did this because I want to affirm that we are still an organizational unity as a Congregation, not a kind of federation of independent abbeys or national religious institutes. Certain important missionary endeavors and formation in general, of their nature, need to be under the responsibility of something larger than individual Provinces or Delegations, and our Rule affirms it. I think there is a special call here which has become clearer and louder in recent years. Today we need to think about the cohesion of the Congregation beyond our decentralized Provinces and Delegations. Which way are we to go?

51. A possible method to overcome the weakness of certain Oblate units that are just too small or too limited in resources would be the creation of larger Provinces. This brings a solution in some cases. I am convinced that the movement of restructuring is a healthy one and should be continued. Another remedy for part of the problem described above is a conscious preparation of leadership. We must openly prepare Oblates not only for frontier missionary work but also for leadership positions, such as superior, treasurer, formator. That means training in administrative skills, perhaps through practical exposure in another province, language studies and a basic understanding of finances. However, for the smaller units the question remains: Do they have enough potential for all the required positions?

52. I and the General Council believe a more comprehensive approach is required. We should aim at a solution above the level of the Provinces. Sometimes I hear that the Central Government should intervene more strongly. But is Rome not too distant from the local reality, as I mentioned above? Could the Central Government give enough attention to each particular problem to work out with the Provinces consensus-based answers? I suggest that a solution should be sought at the level of the present Regions or Sub-Regions.

53. Let us take one concrete challenge as an example: the need of consolidating formation houses. In the General Council we frequently speak about this issue. Such consolidation serves not only to avoid unnecessary over-building but also to make a better use of our always scarce formation personnel (cf. EPM p. 54.)^[15] And, of course, the advantages of internationality also come into the picture. But how can this consolidation actually happen? Practice shows how difficult it is even to keep to the existing

interprovincial agreements, let alone the creation of new formation systems beyond the present Oblate units.

54. The Region (Sub-Region) would be close to the reality of this particular challenge and other important endeavors that need to be tackled in common. While the Central Government might not be able to provide all the assistance needed, the (sub)regional level is the place to join forces, to become interdependent in order to become stronger. I perceive here a distinct call for a closer collaboration on the Regional or Sub-regional level. How could such collaboration become reality? I offer an alternative:

- One way to go is to work on stronger regional statutes, including effective secretariats and certain contracts between several Provinces. The Central Government could issue guidelines for such statutes and contracts, identifying specific endeavors that should be tackled in common.

- A more systemic solution can be thought of as well. At present the Regions are not a government structure. A power or authority at this level would possibly result in more efficient and effective government in all the Oblate units of the Region. Sometimes, day-dreaming, I can imagine a kind of regional or sub-regional major superior in charge of circumscribed areas like formation, new missions, strategic planning, important financial orientations, etc. He could even become the Region's representative as full member the General Council.

55. I would like the Interchapter to give some thought to this issue of a stronger coordination at the regional level. With the help of your reflections the General Council could do something to strengthen the Regions and even eventually take up again the study on structures made for the 1998 Chapter, and prepare some proposals for 2004.

3. Three things to consider for action

56. I summarize this outlook onto the future in three very short suggestions meant for all of us and leave it to you to comment on them.

a. Let the Oblates boost internationality; let us give the witness of a united family out of many nations!

b. Let us continue building community; it proclaims louder than words the triune God, the God of the Christians!

c. Let us go for a stronger interdependence among neighboring Provinces and Delegations!

IV. Moments to celebrate

57. We have reviewed our life as a Congregation, looking back at the last three years, trying to perceive the present trends and listening to the calls that lead us into the future. All this comes together in some symbols or some persons that we can celebrate. A symbol to celebrate this year is our Constitutions and Rules. We received them 175 years ago from Pope Leo XII and on that occasion we were given a new name: Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. The Founder said about our Rules that their reading filled him with wonder^[16]. It is a book to be reread and celebrated today. For me, it is also the legacy left to us by Fr. Jetté.

58. In the past three years the Congregation has had some outstanding persons to ponder and to celebrate. In 1999 the Church beatified our first Oblate martyr, Fr. Joseph Cebula. Maybe in two or three years the 22 Spanish martyrs will follow in being raised to the honor of the altars. In December 2000 and in May 2001 we had the most recent events of martyrdom, the murders of Fr. Benjamin Inocencio and of Fr. Henry Dejneka. Outstanding models of Oblate life have been the last two Superiors General, both of whom have passed away within a period of less than four months, Frs. Fernand Jetté and Archbishop Marcello Zago. These witnesses, and many others, are with us these days as we reflect on our missionary future. They have lived out the ideals with which we are continuing to struggle.

Each one of us, in his own way and with the grace of God, can reach the fulfillment they have achieved. Our most shining sign of hope is our patroness. Since we bear the name of Mary Immaculate we bear the name of the one person who has overcome sin totally, who has become fully obedient to the Spirit. We need sainthood at a time like this.

V. Personal reflections

59. I conclude with a personal note. I am happy to serve the missionaries in the field, the young in formation, the major superiors and the central government community whose local superior I am. I suffer because of my faults and limitations. Some people ask me about my health. It has been quite good up to now, though I need to undergo regular checkups. So I live a normal life while the Lord permits. My plan is to have visited all the Provinces and Delegations before the next Chapter, but in that program, I also count the visits I made during my time as Assistant General. I thank you for taking responsibility for your Provinces, and for the Congregation as a whole. Thanks for coming – this is our meeting – , and let us move ahead together, into the third millennium.

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[1]Oblate Writings 15, N° 185 - May 1837

[2]cf. R 128e

[3]The Interchapter meeting's "principal purpose ... is to evaluate the extent to which decisions taken in Chapter have been carried out, to encourage further implementation of such decisions and to provide for the remote preparation of the next Chapter" (R 128e).

[4]EPM 17-19; this section mentions the famous *re-evaluation of our missionary practices*; EPM 9 asks us to *creatively respond to today's situations and emerging cultures*, which includes being missionaries to secularity.

[5]EPM 12-14; 27-32

[6]EPM 33-34

[7]Assisting and strengthening some of our smaller missions was one of the Chapter mandates; it had, however, not been put in writing.

[8]The new Rule 92d says: "Living together in community has, from the time of the Founder, been our ideal. ... The situation of Oblates living alone is to be considered as temporary."

[9]"Financial sharing constitutes an essential dimension of our life in communion and interdependence: it is an incontrovertible test of our belonging to the community" (WAC 23,3).

[10] Mission/Evangelization; Community and Religious Life; Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation as an integral part of our evangelization; The Jubilee and a new Millennium; Internationality (without centralization); Brothers; Laity; Youth; Formation

[11] This figure includes 151 first obediences and 67 changes of obedience. Here I am not counting the obediences to and from the General House.

[12] “Our own energies will no longer carry us but our charism will. Lay associates pick up and mirror back to those served and to us what it means to be Oblate. Our OMI community and these Lay Associates will mark our journey as we collaborate together” (Prince George Area, St. Paul’s Province, February 5, 2001).

[13] Also: “Communities of consecrated life, where persons of different ages, languages and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, are signs that dialogue is always possible and that communion can bring differences into harmony” (ibid.).

[14] “Looking around the Congregation, I find that everyday life in the house communities is among the most important challenges that we have to face today.” *Letter to the Young Oblates*, September 8, 2000, #3.

[15] The 1998 Chapter made, in the section on Finances and Sharing, the following suggestion concerning our buildings and properties: “it is recommended that those involved in these matters also take account of regional concerns and needs, thereby unnecessary duplication and over-building may be avoided” (EPM p. 54).

[16] “The reflective reading of our Rules I have just made during this retreat has filled my soul with wonder.” “It is only in this way that we shall be what God wants us to be and make ourselves worthy of our sublime vocation. Will we ever have an adequate understanding of this sublime vocation!” (October 1831, annual retreat).