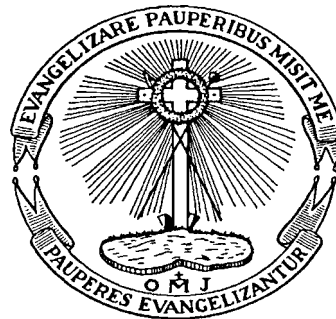


Interviews with two Oblate Bishops

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Interview with Bishop Jean-Claude Bouchard, OMI Bishop of Pala Tchad

Bishop Bouchard, tell us about yourself.

I was born in the village of St. Eloi in Quebec, 25 September 1940. I am a farmer's son. My parents were devoted Catholics, and I learned sacred history at my mother's knee. I am proud of these simple, rural origins; I have tried to remain a farmer's son all my life.

How did you come to know the Oblates?

It was sort of the tradition in rural families that the oldest son would stay at home to help his father on the farm and that the second son would get an education. I was the second son in the family. At that time, almost all secondary schools were in Church hands. In my region, you knew the Oblates through their retreat house at Mont-Joli. Therefore, I left for the Oblate juniorate at Chambly-Bassin.

And after the juniorate?

I decided to enter the Oblates because I had learned that the Oblates were missionaries for the poor and that attracted me. Had I not entered the Oblates, I would have found a profession that would have permitted me to serve the poor in one way or the other. After the novitiate, they sent me to Rome for scholasticate. I arrived there in 1960, the year of the Olympic Games. I found that difficult at first, because I am very athletic and in Rome, we were rather underdeveloped in that area.

And where is Africa in all that?

I had come to Rome for a seven-year stay, but I didn't see myself there for seven years in a row. That is why, after philosophy, I asked to do regency in a mission. The Oblates are missionaries and I wanted to see up close what a missionary is like. Therefore, I asked Father General if I could go to Lesotho where there were Canadian Oblates. But Fr. Deschâtelets had, in the meantime, received a request from Chad, from Msgr. Honoré Jouveaux, Apostolic Prefect of Pala, for a scholastic who could run a school. And that is how I ended up in regency in Chad. I taught and administered the school of Moulkou, and I spent two very happy years of my life there. In 1964, the Olympic Games were in Tokyo, but also in Moulkou where I was the principal, you were either an athlete or you were not.

What did you do after regency?

I came back to Rome to study theology, with the idea of returning to a mission, but this time, to Latin America, in order to know the Church in a different setting. But the relationships that had been created in Chad and the invitations from confreres who seemed to have appreciated my presence, led me, after two years, to ask Fr. General to give me a "definite orientation" for Chad. That helped me better prepare for the mission. For example, I took courses in the history of religions and in anthropology from Fr. Goetz at the Gregorian. I also took courses in African languages in Grenoble; in tropical medicine in Lille; and some courses about cooperatives and community development at Antigonish in Canada. All of that was very helpful to me later on. I am convinced that whoever wants to go to a mission must prepare for it.

What do you preserve from your time in Rome?

From my formation in Rome, I believe it is the international environment that also prepared me for the mission. There was also the "grace of Second Vatican Council" which I experienced on site and whose great documents support me even today. I am constantly quoting these documents at meetings. For many, it is a surprising discovery, which says to me that the Council has not sufficiently become part of the life of the Church.

And then you returned to Chad?

Upon my return to Chad in January, 1970, I asked Bishop Dupont not to overwhelm me with ministry at the beginning, so that I could study the language and become acquainted with the customs and the life of the people and discover the place in general. In my mind, it was necessary for the mission to develop a Church better adapted to the place, more African. Bishop Dupont granted my request and that was a wise choice as we found out later on.

What impressions of your first years in Chad do you hold on to?

What I remember from those first years with the small communities was that I discovered the Gospel along with the people. I was not a missionary who set himself above them and who knew it all, but I

understood the Gospel better through the way that the people accepted it. I listened to the Gospel with their ears; I spoke it with their mouth. The Gospel, received and spoken in another language, is enriching. The Word of God grows with those who receive it and profess it. I still remember the Passion recited entirely by heart by a Massa on Good Friday; in the dark of the night, it was so impressive that it gave me chills. It's totally different from reading the Passion from a lectionary.

Furthermore, it is from that time that there began in the diocese of Pala, and continues to this day, the oral presentation of the Gospel.

Let's speak about this oral presentation of the Gospel.

Speaking of the Bible, I never talk about a text or a reading, but about "the Word." For the Bible is essentially a Word, THE Word. I even pointed that out one day to Cardinal Martini who had come to Cameroon. In his homily, he had constantly spoken of "readings" and of "texts." I pointed out to him that the Gospel was above all a Word that one proclaims and listens to. And he told me: "Ah, I had never thought of it that way."

Still today in the liturgy, I insist that the Gospel be proclaimed and not read. Our catecheses in Chad all begin with a biblical text taken from the Gospels, or from the Acts of the Apostles, or from the words of the Old Testament. We ask our catechists to recite them to the catechumens and those who are baptized. They must memorize these passages in order to recite them.

What were your feelings when you became a bishop?

After only seven years at Guelengdeng, the episcopacy snatched me away. I felt very young to take on this responsibility. For example, I would have to collaborate with priests who were, for the most part, older than I. When I was named bishop, a Massa woman even said: "Now they are taking them right from their mother's womb..."

And what were your dreams?

I didn't have any dreams, but a great desire to put my whole heart into this mission, in collaboration with everyone: priests, sisters, and laity. I think I can say that the Church of Pala has always been known for this brotherhood and this collaboration, even after so many years. Furthermore, that is what has permitted me to keep at it, even to this day, for the past 28 and

a half years, since 26 February 1977.

Today, what are the challenges faced by the Church?

I can speak for the Church of Pala. One challenge is to build up a real, local Church. It's easy to say, but under what conditions can that really happen? A local Church must be made up of living communities. It must be more and more capable of taking care of its own needs, not only for its ministries and the responsibilities of the communities, but also for its material needs. The two pastoral letters which I wrote in 2001 and in 2004 are entitled: "Christians of 2001, we take charge" and "To build an adult and responsible Church."

Then, as Vatican II says: the Church does not exist for herself but to give witness to the Gospel in the world. And that is a second challenge: that the communities be ready to give witness to the Gospel and to make a different world. For us in Chad today, that means especially working for development, for Justice and Peace. We are creating Justice and Peace committees on all levels: local, diocesan, and national. There is so much ignorance, injustice, corruption, conflict. Is it not the duty of Christians to fight against these evils? The Church must absolutely be prophetic; otherwise, she will not fulfil her mission. But it is a fact that more and more Christians are becoming involved in fighting the evils that are crushing society.

A huge challenge added to all that is AIDS. The Church has always had infirmaries, but now, in order to do something about the AIDS pandemic, we need to find some new ways. The whole Church of Chad is currently reflecting on how to involve itself more in this fight against AIDS.

And the country?

I just read in the review "Jeune Afrique l'Intelligent," that the part of the world most buried in poverty is sub-Saharan Africa and Chad is no exception. Chad is number 173 out of 177 countries in the list of underdeveloped countries. The deterioration of our countries is the result of bad government and bad management, but also, unfortunately, it is due to the unjust organization of the world, in particular in international commerce. At the UN, they decided to reduce poverty in the world by one half by 2015, but no one really believes in these "decisions." And that will remain true until there is the political will power and the courage to attack the real cause of poverty: institutionalised injustice. Just one example: subsidies for agriculture in America and in Europe are far

superior to all the international aid by these countries, and on top of that, they force down prices on the world level. Cotton is just one outstanding example.

Being a bishop: an exciting profession?

Yes, but often it's a heavy thing to carry. I see that right now in our countries they expect more and more from the Church, and therefore, from the pastors of this Church. That's fine; it shows the credibility the Church can have, but it is also a burden that becomes heavier and heavier. In spite of the often catastrophic

situation on our continent, we look ahead, certain that our people are called to a better way of life. That is what our Christian faith tells us and that is what we share with our communities. I am convinced that if it were not for the Church in Chad, the situation would be even more catastrophic. The Church has played and is called to play a very important role in facilitating, for example, inter-ethnic and inter-religious relationships, often the source of conflicts. To be there, to be with, to be for... that's a delight in the every sense of the word.

Interviewed by Jean-Pierre Caloz, OMI

Interview with Bishop Gerald Wiesner, OMI Bishop of Prince George, BC Canada

On October 26, 2005, Oblate Information Service interviewed Bishop Gerald WIESNER, OMI, of the Prince George Diocese in British Columbia, Canada. Bishop Wiesner was one of four Oblate bishops who took part in the recent Synod on the Eucharist, held in Rome.

Besides Bishop Wiesner, the Oblate participants were Archbishop Liborius NASHENDA of Windhoek, Namibia; Bishop Edward RISI of Keimoes-Upington, South Africa; and Bishop Pierre-Antoine PAULO of Port-de-Paix, Haiti.

Bishop Wiesner was born in Macklin, Saskatchewan, in 1937 and was ordained to the ministerial priesthood as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate on February 23, 1963. He was ordained to the episcopate on February 22, 1993 as bishop of the Diocese of Prince George, BC.

From 1964 to 1972 Bishop Wiesner was a professor of Theology at St. Charles Scholasticate in Battleford, Saskatchewan. During that time he was involved in formation work in the Oblate Community, which he continued when the Oblate Scholasticate moved to Edmonton, Alberta in 1972. From 1972 to 1984 and again from 1991 to 1992 he taught theology at Newman Theological College. In the interim between 1984 and 1990, he served as provincial of St. Mary's Province. In 1992 he served briefly as Acting President of the college until his appointment as Bishop of the Diocese of Prince George.

Bishop, were you elected to the Synod by your

brother bishops or appointed by the pope?

I was elected by our Canadian Conference at our plenary session in 2004. Four of us were elected, two from the English sector and two from the French sector.

You were President of the Conference at one time weren't you?

I was, yes.

That had to have been an interesting experience.

Yes it was. For two years I was Vice-President, and for two years, the President. It's a service that someone is called to do. There are benefits that go with it too. There are experiences that I had as president that I am grateful for. I don't know if I mentioned it to you, but we met the pope here at the Synod. We met him in our small linguistic group. I suppose there were about thirty in the group. I was near the end of the group that met him. The Cardinals had met him and the archbishops. Ahead of me were a bishop from the Caribbean and one from Africa. I came along and I was going to give him my name. But he said to me, "Bishop Wiesner, you are from Canada. You used to visit our office." It was five years ago that I was president of the conference. Somehow or other, he remembered. It's extraordinary.

What was your general impression of the experience of the Synod?

Probably one of the most striking things is that it was a very good experience of collegiality, being together with bishops from across the world. It was an extraordinary experience. And I would say, along with

that, a really broad experience of Church. I had been at the Synod of America, and that was a good experience. Like someone said, “We came to Rome to get to know America.” And in many ways, that was true.

But this Synod was much different. This was much, much broader than that. A little example: it was brought up in our small discussion group that something should be done with the Sign of Peace during the Eucharist...that it was too disturbing before Communion...that it’s irreverent...that there’s too much exchange going on. Then a bishop from Sudan speaks up. He says, “Our country has been at war for 14 years. The only time people can experience some peace, some joy, some goodness, is at Mass. And they are a very expressive people. They like to express the joy that they are celebrating here.” You know, you sit and listen to that and you say, “The sign of peace is bigger than it is in Canada.” That’s just a little example, but that broad experience of Church I found most extraordinary. I had had some awareness of this, but when you hear the concrete, practical things, it makes a big difference.

During the Synod, I wrote down just the headings of what the different interventions were about. It’s interesting that when you go through the different countries and what different people expressed, a lot of things are the same. But there were things that emerged that really make you stop and think. It’s not exactly our own experience, but you can understand where they were coming from as they expressed their experience.

It will be interesting to see what the Holy Father does with the propositions. I’m not so sure we came up with anything extraordinarily new at the Synod. It was a strong updating and deepening of the Eucharistic life of the Church. That evidently was one of the main purposes of it and I think that was achieved. I’ll go home with a renewed and deepened experience of the Eucharist...something I would like to share with the people of the diocese.

Also expressed was the unity of the Eucharistic life of the Church, even though people come from different backgrounds and have different experiences. In every situation, you got the impression that the Eucharist is achieving basically the same things. It is clear that the Eucharist is central in the life of the Church.

Is there any one thing that really stands out for you?

The first thing that strikes me, as I said, is the collegiality. For example, I was in an English group and I think there were 25 people in the group who could vote on things. We were five Caucasians in this English-speaking group. That says something about Church. I sat up and looked around the room when I realized that. And there were some other rites there too, Eastern rites. That’s for me a highlight, and also the deepening of the Eucharistic life of the Church. Those are the two main things that I would take away.

Did anything not happen that you wish had happened?

Well, there were a few issues that I think we could have advanced somewhat and did not. One of them was the question of not being able to provide the Eucharist for all the people—in other words, a shortage of ordained ministers. That came up in many different situations and circumstances. And I wish we had had a little more openness. It’s not that we would have solved things there, but maybe we could have at least questioned some of the things we are insisting on. In response to this question, there was a very strong affirmation...almost an essential connection made between priesthood and celibacy. So to look at the possibility that “*virii probati*” – men who have proven themselves; catechists who have proven themselves or are exercising a strong leadership role, really caring for people in some of the remote areas where we have difficulty finding a priest to come and celebrate the Eucharist — the possibility of looking into something like that did not make any inroads. I would have thought, would have hoped, that we could have said something like this: “It could be discussed. It could be looked at.” But we did not seem to be able to come to that. I don’t know if the difference of opinion was 50-50. Probably not, but I think it came quite close...those who would say that we need to do something like that and those who would say we do not. There was a Cardinal who one night, I thought, made a prophetic statement. He said that we are representing the bishops of the Church and we need to listen to the Spirit speaking in the Church. But in terms of what to do in providing the Eucharist more faithfully, we did not seem to be able to move in that direction. The propositions that were made around that were, I would say, quite traditional.

Another thing that came up many times was the question of people, especially in second marriages, who are not able to participate fully in the Eucharist. Again, that was something that was discussed a lot. And I was hoping that we could say that this is an issue that could be looked into, to see if there would be ways

and means whereby we could somehow welcome more of those people.

I remember some years back during one of my visits here having had a discussion with one of the Cardinals who was Prefect of a Congregation. We spoke about that subject. He was a very pastoral man; he had been bishop of a diocese. And I remember him saying: "We have to find a pastoral solution for those people." You know, there are some who don't really care. But there are a lot of people in second marriages who would love to participate fully in the Eucharist and are not able to. And they are really not able to get out of the situation wherein they find themselves for a variety of reasons.

And along with that, and this was something totally new to me with respect to marriage situations, was polygamy. A number of the African bishops introduced the whole question of polygamy. What are we doing with that? How can we resolve that? How can we invite people in polygamous marriages to be fully initiated into the Eucharist? One of the bishops told of how he was born into a situation where his father was a polygamist with three wives. His father became a Christian. He had been introduced to Jesus and was moving in the direction of initiation into the Church. He had to get rid of some wives. This bishop, with two siblings and his mother, were sent away. The bishop cried as he told this story. This came up several times with the African Church.

Those are two pastoral issues which I felt we could not have resolved, but in some way we could begin to look at them differently.

What do you think you can take back to Western Canada, knowing your people as you do? What do you think they will want to hear from you?

Well, I would think something which I referred to earlier: the call to deepen the appreciation of the Eucharist. We tried in the Year of the Eucharist to do something. We tried to have people reflect and enter more deeply into the Eucharist. In fact, we produced

four videotapes for discussion across the diocese. But I don't think we did a lot in terms of really renewing people. So I think that would be one thing that I should take back...to try to encourage people. We have the added bonus...in Canada that we are preparing for the International Eucharistic Congress in 2008 in Quebec City. We are going to be constantly reminding them of this so that the whole nation is preparing for it.

Did you offer any of your own thoughts to the Synod?

My own intervention at the Synod was about a call to a greater participation of the faithful in the Eucharist. Vatican II spoke so strongly about full, conscious, active participation. That was the primary purpose of liturgical renewal. I think we are really missing out on that. Many people come to the Eucharist without much of an idea what it is about. Nor do they have an awareness of their own call, in virtue of their baptism, to participate in the Eucharist. There are probably four places in the documents of the Vatican Council that talk about the baptized offering the Divine Victim to the Father in the Eucharist. I think that 90% of the baptized people don't really see themselves, in virtue of their baptismal priesthood, as able to offer the Divine Victim to the Father.

Something else which came out at the Synod was the call to a Eucharistic life for the laity, a call to live the Eucharist in their ordinary, everyday lives. Very closely allied with that is the mission that is ours in virtue of the Eucharist. In fact, one of the propositions deals with somehow elaborating the conclusion to the Eucharist so that it expresses more clearly the mission that is ours as a result of celebrating the Eucharist...not simply, "The Mass is ended: go in peace," but expressing the "Ite missa est" that we used to have in Latin. We are to go and be Eucharist...the mission is still there but it is not described that clearly. It's not understood that clearly. So that would be something to work on too. It would be good to give a series of parish missions on the Eucharist too.

Interviewed by James Allen, OMI

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