



XXXIV General Chapter – Young Oblates Speak

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How can we make the Oblate charism active in our lives and in the Congregation?

Ukrainian and Belarus scholastics

The Precapitular Commission asked some young Oblates, who are in first formation or in the first five years of ministry, to share their hopes and desires for the future. The reader will bear in mind that some of these young men are writing in languages that are not their mother tongue. Editing of their texts has been kept to a minimum to preserve the flavour and imagery of each country and culture.

Heirs and Visionaries!

Fr. Pierre-Olivier Tremblay OMI (Quebec, Canada)

What are my hopes and desires with regard to putting the Oblate charism into action during the coming years? I can place them in two categories: heritage and vision. However, that must be expressed in three words: heirs and visionaries.

I believe that we must reassert the meaning of our Oblate identity. By identity, I do not mean such things as religious habit. That would be too simplistic and merely accessory. Rather, I mean that we must state anew and clearly what our fundamental values are and what is our understanding of mission. It is sometimes wrongly thought that our works identify us. It is not what we do that distinguishes us from other communities. (There are many others who evangelize, teach, preach, are pastors of communities, etc....) In other words, what are the values, which orientate, qualify, characterize and give life to our apostolate? The challenge is to rediscover or perhaps to restate more clearly what is essential to our heritage. We will then have greater freedom of discernment in choosing the works to be preserved and re-launched and those that we must leave aside.

I dream of a community which, having weathered many storms, closes its ranks around a renewed and better defined identity, a community which is capable of calmly integrating its past and its history and facing the future with determination. Community life would be more intense, more human, at a deeper level and would be the result and effect of our openness just as much as being an end in itself.

My hope is also that we should be increasingly a visionary community, capable of launching out into the future. Where do we foresee that we will be in five or in ten or twenty years? That would enable all the members to channel their energies better and to combine their efforts in a common direction.

I would like daring, which is one of our fundamental values, to be more obvious in our choice of new ventures. I am convinced that we would be able to attract new quality candidates (even here in the First World), by showing our willingness to go beyond our limitations, to venture into new fields, and not merely to keep the works we have and renew them. I believe there is a real distinction, a change of paradigm, between simply renewing what already exists and making new foundations. Of course, before hastily abandoning our present works, many of which are still relevant, we should ask the questions: "Do we want to undertake new ventures? Are we able to do them?"

If we are to promote creative and visionary innovation, I believe that we must make a long term and twofold investment in the future: in both first and ongoing formation and in the setting up of pilot projects.

It seems to me that the maximizing of the fecundity of our first and ongoing formation will come from orientating it to the way we see our future and ourselves. Without slipping too easily into the realm of specialization, we should make a greater effort to link the formation of a candidate to his personal charisms as well as to the priority needs of the Congregation and of the world as we perceive them.

The wish that is closest to my heart is the idea of experimental pilot projects, which would open up new horizons. We should encourage and give preference to innovators, and give them plenty of

scope and autonomy. Let us invest in the development and research of present day new ways to evangelize our world! For my part, I am at present working on a new project for young adults in the city of Quebec (Canada): a new form of Christian community that is trying to be truly missionary. We very much enjoy using the method of evangelization cells (small group sharing in the homes).

What is my reason for underling the conjunction “and”? It is because preserving our identity without promoting visionary innovation, and vice versa, would impoverish us. In spite of their seeming contradiction, it is possible to maintain these two poles of thought together. Therefore we must not be tyrannized by the “or”.

That’s it! It goes without saying, in my opinion, that a proper discernment of our heritage and our vision can only be done in renewed community prayer. May the Holy Spirit enlighten us, point us to the path and the call that lead to God, and may Saint Eugene provide us with the daring to take that path with confidence!

“We are called to be Imago Dei.”

Sc. Peter Czerwinski, OMI - San Antonio, Texas, USA

Come and See who you are in the eyes of Christ.

I responded to the call of Jesus Christ after having lived, studied and worked in Sweden most of my life. The context wherein I responded to the call of Christ was the secular western society of Sweden where religion and faith is secondary, a posture one does not share with others. My faith was strengthened through my Polish heritage. The witness given by my mother and my family helped me grow in the understanding of my faith. This faith helped me listen to God’s whisper and then respond to God’s call. This call, after many detours, brought me to the Oblates. I asked myself, Why? The answer was because the Oblates of Mary Immaculate invited me to come and see, and helped me discover who I am. This hospitality is the key not only to my vocation but also to the vocation of others. By welcoming the young and the old from various walks of life to our Oblate communities and by witnessing our faith and commitment to our mission, we can help them come to know who they are. If we do not make the effort to help people know who they really are, I believe that our mission is faulty. The response from a person may not be what we expect, but if we are honest, accommodating and true to the call of Christ, that person will find out who he is in the eyes of Christ. This may lead to becoming an Oblate or to a vocation to other communities and lifestyles. Whatever the call of Christ is, we must help people discover that call.

Leave nothing undared

I have meditated on the Preface to our *Constitutions and Rules* countless times. What I find is that De Mazenod’s insights in 1825 are as relevant today as they were then. The Church has “been cruelly ravaged” and what is our response? I can only talk from my experience of the Church in Sweden, Australia, and the United States where I have been working and studying. Without downplaying other countries, I would in general say that in these countries the standard of living is good, education is excellent, and health care is accessible. In other words, in these countries life is first-class. Nevertheless, people are searching for meaning; this seems to be evident among young people. Their striving for the best education, best job and best living conditions at times makes the young people lose hope and focus in life. This loss often leads to search for meaning in life. Our call as Oblates is to the most abandoned. In the western world it is hard for us to imagine what real material poverty is. Yet, we have poor people but we also have a safety net that helps us manage

these issues. I believe that one group that can be identified as the “most abandoned” is the young people. I believe that to “leave nothing undared” is to spare no efforts working with the young people of today. I have found in them an openness and willingness to listen to the message Jesus Christ offers. Our task is to invite them, listen to them and respond to their plea for guidance. On our behalf there must be a willingness to accept them, and like De Mazenod who spoke and preached in the language of the poor in Provence, we must speak their language. This task may be daunting, but my experience is that with perseverance and by giving oneself to the young people, they will follow us, and by following us they hopefully are able to follow Christ.

**We must lead people to act like humans, first of all,
then like Christians, and finally we must help them to become saints.**

To be truly human is to imitate Christ. This is a statement that is used to describe the Christian understanding of a human person. Our task as Oblates is, first of all, to be witnesses to the world, our neighborhood and the people we meet of what it means to be human. By our actions we can preach humanness. If our communities do not bear witness of a life together, it is difficult to preach family values? If our communities do not pray, eat and play together we are missing an important ingredient of what it is to be family. A stable family is foreign to many young people. De Mazenod is the patron saint of dysfunctional families. As Oblates we can be a living witness to family values. Our communities must be life giving, supportive and a home, not like a hotel that is just a place to sleep and eat in. However, we do not always live with people that we choose to live with and they may not be our best friends. What our communities bear witness to is commitment. I believe that if we work with young people, then commitment is an important part of our witness to being human.

To act as a Christian is to be part of the worshiping community. We cannot be Christians on our own. Young people must feel at home in their worship community. As Oblates we can help to accommodate worship space in our parishes, schools and other missionary works. By offering young people a home in our communities they may have a greater chance to give thanks and praise to God in their way. Our Church is not a single lane road, with only one way of praying and being a Christian. No, our Church is a big freeway with many lanes; this freeway has a single destination – God. Our faith is one but our expression of this faith is many. A worship community is not a homogenous unit: there are many people and wills to please. The challenge for us is to help the young people to be at home in our communities, to pray with them, and to challenge them in the difficult journey of becoming a Christian. However, we also need to help them understand that other people also belong to the same community and all have different needs, and not all can have it their way all the time.

John Paul II called for saints of the new millennium during the World Youth Day 2000. Our Founder invited us Oblates to help people to act as saints. I believe that I am still working on becoming a Christian. Our journey to become saints is a lifelong process. I see this best expressed in a brother Oblate, from my time in Australia. Fr. Joe had been an Oblate priest for over 60 years. When he was at the end of his life, he was very sick, but to the last weeks of his life he was committed to serving others and to being a true Oblate. Over the years as an Oblate he had touched many of us and in different ways showed us the face of God. On his sick bed Fr. Joe was never alone. Brother Oblates, family and friends just kept coming. Fr. Joe prayed for us all, but was also humble enough to ask each of us for prayers and blessings. For me Fr. Joe is a saint and through his life he gave witness to what it means to be a follower of Jesus. If I can in some way reflect the image of God by my life and work, and in that way help people come to know what it means to be a follower of Jesus, then I will be giving them a model of what it is to be a saint. Fr. Joe did that through his life. The task of our journey as Oblates is to do the same.

In a few words through this contribution I have tried to express my hopes and desires for us Oblates. I have chosen to focus on the young people of today and the difficult task of evangelizing them. Our mission as Oblates is to invite people to come and see who they are in the eyes of Christ. In the western world we need to focus our efforts on reaching out to the young people, whom I see as among the most abandoned today. Our communities must be life giving; a place where we pray, eat and play together, an image of commitment and family. We must accommodate young people in our worship communities and make that community their home. Finally, through our way of living and zeal for our faith, we must be saint-like and reflect the image of God. As the kids of St. Anthony Catholic High School in San Antonio have written on their campus ministry shirts, "We are called to be *Imago Dei*."

Witnessing to Hope: A Call, Our Mission

Sc. Gregory Arokiasamy, OMI
St. Paul's Institute, Poonamallee, India

Introduction

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick." (Prov 13:12)

Hope is a basic and essential thing for humanity to live vibrantly. People will seek every opportunity to end their life when they reach the bottom of hopelessness. If humanity has continued for so many years it is because of its Hope, understood also as God. Hence for me Hope is "Clinging to the God of Truth, come what may, and continuing to seek the good in oneself and others, and persevering in the integrity of oneself amidst all the oddities of life". I understand 'Hope' as 'Christ'. So consequentially our call and our mission is from Christ and for witnessing to Christ, who is our only Hope and who alone can be our Hope. India is the cradle of major world religions and cultures and continues to be a religiously pluralistic country. The "richness and depth of Christ", as the Hope of humanity, needs to be understood with a sensitive heart and dialogical spirit.

Hope as Impetus towards Fullness of Life

A threat to Hope is a threat to our very life, because Hope and life are very closely interconnected to each other. Life is lived from moment to moment! Life is as open as death could be! The breaking point between the threat to life and the fear of death is Hope. In India people lose hope, because they do not have the resources to live. Just imagine what people can do without even water to drink and agriculture employs 64 per cent of the total workforce but that this employment depends to a large extent on rainfall and harvesting rainwater. Besides this natural predicament, the political system here is very corrupt. Due to the New Economic policy, liberalization, privatization and globalization the state has given up being the welfare state. The government does not really take steps to remedy the deplorable condition of the poor. So, basically our hope in life is dwindling. Popular Hinduism seems to compromise with the status quo, as though the plight of people was a divine programme that must be taken as it is. The offshoots of these patterns gave rise to existential crises like poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, casteism, superstitions and so on.

In international terms a person earning two dollars a day is poor and those earning a dollar a day are chronically poor. Against this yardstick, according to the chief economist of the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NC AER), 70% of Indians will qualify as poor and the 26% in the Below Poverty Line (BPL) category will qualify as worse than chronically poor. Subsidies and the Public Distribution System (PDS) may, for a while, help them to just physically survive in the short

run, but will not lift them out of the conditions of poverty. What is hope for these people who do not get enough food, water, shelter, basic health and education to sustain them?

Although the Church is institutionally very strong, it does not remain a living sign of hope! It is very sad to see the Church use all its energy and resources in educating the rich to become richer and richer. Many religious consider their commitment towards the uplifting and liberation of the poor as an appendix to their life and not as their primary mission. Hope is in crossing the borders, the familiar ministries, the comfortable zones, and the contradicting life-styles. In this sense our ability to actively enter into an *ongoing conversion* is the real key to any hope and call to mission.

My Hopes and Desires to Bring the Oblate Charism to Life in My Own Life

Today, in the context of my country and the trend of the world, I am compulsively called to be a prophet, a man of God. A prophetic role that speaks the mind of God to the world is the apt role of an Oblate. As a prophet I must be a man who is sustaining, promoting and enriching the life of the people, specially the poor around me. I need to develop the "Christic senses," "to look at the world through the eyes of the Crucified Saviour." Through my being a compassionate and just person I can be a great sign of hope, the voice of the voiceless for my brethren who are faced with discrimination and oppression.

The second thing I dream of is to be a man with a sense of humor. This is possible when I place all my hope in Christ. It is He who works through me. I must see that there is a perfect blending of anger against injustice and joy of Christ present in my life. This dialectical tension in me would be the boost of Hope for me and to the people around me.

As Jesus went about doing good (Acts10:38) my spirituality (the habits and disciplines I use to shape my desire) should enable me to be an energetic and zealous Oblate for the Kingdom of God amidst the oddities of life. I must possess a *Good Samaritan* complex of being hope for the needy, transcending all barriers, and not the *Cain complex* of being indifferent to my brothers and sisters.

In the life of the Congregation

We Oblates should be present amidst the poorest of the poor. We should not be comfortable in our conventional and traditional ministries in the parishes or other institutions. Our work and our presence should be with the people who are losing hope in life. Therefore there should be a radical shift in our mission approach.

In order to be a concrete sign of Hope, we must be competent in some of the secular fields, e.g. as a medical doctor, advocate, lawyer, agriculturist, environmentalists... These fields of proficiency should be directly building the infrastructures of the given society. Through our authority in these fields we can directly involve ourselves in the struggles of the people and root out the highly commercialized and profit-motif of the present of system of education and health.

The Oblates should voluntarily extend their sincere collaboration with the secular movements, vibrant signs of hope, which fight for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation. This will broaden our ministry as agents of Hope.

In India, we Oblates should have educational institutions of our own in order to plant and inculcate the values of a new social order envisaged by Christ, especially in the children and youngsters.

According to the Nobel prizewinner for economy Mr. Amartya Sen, “*sound primary education of all the children is the real sign of hope for India*”.

The strength of the human family is in its collective life, without which it simply cannot survive. The meeting of peoples and races, cultures and religions is the most hopeful thing that could happen to humanity and signifies a fresh epoch of richness. Therefore the Oblates should be in the frontiers of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, the defense of human rights and human dignity, and the creation of a more sustainable and equitable global economic order.

Conclusion

To witness to Hope as our call and mission I firmly believe and am convinced that all Oblates should feel that they are called to be ‘Jesus of Yesterday’ (as in the Gospels) to go about being signs of Hope to the sinners, outcasts, the poor, the sick, the laborers, women and children. We are sent to the ‘Jesus of Today’ who are politically dominated, economically exploited and socially subjugated. Then we can be sure witnesses of Hope.

The Oblates, Signs of Hope

Sc. Joseph Dumé, OMI - Haiti

The Congregation is for us, Oblates, a gift from God, a spring of love, of mercy and of inexhaustible happiness. Its essence is on the one hand revealed, and on the other hidden. Fortunately, community is not a utopia or a simple concept that has meaning according to the caprices of those who aspire to it and make it. It is a concrete reality through which brothers bear witness to the love that is from Christ. Community is already a way of life. One needs to constantly adapt to its demands. From this point of view, I want to believe that the next Oblate General Chapter is going to be an excellent occasion for updating a time of intense thinking, in order to make the right decisions in the struggle against despair and hate prevailing in the world. It is an opportunity we have to reread the Oblate charism and delve more thoroughly into it in order to give a better answer to current needs.

Today, it is possible for the Oblates to create, to invent new conditions, and to give a new face to the world. The Founder and his companions did that in their time. Now we want to increase our zeal, with new methods (the content of our documents of strategy) and our own energy to take up the challenges of our era. Does the Church not recognize the Oblates as specialists in difficult missions? What mission can shake us then? In any case, with complete confidence, I wish to put out into deep waters, and lower my net. I am sure that God will make this work fruitful.

Agreeing with my colleagues in the scholasticate of Haiti, I already see the next General Chapter as the first concrete expression of Hope the Oblates today are called to live and to testify to. It is an opportunity for the community to put charity above all, to make internationality a priority, and to place itself at the service of the poorest. I already foresee that the decisions of this Chapter will arouse in each Oblate, a great availability and a total gift of oneself to God and to the Congregation. It will also be a deepening of Oblate spirituality and values. I believe that the significant propositions of the different provinces will materialize. A greater investment for the youth in order to prepare staff will be possible. The walls between the different provinces, between priests and brothers, the elders and the younger will disappear. A greater brotherhood between Oblate colleagues already opens up the road to Immense Hope.

The future of the Congregation depends on the Holy Spirit, the general directions and the responsible behavior of each Oblate. Really, I do not worry about the future of the community, so long as every one takes seriously his vocation and his consecration. Without diminishing the major problems of some Oblate units, if we share the same convictions, surely the community will never fail in its mission. Our Lord is always faithful, He promises to be with us forever. It is up to us now to discern what He wants us to accomplish in love and faithfulness. We are certainly concerned with difficult situations such as, for example, the lack of Oblate vocations in some regions. But, in some others, many youths ask to meet us. The Lord seems to be intervening to give us vocations. It is an invitation for us to establish a real partnership in our works and fields of mission? Vocations are the Lord's signs that reassure us that the hope He has deposited in us will not fail. Thus, docile to the Holy Spirit, let us keep going to stand up as standards of hope for those who despair; for the Lord supports and raises all human weakness.

I am already prepared to welcome new changes that will help me to live the radicalization taught by the Gospel and transmitted by the charism. After the General Chapter, hope will continue to be more than ever in the center of our daily experiences. We then are going to be able to testify to it unflinchingly. Our Congregation will surely improve the quality of its presence in the midst of the people it serves, so as to be an authentic sign of God's Kingdom in the world.

In the final analysis, we have to be the witnesses of this hope that deceives not, for ourselves and for the people who expect us to give an answer to their problems. The need to take a stand *hic et nunc* for the cause of happiness and salvation becomes urgent. Becoming Incarnate amongst us, Christ invites us to do that. We have been called to be different and to stand up to despair. May the abundance of the Lord's love transform us to the point of conforming to His will, and change us into real signs of hope: bearers of peace, joy and love in the world. By the intercession of Mary our Mother and Saint Eugene, may this General Chapter be very successful. May it also mark a decisive change of direction in the history of our Covenant with God, and our quest for faithfulness under His regard and in His hands! (*Translated from the French by Jean Camille MÉSIDOR, OMI – Haiti*)

To Serve the Poor as a Lawyer

Sc. Pawel Ratajczak O.M.I.
St. Charles Scholasticate, Ottawa, Canada

Living the charism in my own life

I envision myself serving the poor as an Oblate in a very specific ministry: it is my deep conviction that the marginalized are often in need of adequate legal representation. From experience, I can also say that such legal representation is regularly not accessible to them, even in those countries with extensive social programs. When available, free legal representation provided by the government deals often with only a segment of the law – such as criminal offences – and sometimes can be of poor quality.

My hope is that I can serve the poor and the marginalized as a lawyer. This would put me directly in touch with those whom St. Eugene de Mazenod considered as the most disadvantaged: the prisoners, the materially poor, the immigrants, and those whose voices are often ignored. I hope that I can combine the ministerial priesthood of the Catholic Church and the vocation of an Oblate religious with my work as a lawyer, thus being of service to people not only in the legal field, but also in spiritual matters. Additionally, in North American society, the court system has much influence over public policy: I hope to use law and the courts to bring Gospel values to the public sphere, particularly as they apply to the dignity of human life.

Perhaps I can pursue my calling to serve the poor as a lawyer in a firm or association composed of like-minded individuals. This would put in practice Constitution number six of our Oblate Constitutions and Rules, which speaks of cooperating with non-Oblates in working for justice and peace. Possibly, I could work together with Oblate associates. Over time my ministry as a lawyer could transform into work at the national or United Nations level on behalf of the poor. I am also open to the possibility of serving the legal needs of the Congregation, but I hope that the poor will continue to be the primary focus of my ministry.

As an Oblate, in whatever service I will perform, I hope to be in solidarity with the materially poor by living simply. A simple lifestyle adds credibility to someone who works with the marginalized, and it is also an effective antidote against the power and prestige associated with the legal profession.

Living the charism within the context of the Oblate Congregation

It is my deep conviction that apostolic community is a very effective sign in the contemporary world: the sight of Oblates living and working together can help to overcome the rampant individualism of North American culture. I believe that being linked to an apostolic community will help me live the charism within the context of the Oblate Congregation. Ideally, I hope to work as part of a team of Oblates. If I do become a lawyer, this can take place in the context of a social-justice center, established to aid the poor and marginalized.

Finally, living the charism within the context of the Congregation, I hope to be open to ministries that the Oblate community proposes. In other words I will take into serious account the discernment of fellow Oblates – particularly my superiors – in deciding which work to pursue. As an Oblate – assigned to whatever ministry – I will strive to be obedient to the charism by being obedient to those whom the Oblate community has placed in leadership roles. Faith that God speaks through human agency, and through the vow of obedience, is crucial for me as I live out the charism in the Congregation.

To Bring the Oblate Charism to Life: My Hopes and My desires

Sc. Márcio Soares do Santos OMI
Institute of Theology, São Paulo, Brazil

In the nine years that I have known the Oblates, I have perceived how important the Oblate mission is. What is more interesting is that all are involved and all fields are included in the one process. During my formation process I have never felt as an outsider in this process; on the contrary in as much as possible the Oblates have always presented their proposals of work and mission projects, which often involve a situation of conflict because of the very nature of the mission, but these barriers have never been obstacles which cannot be overcome through dialogue and communication and thereby adequately resolved. A very clear example of this whole process has been provided through the Immense Hope project. I have never seen such involvement and dedication on everybody's part. I participated in all of the meetings to reflect and prepare the documents. This project was the source of much joy because the results were the work of our own communities.

I believe firmly in the Oblate mission, in its proposal of life and its mission in favor of the most needy. Among my many hopes one has to do with the mission. I hope that the mission will grow in maturity, in the sense that it will not fail because of my failings or the failings of my Oblate confreres,

that it preserve its finality, and that the mission may be a sign of great strength and unity for all of us. We have many examples of this, for example, the many foreign missionaries who have come to Brazil from France, the United States, Canada and Ireland. Each one contributed in the best manner possible and we benefit even today from their efforts. I am a consequence of those efforts and I am very grateful to the Lord for this blessing.

I want to contribute to the process in a very intense manner because in formation I have a limited participation because of my academic obligations. I think a lot about preserving all the values I learn during my formative years both at college and in community living in order that I might be an Oblate who can serve in any place and in any country where I might be stationed, and to be one among many who have witnessed to our Oblate charism. This is my sincere desire and I hope to become stronger in this ideal, counting on the help of more experienced Oblates since they are points of reference. I can feel that the Oblate Congregation encourages our initiatives in favor of mission and that our projects are not personal projects but include the whole group in mission.

I hope that this Chapter can analyze these questions of the motivations of the seminarians for the missionary life. I am not speaking about a specific mission, but about the essential of Oblate mission as a specific trait: to be a sign in the world of today, to witness the Risen Lord and to be a presence in the midst of the most abandoned. They are values I try to live in my experiences as a seminarian and which I hope to preserve at all cost. Even knowing that the challenges are many and that the modern world in which we live is demanding more of us as missionaries than ever before in history. But I belong to a group, which really lives a fraternal spirit, a deep friendship that many times in moments of difficulty and trial provides me with the necessary support to commit myself even more actively to the mission. I think that at this point I can perceive the true role of an apostolic community, which should be stressed in the Chapter in the view of promoting a profound relationship between the community and the mission under our responsibility.

I see with great hope the future of our communities as they provide us with the joy of a warm reception wherever we find the presence of an Oblate whoever he may be. These statements encourage me to continue and to seek out new fountains of life in the footsteps of our Founder who always lived out the spirit of the newly established Congregation in its reality. I want to do the same.

Whenever I visit the parish communities I think of the role that I exercise and always someone appears at the end of the encounter and says, "It is so good that you Oblates are here!" This phrase touches me very much and makes me feel that I am a sign among these people, a sign which goes beyond me. This is not to my personal credit, but projects the name of the Congregation, or better still, is a mark of our charism that is revealed in us. There is another reference of hope, which I have ever since I entered the Oblates. I feel the sense of belonging and of being a follower of someone who has the mission to continue the work of the Founder. For me, this point is extremely important and ought to be an ever-present sign of our presence today and in the future: to show hope in the midst of people without hope. To achieve this I only know one road to mission, and by means of this we have the opportunity to reach the abandoned as Saint Eugene taught us so well. This is a challenge, which to me appears to be met through missionary activity. We can deepen and reach the true significance of the mission.

Because of this I believe very much in my future and in our future. We are responsible for the flame of our Founder and let us never let it burn out. With all sorts of problems, difficulties and other trials we are apostolic men called to the service of the Gospel. I hope to be able to witness in our mission all of our values, our hopes and above all our fidelity to the cross, left by Jesus Christ.

Immigrants... My Respectable Brethren!

Sc. Quilin Bouzi, OMI
San Antonio, Texas – USA

I feel humbled and proud at the same time to share with you my hopes and desires, for the forthcoming 34th General Chapter. I would like to reflect on its theme in the context of the United States of America. The theme “Witnessing to Hope: a Call, our Mission” is indeed right and appropriate with the reality we are presently living in the United States of America. It is a theme that calls for particular attention to several realities that affect the poor with their multiplicity of faces. One reality I hope and desire that the General Chapter will pay particular attention to is our mission to social justice, with special attention to the reality of the immigration of peoples. Hundreds of people mostly the poor have become victims of social injustice. In the USA hundreds of people are dying and remain unaccounted for along the Mexican-American borders, in their attempt to cross over into the USA to seek for a better lifestyle. Those who have managed to crossover have remained subjects of unjust treatments.

My desire for attention to the immigrants comes from my experience as an immigrant from Haiti. I was born and raised in Haiti in a Catholic family. My mother migrated to New York (USA) in 1982. Faced with the untimely death of my father, my mother did not opt to get married again. As such she single handedly raised five children. Faced with unbearable economic difficulties in Haiti, my mother came to America to start a new life. This was twelve years after the death of my father. When she migrated to New York, she was faced with many hardships. It was hard for her to communicate with the Americans, for she did not speak English. To make ends meet my mother worked for several hours each week. From her meager wage she supported us in Haiti. Through God’s grace and her hard work she managed to raise and save some money, which got us to New York where we were reunited with her. It was then that I came to New York with my brothers. At the time I was twenty-eight years old. As an immigrant of Creole and French background I had to learn English. We learned English and we were able to enroll and attend the City College in New York. My brothers, who have graduated from college, now work in New York. Two work as electrical engineers, the other as a computer programmer and the fourth one works as a technician.

It is from this background as an immigrant that I strongly feel that the theme for this year’s General Chapter could have recourse to the reality of immigrants. In tune with our charism as missionaries to the poor with their many faces, it is certain that immigrants form part of that college of the poor in dire need of our presence. We cannot deny the reality that the Founder’s response to the needs of the poor in Aix-en-Provence was intended to recognize the integrity and dignity of their humanity. His concern was the dignity of each person regardless of his or her social classification. It is obvious that humanity cannot be divorced from basic human needs. When we talk of basic needs we imply such things as: accommodation, food, clothing, health, and education, to mention but a few.

Our father Founder Saint Eugene de Mazenod, wanted to share with the poor, that personal experience of God’s love for him. For him his special attention was to those abandoned by society or least considered, whose rights were being trampled upon. These were persons, who were denied their rights by the French society. The French society at the time had a tendency towards classifying persons according to their monetary or material worthiness. The love for the poor in Saint Eugene de Mazenod’s life is what prompted him to a more defensive attitude to them. In the work of his experience with the poor he devoted his life to teaching the richness of the faith to them. It is quite evident that from the very on-set of his priestly ministry in southern France, he sought to reach the

“most abandoned” as he saw them. These included: people of humble means like servants, artisans, peasants, beggars, the youth, and prisoners.

To these people the Founder communicated in a language that was comprehensible to them. He spoke in Provençal, a local French dialect of Southern France. This was a language uncommon to the French church.

Saint Eugene de Mazenod in a prophetic way stood against this kind of attitude as an excerpt from his Good Friday sermon reflects:

“You, the poor of Jesus Christ, the afflicted and wretched, the sick and suffering...my respectable brethren, listen to me! You are the children of God, the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, the co-heirs of his eternal kingdom, the cherished portion of his inheritance; you are in the words of saint Peter, the holy nation, you are kings, you are priests, you are, in a certain way, gods!” (Notes for Lenten Instructions, March 1813).

From these words, I can see what was the place for the poor in his heart. He denounced the unjust attitudes towards the poor. In them he recognized God’s revelation. This denunciation goes beyond simply empty verbosity. It is about identifying with them through our own simplicity of life. Through our lives we can remain in solidarity with them. These immigrants – legal or illegal – are part of the poor today. These men and women are people, who have been forced to leave their places of natural inheritance because of social, political and economical hardships. They have left their land in search of a better lifestyle that will enhance their dignity as human beings. As persons with “almost” no rights they are in essence the poor. They have been forced to lose their integrity because of the subhuman conditions in which they have been living in their native land. They have left their home to go live where they have no family and relations, with the hope that their human dignity will be restored.

It is thus my hope that the Chapter, as it responds to the essence of the theme, pay a considerable amount of attention to the plight of immigrants.

Oblate Charism, Formation and Immense Hope

Sc. L. Mosemedi, C. Nabwenje, S. Rossouw, OMI
St Joseph’s Scholasticate, Cedara, South Africa

Our experiences of the charism in formation

We find in ourselves a desire that is enlightened by the hope we have in the Congregation. The Oblate charism is summarized in Constitution 5: Becoming members of the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate is to hear *the call of Jesus Christ within the Church through the people’s need for salvation.*

Our formation is such that it accompanies us to the realization of the Oblate charism. We feel that we need to have that vision of the charism so as to understand what Oblate life is all about. Our formation allows individuals to know themselves since this is important for ministry. We have to some extent experienced the reality of our charism in different ways, during the pastoral experiences, the regency programs and the ongoing contact we have with Oblates from different countries. So far our house of formation has allowed us to have these experiences.

We have come to the realization that the ministry among youth requires greater consideration. Youth ministry has to some extent been emphasized. We feel that still more needs to be done. Youth work calls for full time ministry. One can only become an Oblate if one hears the voice of those who are crying for help especially the poor with their many faces.

My hopes and desires for the actualization of the Oblate charism in myself

The Oblate charism can only be actualized in me by my being involved and living the reality that calls for it. Our hope is to learn more from our experiences of different realities. The question for us today is: are we still following the original inspiration of our Founder? Our formation program should help us to look at this question. It is from the experiences that we have that we are able to be more effective. One cannot give what one doesn't have.

The other question would be: what is our mission today? In *The Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate*, Fr. Fernand Jetté wrote: "In the light of the foregoing, the Oblate charism is first of all a view, a love and faith filled view which lets us see things that others miss and to hear appeals to which others are oblivious."

My hopes and desires for the actualization of the Oblate charism in the Congregation

We wish that Oblates would spend some time in reflection on the realities they live so as to see and contemplate what our charism is in this present world. When this is done, and given due time, our Oblate charism will become actualized in the Congregation. Then after we can go out with the zeal for souls.

We say our mission today is the youth. They are among the poor with their many faces. We need to look back and see what could be done in the future so as to reach the people who need us. We need the original inspiration of our Founder in our time.

Conclusion

In our formation we are given the chance to meet the challenges our Congregation is facing. There are opportunities of pastoral insertion. Our formation house helps us to become the voice of the voiceless. The youth are the leaders of tomorrow and they need our attention. Our lives should be enriched by the youth.

Our formation should always be aimed at broadening our horizons because those in formation are the future Congregation. In the scholasticate we have spiritual conferences which help us to be prepared to face the reality of life. We are happy with the formation we are getting.

Hope, desires...and the Oblate Charism

Sc. G.Rambola, M. Ratelolahy, E. Ramiadamanana, OMI
St. Eugene de Mazenod Scholasticate, Fianarantsoa, Madagascar

The words "hope" and "desire" have become timely. During the past year, we have tried to promote these words within the "Immense Hope" project of our Congregation, at the beginning of the Third Millennium. Joyfully, we, the young people in first formation in Madagascar, wish to share a few signs of hope and submit a few desires. We want them to be heard before or during the next General Chapter.

Signs of hope

To live the Oblate charism in Madagascar, where 80% of the population depends on agriculture and animal husbandry calls for attention to the spiritual, material and intellectual life of these people, three basic factors of human development. Our experience in the Congregation for the past few years with people from the backcountry, especially in the region of the Tamatave diocese, makes us understand that our charism should not limit itself to preaching spirituality. We should even teach the value of knowledge, the usefulness of learning, things that will no doubt help them improve their material life. Oblate vocations are rare in that region precisely because of that intellectual and material poverty. Few complete their primary education. On the other hand, many young men from other regions are knocking at our doors today because they want to do something for the Church and the Nation, while living the Oblate charism.

The spirit of communion, fraternity, and collaboration in our Oblate life style is at once an indication and a hope for the future of our Congregation in Madagascar, since these same values already exist in Malgache wisdom, which is based on parenthood (Fihavanana). This Oblate identity therefore corresponds exactly to Malgache wisdom. The people greatly admire the harmony in difference that they observe among the Oblates.

A few desires

In Madagascar, as elsewhere, poverty stands in the way of human development. Yet we make no effort to join with those who are working for the intellectual and material development of the people. That is why we would like to collaborate in the intellectual formation (for example, by establishing schools in the back-country...), in the special formation of catechists and in the education of illiterate adults, who are so numerous.

From the financial point of view, the OMI Delegation in Madagascar is always dependent on other countries. To improve our finances in the future, we believe that remaining in the backcountry will not resolve the problem.... Perhaps by founding institutions of advanced learning, of agronomy, of human sciences... we might reap some benefit! Young Malgaches in first formation want to simply avoid the spirit of mendacity and dependence.... The members of our Delegation are in agreement.

Madagascar is an island and we speak only one language, "Malagasy", which is close to the Indonesian language. (Our ancestors came from Indonesia and Malaysia.) Hence, our young Malgaches would like to expand their knowledge of other international languages, such as French, English... going for that reason to other provinces, for example for a pastoral stage of one or two years). This would permit us firstly to come into contact with the internationality of the Congregation, to experience other cultures, and it would reinforce Oblate unity at the local level as well as at the international.

Dear confreres, this is the hope and some of the desires of the young Oblates in first formation in Madagascar. We have confidence in God regarding the future of the Congregation in Madagascar. We are striving, in turn, to construct a better future in keeping with our charism, and in the spirit of the internationality of our Congregation!

How can we make the Oblate charism active in our lives and in the Congregation? Our hopes and expectations

By the Ukrainian and Belarus Scholastics
at the scholasticate in Obra (Poland)

The Church, that beloved spouse of God's only begotten Son, torn with anguish as she mourns the shameful defection of the children she herself bore, has in our days been cruelly ravaged. These words of our Founder remain timely. In a most striking way, they apply to the territories that were once part of the Soviet bloc, like our countries the Ukraine and Belarus.

In fact, these are not typical *mission* lands; they are rather fields for a new evangelization. Living among the people of these post-Soviet lands, one is forced to conclude that the population is not Christian, even though some commonly assume that it is. The inhabitants consider themselves believers, but their daily lives absolutely belie it. We wish therefore to emphasize that to be missionaries in Ukraine or Belarus, as in the other post-Soviet countries, is to be faithful to our charism of reaching out to the poor and most abandoned. It must not be forgotten that in our land, spiritual poverty is very often accompanied by extreme material poverty.

The example of the Apostles, who consecrated their lives to Jesus, teaches us that each one of us, following St. Eugene, must be inflamed with *the love of Jesus Christ, the service of the Church*, and also be full of zeal, ready to sacrifice our goods, our talents, ourselves, for the glory of God. We can do this if we remain united to God through prayer and the sacraments.

The Oblate Community must therefore find in prayer the primal source and the crowning point of its activities. Furthermore, our common life must be such that each member can find understanding, honest evaluation and a truthful acceptance of his life. In our communities, we would like to have extraordinary Oblates, who really want to become saints, and who seek in their daily lives to attain the goal described by the Founder. Even though disagreements may arise among confreres, the problems must be solved each time, and without delay, by speaking honestly and remaining open to brotherly correction.

We are happy to affirm that in our communities, prayer, ministry, and common recreation are in fact considered essential and constitutive elements. We are also convinced that prayer must precede our ministry and activities; we must not allow work to destroy the spiritual life of the community. The needs are enormous! True enough. But it is equally true that before bringing someone a glassful of love, we have to fill it first. For us, that is evident! We also dare to make this suggestion: that every seven days there be, in our communities, a time for common adoration of Jesus in the Eucharist. And where possible, it would be desirable that the laypersons that work with us, along with parishioners, join us in this prayer.

It seems to us that at times our communities would need more discipline, docility, and availability. We believe that by means of these qualities God could more easily act in us and through us, and by the same token they would provide us with one more occasion to practice – in a spirit of obedience – poverty of heart. We could thus surpass our own limits, and ourselves abandoning ourselves more fully to the Lord.

We believe that we are called first of all to announce the word of God, and this ministry is accomplished through the celebration of the sacraments and the loving service of those in need. It

seems to us, therefore, that at each Eucharist – if possible – our preaching should explain the Scriptures. It seems equally necessary to encourage the faithful to approach the sacraments, and to facilitate this approach for them.

While responding to their spiritual needs, we must also remain sensitive to the material poverty of the people. In fact, many of those among whom we mingle lack the sufficient means to exist. We must not forget them; on the contrary, we must rescue them. Thus, the poor will sensitize us to the need for a greater radicalism in our own lives, which are inspired by the evangelical counsels. This evangelical radicalism may ask us to renounce certain goods and conveniences in our lifestyle. However, this could provide us with the occasion to discover our own insufficiency. We must not fear being poor, nor be afraid that living a life marked by poverty will make us lose certain contacts: the Founder accepted these things, and yet he had numerous acquaintances and many friends in France and elsewhere.

By working among the *poor with their many faces* and the marginalized, *we will allow ourselves to be evangelized by them*. Our houses – while respecting the demands of religious life and the cloister – should remain open to the poor, even to the point of sharing our table with the homeless if the occasion presents itself. Usually, people come to our houses, but we are convinced that we must also dare to knock at the doors of those who do not come, and thus meet them in their everyday lives and speak with them. If they do not come to Jesus, let us then allow Him to go to them.

We are aware that each of us has received certain qualities and talents from God. We must develop these with an eye to future use in the task of evangelization. We must also be wary of becoming obstacles for those who discover new charisms within the frame of the Oblate charism. Thus, we may learn later whether it is necessary to go beyond parish ministry and the preaching of missions, to form *specialized communities* concentrating on a very special activity. Certainly, before initiating a new project, we must consider the situation of the local church, submit the project to our superiors, and go through a serious discernment. Among possible projects, we are thinking of youth ministry, ministry to the marginalized, and the promotion of Oblate vocations. These *specialized communities* could collaborate with specialists in other congregations and with other ecclesiastical or lay experts.

Mary Immaculate is the patroness of our Congregation. This means that our activities should reflect a Marian orientation. Those who are with us and around us must see that Mary is truly our Mother, and that her place in our lives is very special. Our parishes should promote an *authentic devotion to the Immaculate Virgin*. This can be done by Marian celebrations and the use of contemporary audio-visual means.

In summary, we must return to the Founder, know him more and always be re-discovering him. Then, we must search for similarities with the current situation in our country. We must never stop growing spiritually and as Oblates, in order to become truly apostolic men. This is so that people may know who Christ is. We must take up the cross and follow Jesus each day; lose this life to gain it in eternity.

OMI DOCUMENTATION is an unofficial publication
of the General Administration of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate
C.P. 9061, 00100 ROMA-AURELIO, Italy
Tel. (39) 06 39 87 71 Fax: (39) 06 39 37 53 22
E-mail : information@omigen.org <http://www.omiworld.org>