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Oblates, Immigrants and Europe

Oblate European Mission Conference

June 8-15, 2005

Crewe, England

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The Oblate European Mission Conference held its biennial meeting on June 8-15, 2005, at the Oblate Mission Centre in Crewe, England. The theme of the gathering was the Oblate mission to recently immigrated ethnic minorities in Europe. Fr. Ned CAROLAN, the interpreter for the meeting, compiled this summary of the various situations faced by Oblate missionaries in mission centres throughout Europe.

Participants

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Oblates, Immigrants and Europe

In the not-too-distant past, North America was seen as the great racial melting pot where immigrants flocked to share in the wealth of the New World. That is still true today. Immigrants still come to the USA and Canada from all continents and countries. The melting pot, however, has always been linguistic as well as cultural. Within a couple of generations all were speaking either English or French, according to the area in which they settled and it is foreseeable that even the present wave of Hispanics will be absorbed into their new surroundings linguistically as were all their predecessors.

Europe has, from time immemorial, been a melting pot too, but not linguistically. Furthermore, the twentieth and twenty-first century prosperity has increased the waves of immigration in a way that would have been unimaginable after World War II. Languages in Europe are even more numerous than countries and within many countries there is a multiplicity of dialects. The immigrants from Asia or Africa must feel somewhat bewildered if they have to move from one country to another in search of work or in search of the “Eldorado” they hoped to find.

So far the immigrants in Europe, in most cases, are a patchwork of minorities. However, if the native European population continues its present aging trend and diminishing percentage of population increase, some countries will have an immigrant majority within merely a few generations. Will they all become inculcated in their country of adoption or will many parts of Europe have a new culture as has happened many times in the past? For centuries the culture of Europe has been basically Christian. Is all that about to change? Has secularisation become the fashion and New Age syncretism the “gospel” of the moment?

The experts have different opinions with regard to the de-Christianisation of Europe and its consequent preparedness to Christianise the new wave of immigrants. The Christianisers of the past, the priests and religious, are, like the general native population, decreasing in numbers. Many of the traditional prayer centres, monasteries and convents, have been closed or have become museums. Other more modern movements and forms of worship and contemplation have arisen but will they be sufficient in number to meet the needs of evangelisation or sufficiently robust not to be swamped by their religious counterparts?

As Christians and as Oblates, we believe that we have a role to play in this new Europe. We must not be overwhelmed by the task ahead. Many of our members in the “Old Continent” have already begun to meet the challenge, or at least to study the battlefield. They merit our cooperation, our encouragement and our prayer. Our experience as a missionary Congregation and our internationality are assets to be exploited and are being put to good use in a number of cases.

Ukraine

Diego Sàez is a young Oblate priest from Spain. Just a few years ago he was sent by his superiors to Ukraine to attend to the spiritual needs of Spanish speaking immigrants in that country where Polish Oblates have been present for some years already.

Ukraine has a number of ethnic minorities. According to the State Committee of Statistics, they make up 22.2% of the total population. The largest is the Russian language group which makes up 17.3%. However, there are also considerable numbers from Belarus, Moldova, Crimea, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Poland. During the past fifteen years there has been a new immigrant phenomenon, especially in the area of Kiev; there have been immigrants from Africa, Asia and Latin America who have come to Ukraine for a variety of reasons.

In our Oblate parishes the main ethnic minority is Polish. In the past, much of present day Ukraine was part of Poland. Today there are quite a few residents of Ukraine who have Polish roots or nationality. It is possible to have Ukrainian citizenship and passport while belonging to this group with Polish nationality. It was largely thanks to this Polish ethnic minority that the Roman Catholic Church was able to survive in Ukraine during the Communist persecution in the former USSR. Many of our parishioners have Polish roots.

In Kiev there are many ethnic minorities. One of these is the Latin American group. In the Oblate parish there is a small group of Spanish speaking people, most of whom come from various Latin American countries but some also from Equatorial Guinea which is the only Spanish speaking country in Africa.

There are Polish Masses in all our parishes. In fact it may be said that the spiritual needs of this group are very well provided for. The vast majority of the Catholic clergy in the country are Polish and the Polish people are, in general, a very religious people and with a strong sense of belonging and commitment to the Catholic Church. Other minorities have, perhaps, greater needs.

About ten years ago a Mexican priest from the Apostolic Nunciature began organizing meetings for the Spanish speaking people of Kiev. More recently, I have been asked to take on this responsibility. There is a community of three religious Sisters, two from South America and one from Spain, who have a house in the area. Together we try to address the needs of the immigrants. On Sundays, there is a Mass in Spanish in the parish and a meeting afterwards. Sometimes these meetings are devoted to catechetical instruction while there is also occasion to discuss various problems or to welcome those who have recently arrived. In the Sisters’ house there is Mass in Spanish almost every day and youth meetings every Saturday. Once each month there is a party to celebrate the birthdays of the month. The Sisters’ house is always a place of warmth and welcome.

Each of the immigrant groups presents its own difficulties in the work of evangelisation. During the Soviet era the Polish people suffered much for their Catholic faith. They were marginalized and many were executed but they managed to preserve their Catholicism. After the collapse of

the USSR they struggled to re-establish the Catholic Church and to bring about the return of several Catholic parish buildings which had been confiscated and used as factories. Their sacrifices have given them a sense of ownership. Today they find it difficult to accept that the principal Masses should be celebrated and that catechism should be taught in Ukrainian and not in Polish. They have a sense of having been betrayed.

Of course there are Masses and catechism lessons in Polish in many parishes and even lessons in the Polish language. Besides, there are Polish cultural activities and concerts by Polish musicians in some of the churches. Polish traditions and religious or civil feasts are observed. Parish libraries have books in Polish on both religious and secular subjects. There are frequent pilgrimages to shrines in Poland or summer camps for children. The needs of other minorities, such as Hungarians, Czechs and Moldavians are less well cared for.

The challenge presented by the Latin American minority consists of how to integrate them into the life of the parish. Because they are new, Ukrainians are not sure what to make of them. On the other hand the Latin Americans do not feel that the parish is theirs. Their point of reference is the Spanish speaking community. It is very difficult to get them involved in the activities of the parish. Those who do not attend the Mass in Spanish will usually not frequent the Mass in Ukrainian either.

Secularisation is not as yet a major problem for the Ukrainian religious situation but it will become a greater threat in the years ahead. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many people began to show an interest in religion. However, 38% of the population do not have any official religion. Many of these would consider themselves Orthodox but they do not practice, and whatever religious ideas they have are mainly superstition. Those who believe in God and practice their religion have a very strong faith. They pray, they come to church and they are committed to the life and activities of their parish. Latin American immigrants show that they have been more deeply influenced by secularisation in their own countries. For them the process had begun a long time ago. Many had already ceased practising their faith. Now they have the opportunity of contrasting their faith with that of the host community and also with that of other immigrants. In general the results have been beneficial.

As for the Tatars, nearly all of them are Moslems and contact with them is only through humanitarian help, providing clothing, food or other necessities to those in need. It should be noted that, in many towns, there are inter-confessional meetings to deal with problems facing a multi-religious and multi-cultural society.

Oblate Constitution 5 states that “our mission is to proclaim Christ and his Kingdom to the most abandoned”. Minority immigrant groups are certainly among the most abandoned since ordinary pastoral work does not normally touch them.

France

Domingos Pereira is an Oblate priest of Portuguese origin. He belongs to the Province of France and has been much involved in prison ministry and ministering to immigrants in France.

France has long been a country which received immigrants from many parts of the world. The 1999 census revealed that there were more than four million legal immigrants in France, which is 7.4% of the population. Government conditions for immigration are becoming more stringent. Nevertheless, in 2003 there were 135,395 who received residence permits. Of these,

11,787 were from European countries outside the European Union, 90,062 from Africa, 22,192 from Asia, 11,258 from the American continent and Oceania.

The immigrants settle mainly near the bigger towns and especially in the Paris area. Fitting in with the local population is often problematic.

The first challenge for the Church is to reach out to these ethnic groups. Certain adaptations have to be made, especially by using a simpler language which foreigners can understand. In the words of Elie Lagrille, an Oblate: “the origins of each one must be taken into account, without however forming individual church groups.” We must avoid forming separate communities and encourage links among the different ethnic groups. The Church must defend the right to human dignity in the way in which these people are received.

There is an Oblate presence among the ethnic minorities, particularly in the big cities: Paris, Marseille, Strasbourg, and Le Mans. The minorities most represented in these places come mainly from Northern Africa, an area known as the Maghreb. In many places these communities have their own associations and places of worship (mainly Moslem). Oblates have friendly relations with them. There are occasions for inter-religious dialogue and there are common declarations on such topics as war and peace. There are even prayer in common and messages from the bishops for certain events. Some of our Oblate communities (Marseille, Fontenay) have reception centres for those seeking asylum, even though Oblates themselves may not be directly involved. Those who frequent these centres come from different countries of Africa, from Eastern Europe, from Latin America or Algeria.

Oblate communities in France are often composed of members of different nationalities who have spent some years in the country before joining the Congregation. They themselves have experienced what it means to be an immigrant. Other communities, such as Marseille, Strasbourg and Aix, have received Oblates from Poland and Haiti.

French Guyana is an overseas “department” in South America where Oblates have been working among immigrants for many years, especially among the sizeable group of Hmong refugees from the Oblate mission in Laos. Other groups there come from Haiti, Brazil or neighbouring Surinam.

Little account is taken of the increasing number of illegal immigrants in this country. I have met quite a number in the Fresnes prison where I work. They were caught trying to bring drugs into France.

Elie Lagrille says that previously there was no organized pastoral work among immigrants. He is now in charge of that apostolate. His mission is “to form a church which is one in its plurality” from among the various ethnic groups, to get to know the immigrants and to ensure that they are well received.

Italy

Roberto Villa is an Italian Oblate priest with many years experience in parishes (Prato and Pescara) where immigrants are numerous.

To the observer, it is obvious that the immigrant situation in Italy has changed radically in recent decades. Italy, once known as an emigrant country, has now become the recipient of numerous immigrants. The migratory tendency has been reversed. An ever increasing number of people are arriving in the country to seek refuge from hunger, violence or war. Percentage-wise the largest number comes from European countries (53%) and mainly from the East. They are followed by

those from North Africa, Asia and the American continent in that order. Statistics also include circus and entertainment people, as well as gypsies, sailors and airport workers.

There is a variety of statistics in answer to the question "How many immigrants in Italy?" The *Immigration Statistics for 2004* put the number at about three million. That refers to foreigners in general who are not Italian citizens. It includes 150,000 who belong to the European Union as well as Canadians, people from the United States, Swiss, Japanese and South Koreans who do not fall into our category of immigrants. It also includes the more than 50,000 who have come to Italy and especially to Rome for religious studies or church purposes. Clearly the number of foreigners present in Italy for any reason, apart from tourists, constitutes about 5% of the population.

The Church is faced with a phenomenon which is continually changing as to its causes, consequences, forms and dimensions and is trying to respond to the needs concretely and promptly. The challenge lies in the facility of human mobility at the present time, making it possible for large numbers of people to flee situations where they were struggling for their existence only to fall victim to criminal elements which exploit their situation and reduce them to virtual slavery. There is also a challenge in the fact that, in spite of the trials and sufferings involved, immigrants are a source, not only of economic benefit to the country, but also of enormous cultural and spiritual potential, if that potential can be harnessed. The greatest challenge for the Church, however, lies in the need to evangelise these people in the fullest sense of the word.

The Oblates in Italy are particularly involved with immigrants in the important cities of Naples and Palermo where there are large numbers of immigrants. Since many come from the two ethnic groups of Sri Lanka (Singhalese and Tamil) the Province has requested help from the Oblates in that island. Two priests from that country have been provided, one for each of the great port cities.

Elsewhere in Italy where the Oblates are involved in parish, mission or prison ministry, there is a wide variety of nationalities represented by the immigrants: Indian, Pakistani, Senegalese, Ghanaian, Ivory Coast, Algerian, Moroccan, Eritrean, Chinese, Filipino, Polish, Romanian, Ukrainian, Albanian, Bosnian, Serb, and Gypsy. The Italian Oblate Province is fully aware that the greatest form of reception that could be provided for these people is evangelisation in the most original sense. That means proclaiming the word to all, even to Moslems. The only way to do so at present is to receive them with open arms, helping them to become integrated, promoting dialogue and mutual understanding, using every means at our disposal to give witness to the charity of the Gospel. Having done so, it is the Spirit of God who will continue the work in the mysterious ways in which the face of Christ is made known to those who sincerely search for him. Often it is the migrants themselves who venture to manifest their curiosity and interest, giving expression in their own way to the request: "Show us who Christ is?" (Jn 12, 21)

Ministry among Sri Lankan immigrants in Palermo and Naples

David Emmanuel RATNARAJ is an Oblate priest from Northern Sri Lanka. He has been six years ordained and has worked in various ministries in his native land. Since July 2004, he has, at the request of the Italian Oblate Provincial and the Cardinal Archbishop of Naples, been working among Sri Lankan immigrants in Naples.

Having spent a couple of months learning Italian, I now live in a community of seven Oblates in the city of Naples. The community gives me its fullest support in my work among the immigrants, an apostolate which is fully in line with the directives of our recent General Chapter.

This city, with its museums, archives and historical sites has many treasures to offer to those interested in art, culture or history. It is a very tolerant city with a wide variety of multi-ethnic groups coming from Africa and Asia. Furthermore, the different layers of civilization which have been here throughout the centuries provide the student with a key to the evolution of culture. Among its population of almost three quarters of a million, there are 12,000 Sri Lankan expatriates who provide a domestic labour force. They come from both the North and the South of the country. The local Catholic population is very tolerant of immigrants and fully supports this new mission in their midst. They welcome the stranger and provide for the hungry and the homeless. There is place for every culture at the table of the Lord.

Among these Sri Lankan immigrants, there are Buddhists, Hindus and Moslems as well as Catholics. Together with a Jesuit priest, a former provincial superior, I form a team and we provide the liturgy in both Singhalese and Tamil.

The Jesuit mission among the Sri Lankans in Naples began in the 1960's when Fr. Vincenzo Cali, a former missionary in Colombo began providing Mass, the Sacraments and other needs for the Singhalese community. Other returned missionaries continued the ministry until the late eighties when their brethren from Sri Lanka were invited to take over. The apostolate among the Tamils owes its origins to the pioneering efforts of the late Fr. Peter Rayappu, OMI, and a number of Sri Lankan priests who were studying in Rome. That began in the late seventies. In the early days, even the Hindus came to the Sunday Mass as it was an occasion for them to get together socially. I am the first chaplain to reside in Naples.

In Palermo, Sicily, there is also a Sri Lankan community: about 6,000 immigrants who began arriving about fifteen years ago. Fr. Victor JEYASINGHAM, OMI, is their chaplain, appointed by the Sri Lankan Bishops' Conference at the request of the local Cardinal Archbishop. For a number of years he has been going there regularly from Rome ON weekends but now he has taken up permanent residence in the local Oblate community. We intend to get together to share our experience at intervals.

In the beginning, our mission is more social than pastoral. We help the newly arrived find jobs. The majority work as domestics in the homes of the Italians. Most of these families have been very helpful in integrating the servants into the family. At the pastoral level, we provide Mass in their native language. Apart from the Sunday Mass, we have Mass too in some of the homes and we try to meet and visit each family, providing Bible services in some cases. There are also catechism classes for the children and after school programs. Of course most of the children study in Italian schools. Some of the local population volunteer to help these children on weekends.

Of course there are other ethnic immigrant groups in Naples: Polish, Ukrainian, Chinese and Filipino. We have taken the initiative of bringing the various chaplains together every three months to share our experience and on one occasion we have organized a multi-lingual Eucharistic celebration.

Spain

David López Moreno is a young Spanish Oblate priest who has been working in Southern Spain for some years. Many areas are very isolated, relatively poor and there are numerous immigrants, especially from Northern Africa.

During the past twenty years, Spain has witnessed a new phenomenon: immigration. The in-

crease of foreigners in the country has been enormous in just a few years. The traveller on the Madrid Underground will meet people from Latin America, North Africa, Asia, and many of the countries of Eastern Europe.

It is difficult to calculate exact numbers since many (approximately 600,000) are here illegally. Recently the government has tried to deal with this situation. It would be safe to say that there are at least three million foreigners living in Spain. That is between 6% and 8% of the population. Official statistics put the numbers at more than 514,000 from Latin America (Ecuador, Colombia, Peru); 432,000 from Africa (mostly Morocco); 406,000 from the European Community; 154,000 from other European countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine); 121,000 from Asia (mainly China); and 16,000 from North America.

Our Provincial Council in 2003 named *Work among Immigrants* as one of the priorities of the Province.

Some quite remarkable work has been done among the gypsies in Badajoz. Our priests there have been involved in a number of social projects; they also work among drug addicts and in the prisons. In the Madrid community at Diego de León, Fr. Ignacio ESCANCIANO is much involved with immigrants from Latin America, helping them find jobs, usually in domestic service. A group of about fifty of these immigrants meet every Sunday for a period of reflection, sharing and celebration of their faith. Most are Catholics or at least Christians. They join in a variety of activities and have formed a parish choir.

In the rural area of Jimena, near Cadiz, there is a new Oblate community. Here there are about one thousand immigrant farm workers in five villages, most of whom come from Romania or Latin America. They are engaged mainly in the orange harvest. The Oblates meet with them and provide legal and social information. They also work with their employers and the public officials in an effort to regularize the situation of those who have that need.

Elsewhere, such as in Aluche and Pozuelo (Madrid), Oblates are the instruments of CARITAS in providing and legal assistance for immigrants. In Jaen, the Oblate ministry is to seasonal farm workers and in the prison where there is a number of foreigners.

Ireland

Kevin McLaughlin is parish priest of St. Michael's Oblate parish in Inchicore, Dublin. He is also Secretary of the Oblate European Mission Conference.

Ireland, for the first time in history, is now attracting immigrants in quite large numbers. Their arrival has been fuelled by the current economic boom, a phenomenon often referred to as "*The Celtic Tiger*". People are coming to our shores to find a better life for themselves and their families. Many find themselves in low paying jobs and are vulnerable to exploitation. Most are from Eastern Europe and they tend to be young and single. Their stay in any one place tends to be short and therefore they are hard to get to know.

Others come from Africa and have greater problems acquiring residence permits. Some arrive with their families or bring them along later. They find that accommodations, especially in Dublin, are difficult to find and very expensive.

Statistics are vague, perhaps in the Irish fashion, but the change in population make-up is obvious and all the more so since it has happened suddenly. A relatively small percentage (7,280 as

of March 2005) are asylum seekers. Most of these are still awaiting their claims to be processed and remain in a legal limbo in the meantime. Countries which are well represented are Nigeria, Congo, Philippines (many of whom are employed in the health sector), Romania, Portugal, Poland and China. At the present time over 10% of those resident in Ireland were born outside the country.

An overall pastoral plan still has to be developed for dealing with the situation. In the Oblate Province (which includes England, Scotland and Wales), we have traditionally been very successful in dealing with the waves of Irish migrants flowing into English cities. That phase of our existence seems to be closing. A new phenomenon, closer to home, is the challenge at the moment.

Meantime, our most recent initiative is the international community established at the request of the General Administration in Birmingham's "Bull Ring", the largest commercial centre in Europe. The milieu could scarcely be more international or immigrant orientated. St. Michael's, the base of the Oblate mission to secularity is on the very edge of that area. John STAAK (USA) is the Superior and the team is made up of Leo PHILOMIN (Anglo-Irish), Ken THORSON (Canada) and Noel GARCIA (Philippines). They are assisted by a core group of one religious Sister and two lay women while a much larger volunteer force is being formed to reach out to the very secular milieu in which they live. The task for the present is to provide a "listening post" in the very heart of a modern city. Time and patience are of the essence of this apostolate.

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