

XXXIV General Chapter

Synthesis of the Answers to the Questionnaires – Major Elements –

Precapitular Commission

Structure and goal of the document

This document is a synthesis of the answers to the Questionnaires for the General Chapter addressed to all Oblates (Questionnaire 1), to the Oblates in their first five years of ministry (Questionnaire 2) and to the Oblates in first formation (Questionnaire 3). The level of participation in this consultation was very high and we thank all those who took part. This synthesis attempts to reflect the content of as many answers as possible and yet avoid becoming a mere accumulation of information. Since the content has been arranged in order to offer a coherent whole, it consequently loses somewhat the original spontaneity of the expressions. The document has four parts :

I. Synthesis of the answers to Questionnaire 1

II. Major elements in view of the General Chapter

III. Synthesis of the answers to Questionnaire 2

IV. Synthesis of the answers to Questionnaire 3

This synthesis is part of the reflection in preparation for the Chapter and has no official character. In the second part ten major elements are proposed. They are mainly related to the content and the priorities expressed in the answers to Questionnaire 1, and to a lesser measure, to those of Questionnaires 2 and 3. These elements are followed by questions that may help for further community and personal reflection.

*This document is not therefore a new consultation and **no answer is expected by the Precapitular Commission at this stage in the preparation of the Chapter.** Nevertheless all contributions to the process of reflection will be welcome. A good way to have new ideas reach the Chapter would be to submit them to the capitulars who will be elected soon.*

I. Synthesis of the Answers to Questionnaire 1

QUESTION 1: *Give three or four significant areas in which you as an Oblate Unit (Province, Delegation, Mission) consider that you are adequately responding to the needs of your society and of the local Church.*

Presence and ministry to the poorest and the most abandoned

It is the area most mentioned. The kinds of involvement described are extremely varied. Most of them take place within the setting of the local Church or with it as a point of departure (parish, diocese, chaplainry, pilgrimage, etc.), but some is carried out also independently or with relative autonomy.

Some of the ministries most often mentioned :

- Ministry to immigrants, displaced persons and refugees, illegal immigrants; ministry among ethnic minorities, indigenous people;
- Sharing the life of the poorest and involvement in their struggle for more justice and solidarity;
- Ministry for the reconciliation of victims (wars, conflicts, situations of injustice);

- Welcome and accompaniment of the marginalized, the unemployed, youth in trouble, of night people;
- Visits and help to prisoners;
- Visits and help to the sick (especially those with AIDS) in hospitals or at home; lepers; ministry to the aged and the handicapped;

- Involvement in development and human promotion projects;
- Charitable works and emergency help to the most needy;

- Ministry in places where people go to seek meaning, like places of pilgrimage.

These many activities reveal a creativity, an audacity and an impressive generosity. Some questions are raised however concerning the little community or joint involvement for justice and the transformation of the social structures that generate or maintain situations of poverty. There are also questions about the lifestyle of the Oblates who serve the poor. Some speak strongly : “Are we a poor Church at the service of the poor or are we comfortably settled apostles who descend to visit them ?”

Parish ministry and service of the Christian communities

In all the Regions, this is the area where the biggest number of Oblates are committed. The answers let us glimpse, however, some fairly varied situations. Some deplore the fact that the Oblates are sometimes like prisoners of the parishes in units that have become real “Oblate dioceses.” This results in a confusion between the vocation of a diocesan priest and that of the Oblate religious missionary. In such situations, the Oblates lose their availability to quickly answer new missionary needs.

Many consider parish ministry as a response to present missionary needs because of the place of the pastoral involvement and the activities that are carried out there.

Some of the more frequent expressions :

- Deliberate choice of parishes in poorest zones and those less reached by the local Church;
- The will to not limit ourselves to the “public service of religion”, but to make the parish a place for spiritual renewal, of meeting in and for peace; to make them “missionary and spiritual centers capable of welcoming and helping people regardless of where they are coming from; make them “communities” that make present the Kingdom of God that is coming;
- Formation of the laity and sharing pastoral responsibilities with them;

- Formation of catechists and other persons responsible for pastoral care;
- Evangelization of young people and adults already baptized (in the secularized societies and where a mass christianization without much preparation for baptism has prevailed);
- Particular attention to the young, to the preparation of marriages, to the pastoral care of couples and the family;
- Accompaniment of Catholic Action movements and other movements or groups that come under ecclesiastical structures and their services at various levels;
- Parish missions and types of missions;
- Animation of pilgrimages and preaching parish retreats;
- Establishing the local Church and setting up parochial and even diocesan structures (in some places only);
- Promotion of vocations for the local clergy.

Opening new missions

Cited by some units, this area expresses well a concern to be attentive to the missionary needs beyond one's own borders and to work together to answer them. Some features to be noted:

- These new foundations are the outcome of a long process of evolution.
- These missions were opened and developed at the cost of big sacrifices in personnel and material resources.
- They are very often the result of joint work which makes evident the solidarity between several units, not always of the same Region; they are as much "mission *ad altera*" (v.g. toward those who are seen as other) as they are "mission *ad extra*" as was practiced in a still recent past.

These attitudes of openness and solidarity contrast curiously with the regrets often expressed in other answers concerning the "lack of openness" of some units. Related to this lack of openness, several raise the issue of obediences (particularly the first obedience) where the mother Province is too often given priority. There is a general desire for more interdependence and partnership between the units of the Congregation.

A few other areas mentioned

– **Youth ministry** : although mentioned as an activity within an ecclesiastical setting (parish, diocese, inter-diocesan), this apostolate, dear to the Founder, is referred to a lot less as a specifically Oblate ministry. All those involved in it underline its demands : the quality of welcome, of respect, of listening; "to risk living fraternally with the young and to dare to propose Jesus Christ as their Savior."

– **Formation of Oblates and the diocesan clergy.**

– **Media ministry.**

– **Inter-religious dialogue.**

– **Witness by elder Oblates of community and of a life of prayer.**

QUESTION 2 : *What are the two or three factors that you consider impede you from adequately responding to the missionary needs of your society and of the local Church ?*

For the convenience of presentation we will group the external factors (coming from society and the local Church) and the internal factors (coming from the Congregation / local community and people).

External Factors : Social and Ecclesial

The Social Situation

The situations noted below appear both as obstacles and as challenges which the Oblates must face. The phenomenon of “globalization”, little mentioned in a formal way in the answers, is also very present. It is seen not so much as an obstacle or as an enemy but rather as the very infrastructure of all apostolate today.

- Situations of violence : Armed conflicts that provoke general insecurity, the displacement of population and the instability of families, and all the situations that in many cases make pastoral activities, as well as the formation of Oblates, impossible; aggressive reactions between religions or between religious groups which make inter-religious dialogue all the more difficult.
- Situations of poverty and rapid economic change : Increase of poverty resulting in “situations of extreme misery”; the pandemic character of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and its consequences in the societies touched by it; the precariousness of employment and the growth in the number of unemployed; globalization of the (mainly North American) liberal capitalistic model which tends to become the unique model and provokes the breakdown of basic living structures, imposing itself as law and leading to the disappearance of local traditions and wisdom; the increasing complexity of human and social situations in general.
- Situation of secularization : the advance of secularization among the youth, in the families, the schools; the acknowledgement of a “Catholicism that has entered a terminal phase” in some areas of the Northern Hemisphere where the voice of the Church is not so much contested as considered to be obsolete; the return of the “religious” under the form of a “transcendence without God” and the proliferation of sects.
- Unstable or difficult political situation : the inability, or the lack of will, on the part of governments and local elected officials to manage the business of their country; corruption and deprivation of rights; absence of infrastructures; the negative or even aggressive attitude of some regimes to religion in general and to the Catholic Church in particular.

The Ecclesial Situation

- Abandonment or pulling back from the perspectives of Vatican II; disregard of the orientations of regional Episcopal conferences; scandalous choice of conservative bishops.
- Difficulties with the local Church (especially its hierarchy) that gives priority to its authority, its interests and its territorial needs; the lack of respect for the contracts between the dioceses and the Congregation.

- Difficulties in the relations with “a local Church that often appears as an established Church, turned in upon its internal affairs”; “a marked return of clericalism, legalism”; the support given to clearly conservative institutes and movements.
- The decrease of faith-based reflection; the support given to mass gatherings and similar movements.
- Difficulties coming from the crises and scandals which affect the entire Church and make it less credible.

Internal Factors : collective and individual

There are 3 sets of responses : The first, and the most important, concerns the lack of personnel; the second, the lack of “vision” and some qualities; the third finally, material/financial means.

Lack of personnel

- A lack of personnel that prevents doing something new and even, in several places, of providing for existing needs.
It is the factor most cited, particularly but not solely, by the units of the Northern Hemisphere. There is unanimity in noting a change in the distribution of Oblates in the Congregation and the unbalance that will make itself felt even more in the years to come. Vocations and the life blood of the future are mostly in the South/Southwest as well as in Central and Eastern Europe while several units of the North/Northwest are nearly “on the way to disappearing”. “New centers” are emerging in the Congregation.
- The tension between the decrease in personnel and an extended missionary activity: “We can no longer manage our dispersion and the multiplication of small units.”

Lack of vision and some qualities

- Lack of communal discernment, common vision and adequate strategy on the level of the units as well as on the regional and general level. Many answers don't hesitate to point out this lack of vision and common strategy and the tendency to strong individualism in our apostolic commitments.
- Lack of common vision and collaboration between Oblates inside a same community; sometimes a turning in on self, generation conflicts, “racist” reactions, and difficulty in transferring power to the next generation.
- Lack of availability, of apostolic goodwill, of daring; mediocrity of spiritual life; discouragement because of the scandals and of colleagues who leave.
- Lack of planning for ongoing formation on the part of the units, but also intellectual laziness on the part of individuals.

Lack of material means

- Insufficient material/financial means: overwhelmingly noted especially by the units of the Southern Hemisphere (cf. Answers to Questions 3 and 5).

QUESTION 3 : *As an Oblate Unit (Province, Delegation, Mission) sharing in a worldwide Congregation of more than 65 Units what **practical issues** seem to arise when faced with the reality of our mutual relationships and responsibilities?*

Four practical questions emerge very clearly and are presented here in order of priority: openness and collaboration between the Oblate units (especially within the same Region);

greater and more real economic solidarity; formation in an international context, and communication.

Collaboration between the Oblates units and the government of the Congregation

Many wish for greater openness and better collaboration between the units in a Region, and even between Regions, in order to answer the missionary situation today. Certainly all units are not at the same point and a certain number of international communities, that have been successfully and happily living internationality for several years, exist already. However, many deplore a lack of openness and desire a change of attitude as well as an evaluation of the Congregation's structures and government. There are two categories of answers, one concerning the attitudes and the other the structures of the Congregation.

The attitudes

- Need for a greater missionary spirit.
- Learn to welcome the other with his differences; "learn internationality in daily life" while living within multiethnic and international communities; welcome the various ways of living Oblate values.
- A lot of units still evolve in isolation and even sometimes present themselves as "Oblate dioceses." It would be necessary to accept more Oblates from outside and to send some to other units. The Oblates in first formation express themselves clearly: "Why are the first obediences always for the Province of origin?" "In our Province the young men enter with the intention of remaining only in their Province or diocese of origin!"

The structures

- Create more multiethnic and international communities.
- Keep the inter-provincial meetings; pay more attention to what is happening in the Region or the sub-region.
- Re-evaluate the Region, its statutes, its structures and its functioning. What is the role of the General Councilors for the Regions?
- Reform "the government of the Congregation which seems too heavy and too far removed from the life of the units."

Some proposals to overcome the opposition to change, or the slowness of the hoped for changes, are even more radical.

- There is a need to remedy our geographical extension and the multiplication of small units. On this topic, the action of the central government is desired. "Rome must decide the road to take : What to close and what to open, to bring about exchanges of personnel and financial sharing...!"

Greater economic solidarity

The second practical question raised by interdependence is economic solidarity. Many answers spoke of a more effective solidarity between the Oblate units, that is to say a bigger financial/material solidarity by the traditional centers toward the emerging centers of the Congregation, being careful not to create or to maintain dependence. Here also one cannot generalize because there is already a generous sharing by some units of the Northern Hemisphere that have real budgetary difficulties themselves. Nevertheless the units in the Southern Hemisphere overwhelmingly express a desire for sharing:

- Sharing and redistribution of the means of livelihood, of the means to form themselves and to care for themselves.
- Financing of some projects for the apostolate like vehicles or the means of communication.

It is necessary, however, to note some important warnings coming from these same units:

- “Economic solidarity is a good thing, but it risks locking us into a system of dependence (which is more like locking us into the capitalist system).”
- “Certainly exchanges on an economic level are advantageous (for the unit/Region that receives), but this unit/Region risks never being able to support itself!”

Formation in an international context

The third question most often raised concerns formation in an international context. Some houses of formation have been international for already a long time, others are just starting to internationalize, while others wish to do so. Three points more especially stressed are: the relation between the international and contextual character in formation, interdependence at the regional level, and finally some concrete points.

International – Local/contextual

- Internationality doesn't mean uniformity or a one-way relationship from the periphery toward only one center. “Local traditions and wisdom are to be respected more and integrated into all stages of formation.” Find new criteria for multiethnic/international formation, reappraise the programs of first and ongoing formation, directories and the General Norms for Formation.
- Assure the preparation of competent formators in sufficient number to realize the balance between internationality and contextuality in formation.

Interdependence

- A desire for the exchange of formators and *formandi*, especially within a same Region but also beyond.
- Regrouping and joining the houses of formation : This would permit more efficient work by the formators, who are few, a greater openness for the Oblates in formation, as well as more real financial sharing. This regrouping could occur on the regional or the sub-regional level.

Some concrete points

- Intensify the study of foreign languages during first formation.
- Endeavor “to coordinate better the formation and the missionary strategies used in the units of a same Region.”
- Create common spaces (international) for ongoing formation (theology, missiology, finances).
- Consider the creation of an international group of Oblate theologians.

Improve communication

Improve communication within the Congregation (between persons, the communities, the units and on the part of the Central Government itself).

- To facilitate the mission and the animation of the Congregation as a whole.

- To become more attentive to everything that is related to the ministry for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation; to become more adept at making our “collective voice” heard.
- To assure circulation of information and experiences throughout the Congregation; make better use of existing documentation.

QUESTION 4 : *Following from the 1998 (33rd) General Chapter regarding **the participation of the laity in the Oblate charism**, what would you suggest in order to carry this direction forward?*

All the answers, without exception, favor the “lay associates” movement which the 1998 General Chapter encouraged. But there seems to be a real problem about the identity of the “lay associates” : Who are they? Who does this expression refer to? Many complain about the lack of clarity surrounding these terms and therefore did not answer. Others ask expressly that “we agree on a definition of ‘lay associates’ as well as on the goals pursued by this movement.”

Two major pitfalls to avoid are noted in many of the answers:

- Clericalism: “Do not make these lay persons semi-Oblates to inherit our structures.”
- Moving too quickly toward a centralization that appears inopportune in many respects.

In the same vein, many expressed themselves in favor of pursuing this movement while giving priority to the “local” with respect for the initiatives coming from the laity themselves. They underline three things:

- That the participation of the laity be developed first at a local level, from the existing communities; that “fraternal relations be privileged as a starting point.”
- That various forms of association in the apostolate and in the Oblate charism be encouraged. That meetings on the local, regional and sub-regional levels be organized (while respecting the first point). “Let the laity themselves be in charge of the initiatives to live the Oblate charism. The hierarchy too often has wanted to direct everything. We (the Oblates) need to learn to listen and to work with the laity without fixing beforehand the structures.”
- It is necessary “for us (Oblates) to change our attitude towards the laity, to learn how to collaborate with them, to renew our ecclesiology.”

In contrast, some feel that it is necessary :

- To structure the apostolate of the laity; coordinate their activities; assure their formation by sending them documents and providing them with the needed guidance; to “create a central organism of communion, formation and encouragement.”
- To write statutes or a directory for the whole Congregation that defines what is participation by the laity in the Oblate charism.

Beyond the differences of approach, that are in some ways complementary, there are some concrete proposals for continuing the “lay associates” movement:

- Make better known what has already been achieved (e.g. the Aix Congress, other meetings...).
- Be more daring in living and making known the “spiritual testament” of St. Eugene de Mazenod.
- “Move from words to action! Confide real responsibilities to the laity; have them really participate in our pastoral decisions (without forgetting the young, the families, the couples).”

Initiatives cited more often :

- Give more prominence to the Oblate feasts in our apostolate.
- Give an “Oblate color” to the groups and movements that already exist.
- Invite some lay people to participate in the week of Oblate prayer.
- Share God's Word with them (the laity), joint action, contemplation.
- Where it is possible, propose a communion of life (moments of communal life).

There was only one proposal in favor of lay associates being present at the next General Chapter.

***QUESTION 5 :** List any other topics that you would consider important to be discussed at the 2004 (34th) General Chapter.*

Some forty “topics” were mentioned in the answers to Questionnaires 1, 2, and 3. Many of them tie in with the themes already taken up in the answers to Questions 1 to 4. The following list groups some answers to Question 3 of Questionnaires 2 and 3. They are listed in order of priority according to the number of times mentioned. (1 = the most frequently mentioned; 12 = mentioned only one time).

- 1. Formation :** re-evaluate it all together; late vocations.
- 2. The Brothers:** Their vocation and formation; take seriously the choice of a vocation as an Oblate Brother without seeing it as a lack of appreciation for the priesthood or as a sign of an insufficient formation; recognize better the place and the role of the Brothers in the Congregation.
- 3. The Immense Hope Project:** “Bring the Immense Hope project down to earth.” Share its fruits on the regional level and within the whole Congregation.
- 4. Finances:** The situation and the future of the Congregation? What strategy is needed for a greater solidarity that encourages responsibility and self-sufficiency?
- 5. Oblate identity:** Diocesan vocation – Oblate vocation?
- 6. Lifestyle and witness of Oblates in communities.**
- 7. Oblate Spirituality and the spiritual life of the Oblates.**
- 8. Reform the Government of the Congregation.**
- 9. JPIC ministry and inter-religious dialogue:** give them a renewed thrust.
- 10. Communication and Media in the Congregation.**
- 11. Mission in a secularized/postmodern/global world.**
- 12. Identify the new poor and develop a greater missionary spirit.**

II. Some Major Elements for the Chapter

Ten major elements are presented in this second part. Every element is accompanied by one or several questions that could help further communal and personal reflection. However, it is not a new consultation and no answer is therefore expected by the Precapitular Commission (cf. The introduction : “Structure and goal of the document”).

PARISH MINISTRY AND OBLATE CHARISM

Parish ministry remains the main place of apostolic activities and of influence for the majority of Oblates. It must be noted at the same time that the phase known as “implantation of the Church ” is practically over, its goals having been reached globally. Doesn't such a situation call for new decisions ?

In fidelity to their charism, should the Oblates leave parochial ministry and risk going further into other more specialized ministries? Must they continue to consider themselves first of all as the “bishops’ men” who not only founded but maintain the parishes, downplaying their Oblate charism? Are they not called to look for new strategies, in fidelity to the Oblate charism, to help these Christian communities become more prophetic and missionary?

THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The Congregation is undergoing some important demographic changes : new centers are emerging in the South and Southeast as well as in Central and Eastern Europe while personnel decreases rapidly in the traditional centers of the North and Northwest, where the material resources are still mainly located. Such conditions make foreseeable and normal a transfer of power toward the upcoming generation of Oblates, especially in these new emerging centers of the Congregation.

What challenges follow from this observation? What are its consequences in terms of passing the powers to the new generation and forming them for these responsibilities? What attitudes prevent a real transfer of responsibilities and what conversion are we called to make to facilitate it?

INTERDEPENDENCE

In most of the answers to the Questionnaire there is a call for more openness, more exchange and sharing at all levels of the Congregation which appears more and more as a multifaceted, complex and interdependent reality. The Congregation is not a number of units that are only the emanations of a unique center.

To bring about real sharing in interdependence, a greater openness of mind as well as an approach that is more attentive and respectful of this complexity are called for.

How can we manage better the tension between the “central” and the “local?” How can we concretely and successfully bring about this openness and sharing at all levels of the Congregation ?

AMONG THE POOR – WITH THE POOR

Missionary Oblates, we see ourselves as “sent to evangelize the poor,” to live and to work where the poorest live and struggle.

Are we, by our life and our ministry, agents of transformation of the conditions of their social and religious life, and do we give witness of having made a choice “for the Kingdom”?

Are we cause and bearers of hope in those places where the poor live and struggle, or do we visit them as self-assured apostles satisfied with the charity we bring? Do we often enough invite the laity, those with whom we work and those who, thanks to us, occupy important places of responsibility in society, to take up the defense of the poor?

MINISTRY OF CHARITY AND JUSTICE

The Oblates are overwhelmingly committed to the service of the poorest, with a lot of generosity, creativeness and daring. Some of them are also involved in a ministry of transforming the structures of their local societies that often generate or aggravate these situations of poverty. But, in most cases, these are only individual initiatives.

What strategies are needed so that these “personal” commitments become more the commitments and actions of the “group as a whole”?

REFORM OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE CONGREGATION

A reform of the Government of the Congregation (structures and way of governing) to better serve the mission in a rapidly changing world : How can we achieve a system and mode of government that is closer to the life of the Oblate units and more efficient in its administration?

Considering the demographic changes and the existence of new emerging centers in the Congregation, how should we reorganize the Regions: their number and their statute, their role and their functioning?

Does the present status of the General Councilors allow them to be really efficient? Is it necessary to consider a redefinition of their role?

FORMATION AND INTERNATIONALITY

The majority of formation houses and Oblate units speak of a greater respect and a better integration of local traditions and wisdom at all stages of formation. They desire a greater openness to the richness represented by the international character of the Congregation.

Some conditions seem to impose themselves so that such a goal can be reached :

- A sufficient number of competent formators.
- Greater cooperation between the units of a same Region and even between Regions.
- A better distribution of the material resources whose shortage is especially felt in the new emerging centers of the Congregation.

What strategies are needed to reach this goal?

THE BROTHERS

As a witness of evangelical fraternity and free in relation to the clerical state, the Oblate Brother, a missionary and a religious, is often able to show better the Oblate identity and to answer the missionary needs in the world of today.

Taking seriously into account such a situation, what can be done to promote the vocation of the Oblate Brother, to assure his formation and to have his place and role in the Congregation recognized?

FINANCES

Financial sharing between the traditional centers and the new emerging centers of the Congregation is already a reality. On the other hand, there have always been and there continue to be varied forms of solidarity between Oblate units. There are clear indications that, in its current form, it is no longer relevant given the demographic changes occurring in the Congregation.

Is it not time to set up healthier ways of sharing which encourage self-sufficiency, responsibility and promote a better management of resources at all levels of the Congregation?

SPECIALIZED MINISTRIES

There are many ministries that can be called “specialized.” Most Oblates perform them within the framework of parish ministry, but they are not always fulltime ministries for lack of personnel and time: Catholic Action movements, youth ministry, formation of the laity and cooperation with them; media ministry; care of migrants; ministry of reconciling the victims of conflicts; prison ministry; inter-religious dialogue; ministry to patients with HIV/AIDS or leprosy, persons who are handicapped etc. They are mentioned in the synthesis of the answers to the first question of Questionnaire 1.

Would it be necessary to give them more importance, more time and more personnel? What can be done in this area?

III. Synthesis of the Answers to Questionnaire 2 (Oblates in their first five years of ministry)

***QUESTION 1 :** During your first five years of full-time ministry, have you been challenged, and have you challenged yourself enough to new “zeal” or are you finding that this first full-time ministry experience is not missionary enough?*

All admitted that they faced such a challenge during their first five years of ministry. It was experienced in different ways that can be grouped under three headings: a time of creativity, of integration to full-time apostolic life, a time of testing one’s fidelity.

- The challenge to be creative, to not be satisfied with the status quo, to be very “daring even when the situation seems blocked or that the Oblate community is hardly supportive during this first period of ministry.” There is a big risk to want to do too much and to collapse under the mass of activities!
- The challenge of entering an active life in a rapidly changing world : points of reference, mentalities, ideologies, beliefs; the challenge of acculturation : learning languages, accepting cultural differences; acknowledging the limits of the formation received; learning by being present and listening; the challenge of “questioning oneself again, the challenge to take charge of one’s life, to be responsible, to acquire a sense of work, of effort and productive labor (all things which figure little in first formation)”; the challenge to learn to live with older Oblate colleagues.

- The challenge to become a “credible witness of Jesus Christ”; to give the best of oneself while remaining faithful to the evangelical values and the choice of religious life in the world; to learn how to live the difference between the life of a diocesan priest and that of religious missionary Oblate.

QUESTION 2 : *Name two fulfilling areas (joys) and two difficult areas that are affecting your life as a missionary and as an Oblate in these first years of full-time ministry.*

The joys

The answers can be grouped under three headings : joy of being among the poor and with youth; joy because of success in the apostolate; joy finally because of the support of the Oblate community, although this element is less often mentioned.

Presence among the poor and the youth :

- Joy of being among the poorest, the most impoverished, the little ones in society and those who bear life’s wounds.
- Joy of “rediscovering with them (the poor) the message and the spirit of the beatitudes, the practice of Jesus of Nazareth and Oblate spirituality.”
- Joy of living with the youth and accompanying them in their quest for meaning, of seeing the hope that fills them and also their all-out efforts for peace, against fundamentalism and for constructing “another world” together (cf. Porto Alegre, Genoa, Evian, and other such gatherings) .

Success in mission :

- Feeling “of being accepted by the people who express their confidence in us”; joy of being recognized as a priest.
- “The experience of God’s power acting through us in ministry”; the joy of witnessing the birth and growth of individuals and communities in the Christian faith; “joy of the Eucharistic celebration as a powerful spur to life and of hope for us and the whole community.”
- A feeling of “pride to be in the front line in situations and in a world hostile to the Gospel.”
- Joy at the “success in the apostolate, of the extraordinary collaboration with the laity, of success in the education of the people who are confided to us.”

Support of the Oblate community:

- “Recognition of our abilities by our colleagues and Oblate Superiors”; the experience of really sharing in the ministry.
- Fraternal support of the community (material and spiritual).

The difficulties

The difficulties mentioned come from the Oblate group itself, or from outside situations, or again from personal situations.

The Oblate community

- Loneliness due to the generation gap (being the only young person in a community); difficulty of the Oblate unit (Province or other) to undertake something new and unknown (due to the age of the confreres).
- Difficulty of integration and “acceptance of the young Oblate priests of a country as collaborators and colleagues by the elder expatriates.”

- Feeling of “helplessness in difficult situations due to the absence of an experienced companion willing to act as guide and who has the competence for it.”
- Lack of vision, of clear direction on the part of superiors: “We lose precious energy and a part of our dynamism when forced to think alone of what must be done.”
- Lack of plans for the ongoing formation needed for one’s missionary situation.
- Limited financial means and too little confidence vis-à-vis the younger members in the area of finances.

The external situation

- Situations of conflict, war or inter-religious violence; a situation of discrimination or hostility to the Catholic Church by the civil authorities.
- Increasing religious indifference; lack of interest in the Good News.
- The weight of tradition, of local custom as an obstacle to the Gospel.

The personal situation

- Difficulty of adaptation: languages, cultural differences, rhythm of life, food.
- Lack of visible results and the “temptation to become discouraged too quickly by the immensity of the task to be done.”
- “Feeling of maturing too slowly to integrate the vocation received (priesthood).”

QUESTION 3: *What other important topics would you suggest for consideration at the 2004 (34th) General Chapter NB. Some of the “topics” proposed have already been included in the synthesis of Questionnaire 1 (Question 5).*

1. **Internationality** : as regards personnel and financial solidarity (“transform the mission procures into NGOs”; a responsible North-South solidarity in the Congregation).
2. **Youth ministry** : Bring it back to the foreground of our charism and into our Constitutions and Rules.
3. **JPIC Ministry** : Give it a new impetus.
4. **Formation** : urgent need of a vision and a program for ongoing formation.
5. **Collaboration with the laity** : Be missionaries together.
6. **Mission in post-modernity.**

IV. Synthesis of the Answers to Questionnaire 3 (Oblates in First Formation)

QUESTION 1: *In your formation program, are you sufficiently challenged to live as a Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate and as a member of a worldwide Congregation?*

A very big majority answered this question in the affirmative.

The challenge of living as a Missionary Oblate

Some positive observations

- Formation “helps us to come out of ourselves and to abandon ourselves to the Lord, with the joy of being at his service no matter where.”

- “Regular pastoral activities among the poorest and in remote areas during the time of the scholasticate”; acts of “solidarity with the most impoverished, for example during natural disasters.”
- Profiting from the studies of missiology, the Constitutions and Rules, Oblate spirituality and stories concerning the first Oblate missionaries.
- “Our prayer which has a missionary orientation.”

Some important reservations in 3 areas : obediences, the style of the studies and the style of life.

- There is still a too strong tendency to think “local” rather than missionary, of going beyond the borders of the unit; the Province of origin always seems to be important in the obediences.
- Over-emphasis on academic studies: while recognizing the importance of solid studies, “we would like more real life experiences and more confrontation with concrete situations.”
- A setting and style of life judged to be “too protected, far from the realities of the world”; “little personal responsibility because all is provided (and even in abundance!) by the community.” Some judge the setting of the formation house to be “too comfortable and too distant from the style of life of the poor of whom we call ourselves the missionaries! Thus, a feeling of awkwardness.”

The challenge of living internationality

Some positive facts:

- Several formation houses already live in a multiethnic context (formators and *formandi*), and thus provide training in accepting and respecting each person with their differences; “It is learning internationality in everyday life.”
- Visits by Oblates from the outside who share their missionary experience.
- Regency (pastoral training) in a foreign country.
- Openness due to studies, information on the other Oblate units, use of the Internet, etc.

Some wishes:

- More visits by Oblate missionaries from other countries : missionaries on holidays, scholastics or formators who are visiting or on holidays.
- More importance given to learning foreign languages.
- Possibility of participating more often in international meetings (insofar as finances permit); “Could not the De Mazenod Experience in Aix be open to the scholastics?”

Some regrets :

That the “Province of origin is nearly always given the priority for the first obediences”; consequently “some of us only think about working in their Province or their diocese of origin rather than being available for the mission elsewhere.”

QUESTION 2 : *Do you consider a Regency/Internship Program important in first formation? Are you pleased with this program and do you find that it effectively and adequately prepares one for practical missionary work; and that it provides, as well, a helpful time of discernment before perpetual profession?*

With only one exception, all the answers are positive concerning the pastoral internship program during first formation. This time is judged to be good, necessary, pertinent; it is a good initiative in Oblate formation. It is seen as a concrete involvement in the Oblate mission and a good preparation for the realities that “await us.” It is a time of “direct contact with

people, their life and their real questions, not only those found in books.” This time is also appreciated as a time of evaluation, discernment and for deepening one’s vocation. “One sees the vows in a different light!”

Some wishes and constructive criticism :

Regency must be neither absolute nor imposed “from above.” It should be decided upon at the request of the Oblate in formation. Individual desires and abilities must be respected. It is necessary to take into account the age and the life experience of the person concerned.

- Regency must not be considered a “period of withdrawal to resolve some personal problems,” or worse, be seen as a time of “punishment.”
- Regency should not be confused with the pastoral year that is centered more on the direct training for ministry.
- It must be seen that “the young Oblate is indeed welcomed and well integrated into the receiving community.”
- When? Where ? How long?

The situations vary, but there is a certain agreement on the length of the program: a minimum of 12 months, though some favor a period of two years when the regency is in a different cultural context.

- In any case, this period requires a good preparation by the Oblate in formation, the formators and the receiving community, especially concerning the precise objectives, the practical details of the regency and its place. (It was noted that it is not always easy to find a place!) There must be serious guidance where the regency takes place as well as some ties with the formation house. Finally, there must be a good assessment at the end of the period in order to draw the maximum profit from the experience.
- Find some types of regency adapted to the Brothers in first formation.

QUESTION 3 : Suggest two concrete issues that you think would be important to be discussed at the 2004 (34th) General Chapter. NB. Some of these "points" have already been taken up in the synthesis of Questionnaire 1 (Question 5).

1. **Vocation and formation of the Brothers :** Discernment of the vocation as a Brother, drawing the consequences for the formation and the missionary vision of the Brothers in temporary profession.
2. **Revision of the Formation Directory:** For the purpose of inculturation (internationality and multiethnic aspect); adaptation to the realities of the world of today; problems around the first obedience.
3. **Mission and Internationality :** Closer collaboration between the Oblate units with a view to greater mobility to face the missionary needs; creation of more international and multiethnic communities.

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