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MISSION TO YOUTH – A STUDY

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Part One:

- Introduction: Notes on the interpretation of the research**
Chapter 1. Description of young people and their values.
Chapter 2. Oblate Mission, Oblate values.
Chapter 3. Community, Unit: programs, personnel.
Chapter 4. Regional or International Coordination.
Chapter 5. Summary of challenges.

Part Two:

Directory and Replies received (see www.omiworld.org)

Introduction: Notes on the interpretation of the research

After studying the General Chapter documents, the General Administration of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate agreed to create a Service to coordinate the Mission to Youth in the Congregation, as a part of the Mission Commission of the General Administration. This is a clear indication that the Mission to Youth is a current missionary priority for the Oblates and, therefore, a fully Oblate ministry (*Witnessing to Hope*, Chapter 4, pp. 32 and 33), emphasizing the dimension of the missionary daring this mission should have, beyond any other connection or interest (for example, vocational recruitment).

Immediately, the Mission to Youth Service indicated the need to know exactly what is being done in this regard throughout the Congregation. Being aware of the difficulties that an excessively thorough research could bring, it was opted to prepare a questionnaire based on the 2004 Chapter statements; it simply asked what each Unit is doing in a concrete way.

This questionnaire was sent to every Province and Delegation. We contacted the Major Superiors, asking for the name of an Oblate who could answer this

questionnaire and it was then sent to them.

We received 29 replies (48.33% of Units) out of the 60 Units in the Congregation (including Missions). These replies include five apologizing for their inability to collaborate for some reason or promising a reply which was never received. Taking into account these five Units and considering the number of Oblates in each Unit that replied, they represent 56.40% of the Oblates in the Congregation. At a Regional level, we can say that most of the Units in two Regions have replied; half in another; and from two Regions, there was no significant response.

The replies invite us to a self-critique and evaluation of our way of requesting information, as well as the possible complexity of the questionnaire that was sent. At the same time, it will make us be very careful about any statements flowing from this research. We will not be able to generalize, but only to identify some global trends at the most, although the perception will obviously vary a lot, according to the Region and even the Unit where they were written or read. Also, some Units opted to adjust their information, thus not providing an exact reply to the questions that had been asked.

Keeping the above in mind, we feel it is important to make public this research for several reasons: in the

first place, this is a first time attempt at such a study throughout the Congregation. It can be a starting point to help us evaluate this aspect of our mission. Secondly, with so many new and creative initiatives, it is worthwhile making them known and shared among all the Oblates, especially those who live their mission with youth. Thirdly, this research helps us identify some challenges and needs that require missionary action at different levels: Community, Province and General Administration.

As a first step in determining how to respond better to the missionary call we hear from youth on a global level, we hope that each Oblate will read all of the replies directly. We do not intend to confuse the readers by presenting numbers and percentages, so our research attempts to show the most important conclusions, while giving a comprehensive description of the replies received, as the first part of this publication. Each item will begin with a reference to an item in the General Chapter document and the related item in the questionnaire. At the end of Part One, we have prepared a summary chapter pointing out the missionary urgencies, which in our opinion, come from the replies received. This first part is being published in the three official languages of the Congregation.

Part Two is a directory with the names and addresses of the Oblates who worked on the questionnaire in each Unit. Many of them are responsible for the Mission to Youth in their Unit. Then we will present each one of the replies as they were received. To close this section, we include all the programs and mission projects with young people received as of today. Part Two is an invitation to a direct communication with the people working in the Mission to Youth to exchange ideas and get a better knowledge of their experiences. **Part Two will be found only on the Congregation's web site (www.omiworld.org).**

We believe this introduction may offer you the key to interpret the research. It is now the time to thank those who kindly cooperated in this study by sending the replies to the questionnaire, by helping in writing it and with its final edition. It is our hope that this first step will not be the last taken by the whole Congregation to revitalize the Oblate Mission to Youth.

Chapter 1. Description of young people and their values.

Witnessing to Hope, Chapter 4, pp. 33-34

"...The problems of countless young people need to receive special attention... (yet) youth have a special role to play, particularly in ministering to each other." [EPM 5 and 13]

According to our Founder, our presence among youth is crucial for evangelization. The widespread poverty of today's youth is not just a question of material deprivation, but is also systemic (unemployment, drugs and addictions, manipulation, sexual exploitation, child labour, absence of hope for the future, broken families, HIV & AIDS, etc.). Despite this we believe that youth have enormous capacity to transform the situation through their embodiment of Gospel values, expressed in their generosity, commitment to face challenges, openness to internationality, thirst for spirituality, sense of justice, readiness for change, and much more.

We Oblates are moved by the situation of the youth and, like the Founder, we want to respond to these calls, affirming that mission to youth is a fully Oblate ministry. It is to this purpose that the 34th General Chapter has re-introduced mission to youth into Rule 7b of our Constitutions and Rules.

While some replies provide precise data on the situation of youth in their society, others are limited to vague replies or to simple expressions of the opinions of the Oblates involved. The different cultural ways of thinking are evident according to the origin of each reply and in this regard, more than in any other, we must judge the statements with that in mind. It would be desirable that each Unit make a serious research on the reality of the young people in their own country. This could be done in conjunction with others who work with youth at different levels (education, health, society, religion, etc.).

The perception of the Oblates working in the Mission to Youth is that this ministry is an option for the most abandoned and that young persons make up that part of the population that suffers most the re-

jection and injustice of their own societies. In this sense, we find differences according to the sector of the population being considered, even within the same country. Speaking in economic terms, we find Oblates working with young people who experience the most severe poverty (including those displaced because of war, and political or religious conflicts) and others who work with wealthy young people among the students in some of our schools.

In speaking of the values of young people, in spite of the differences mentioned above, we find convergence on some issues when we compare the replies we received: young people are open and need to communicate; they want to be heard; they are joyful; they have a certain honesty and enthusiasm; they are generous and sociable. Among the most common difficulties mentioned, it seems that young people lack stability; they live day to day; they have family problems; they foresee a difficult future because of unemployment or a lack of prospects, which leads them to hopelessness and attempts against their own lives and those of others, as well as falling into addictions and gangs. It is clear that the globalization of the media affects the various youth cultures or subcultures, since the media work as transmitters of values and counter-values that are easily assimilated by the world's youth. As for religion, we see differences: in some places, young people seem wary and even contrary to a religious experience, at least as far as participation in a given Church. While they thirst for spirituality, they seek a "tailor-made" religion. Elsewhere, on the other hand, they are open to a religious experience lived as something natural and they are usually open to participation in the activities of various religions and Churches. It is evident that it depends on the level of secularization found in a particular society. At any rate, there seems to be a hunger for creativity and authenticity in the religious experience.

Numbers and ages of the young people: We have no uniform definition of youth as far as their age and situation are concerned. In some replies, the youngest age considered for Mission to Youth is 13 and others still consider those who are 35 or 40 years old as young people. While in some countries, they are considered adults after marriage at the early age of 16 to 18 years old, in other countries, youth group

work continues for married couples who are 30 years old. Nor is there agreement about their insertion into the work force or their independence from their families, since the data varies according to the country where the reply was prepared. Generally speaking, the Oblates consider the Mission to Youth to be meant for those between 14 and 25 to 30 years old.

Generally, the percentage of young people in our missions, compared to the rest of the population, is the same or a little higher than the society as a whole. This is something to keep in mind too, when considering how other social activities affect the youth sector, which along with children, is one of the most abandoned, by both society and religion. Almost all replies reveal the need to have the Mission to Youth linked to the mission to families, wherein it will be necessary to further develop our strategies.

We asked the Oblates to estimate the concrete number of young people they reach in their mission. Adding up all the data provided by the replying Units, we are working directly with over 42,000 young people (we must consider that this figure includes students in several schools under Oblate responsibility) and our work may indirectly reach more than double this figure, due to the different short-term missions or occasional contacts with youth. It is also impossible to estimate those reached by the different activities for young people developed at the shrines where the Oblates have some responsibility. We could add a significant number of young people in those Units which did not explicitly reply to this question, but where, because of the description of their activities, there would be a significant impact.

All of the above considered, we can say the Mission to Youth is and will be an important part of the mission of our Congregation, both from the point of view of numbers as well as the possibility of transforming the societies where we are serving. This statement is in significant contrast with the replies coming from the institutional level; it makes us wonder if, in practice it is really a missionary option for all of the Oblates.

Chapter 2. Oblate Mission, Oblate values.

Witnessing to Hope, number 18.

(The Chapter further recommends, and invites...)

Oblates to develop a Youth Outreach, which would include such elements as:

- *developing an authentic relationship with the youth;*
- *knowing, respecting, and being sensitive to them in their own identity, and in their immersion in a culture of communication and technology;*
- *promoting the values that help them to grow;*
- *challenging them to broaden limited horizons;*
- *winning their confidence and the confidence of their families;*
- *inventing new ways to reach out to them;*
- *being creative in our liturgies and celebrations*

Number of Oblates and their views: The Units from which we received information have some 200 Oblates involved in the different missions to youth. They represent around 15.58% of the Oblates in their Units, although most of them are only working part time or occasionally. As a matter of fact, only in a few Units is there someone working full-time in this ministry (less than 1%).

The Oblates working with youth express a number of feelings: some seem positive, since they consider this a mission in line with the charism; they are optimistic and enjoy their ministry. They do not feel that they have been particularly prepared for this ministry nor have they received a specific training. They have participated in some activities with young people during post-novitiate and this has been sufficient since it is the current general policy. In a few Provinces, they gather to share and coordinate their experiences and in some (the minority), formation is provided, even scheduled annually.

Oblate values mentioned: The most common are that they feel close to the youth and the youth sense that they are close, fraternal and available. Respect for young people is also mentioned, especially for their cultural expressions, as well as an interest in listening to them. Some Provinces are concerned

about the formation of youth. In many cases, this work of the Oblates gives them hope and helps them widen their horizons.

Among the deficiencies: There are issues due to the instability of young people, and difficulties in funding projects with them. Above all, there is evident a lack of cooperation and collaboration among the Oblates who work with the youth, leaving each one to work on his own. At times, there seems to be a lack of creativity and daring in our actions and some do not feel understood by the rest of the Oblates or, in their opinion, they do not have satisfactory institutional support.

Collaboration with other youth ministers: Many of the replies indicate collaboration with other youth ministers: religious women, various organizations, and diocesan programs, although the details of this cooperation are not provided in most responses. In several locations, the young people themselves are involved and even lead and animate the missionary activities to youth. Some are associated to the Oblate charism and they create new youth associations. It is interesting to note that in some Provinces these associations are several years old while in others, similar new groups are being created even today.

It is worthwhile mentioning that in a number of Units, the province youth ministry teams are composed of Oblates and lay people totally involved in this mission. It is considered a very satisfactory group effort.

Description of the different missions: It would seem that most of our Mission to Youth is developed around parishes. This calls for deeper study at many levels. How can we make this more missionary; how does it relate to and how is it coordinated with the mission on other levels as well as the missionary activities of the parish?

Schools are fundamentally important, since they provide the contact point between the greatest number of young people and this Oblate mission. Several are under exclusive Oblate care and others are a program in common with the Diocese or in association with other private institutions. This calls our attention to the fact that most schools do not seem to

have a specific missionary program for youth, but those that do exist are very interesting and creative; there we notice that the Oblates do not settle for just owning these schools. Here again, we need more reflection and missionary daring.

Mission preaching also appears in most of the replies received. Here there is much creativity and programs are plentiful. Some of these missions are specifically directed and animated by and for the young people. We also find Missions in schools.

Finally, it is interesting to see the work done with youth at the shrines under our Congregation's responsibility or on the occasion of pilgrimages or celebrations, and youth encounters at the diocesan, national or international levels. For some Units, coordinating their Mission to Youth around these events has fostered a renewal of that mission.

Other activities depend on the circumstances in the societies where the mission is carried out. Where there is extreme poverty, it is common that the Oblate mission program address this situation, trying to form the young people or bring them together. There are interesting initiatives with immigrants or people displaced because of conflicts (wars, natural catastrophes...); with youth suffering from several types of addictions; as well as inter-religious dialogue found in Asia and America. We also find experiences of ecumenical dialogue. Nevertheless, we believe that reflection and missionary daring in this area could be improved.

In many Units, the Mission to Youth is integrated into and often strongly influenced by vocation recruitment programs. Others, since the Chapter, are trying to find a better definition of the links and specific differences between these two missionary activities. Once again we mention the link that exists between the Mission to Youth and that which is being done for children and families.

Chapter 3. Community, Unit: programs.

Witnessing to Hope, numbers 19 and 20
(*The Chapter further recommends, and invites...*)

19. Each apostolic community to:

19.1 ensure that ministry to the youth be a

community endeavor rather than an individual initiative;

19.2 develop a missionary project oriented to youth, with a specific person appointed to animate this.

20. Each Oblate Unit to:

20.1 establish a mission plan for the youth;

20.2 emphasize the personal accompaniment of youth as an important ministry and sensitize and train Oblates for that ministry;

20.3 include mission to youth in the period of regency in first formation;

20.4 collaborate with others working with youth

This is one of the topics where there are bigger differences between the statements of the General Chapter and the reality in the Units that replied to this questionnaire. Most of the replies say that Mission to Youth is a priority in their Unit, and even most of the Units with an Immense Hope Project or something similar name this as one of the most important priorities. However, it is a minority of these Units that have full time personnel assigned to this mission or an Oblate who coordinates this mission in the Province or works in province programs. A question presents itself spontaneously: is it a real priority or just a formal statement?

If we say this at the Unit level (Province, Delegation or Mission), we must say the same even more strongly at the level of the local communities. Communities with a definite youth mission project are exceptions. The good news is that some communities have such a project (in some Provinces it is even asked that it be part of the community project in each house) and we find some communities whose only project is Mission to Youth. In this regard, it is interesting to learn of their programs, their reflections and their development.

In spite of the above, there is a great creativity and diversity of missionary responses. We also find a certain daring in some of the experiences and all of them show the desire to reach the most abandoned, according to each one's circumstances. In other words, there is a desire to change from a *youth*

ministry to a *mission*, where all the activities would be directed toward those who have not yet received the message and to get those young people who are closer to our communities involved in this “outward” movement, which is also a seed for change.

In other words, there are a number of very “charismatic” Oblates who are promoting a new way of living and carrying out the Mission to Youth. What can be done so that, while giving freedom to these Oblates, we have at the institutional level the support, the reflection and the quest for stability and durability of the experiences they promote? How can we bring about discernment at the community and Provincial levels?

We have received very detailed programs which will be made available. It appears that in those Units which free a person exclusively for this work of Mission to Youth, there are community programs and cooperation developing within the Unit itself. It is also interesting to find that where Oblates coordinate the Unit’s mission, there is better team work, as well as better collaboration with lay people and other youth ministers. Where no one has been freed for this, or at least someone has been designated for this purpose, the work depends more on each one’s creativity, and there is no serious evaluation and reflection on this mission. We need to reflect on whether or not we should be missionaries in a more programmatic and measurable way, if we state this as our present and future missionary option.

Chapter 4. Regional or International Coordination.

Witnessing to Hope, numbers 21 and 22.
(*The Chapter further recommends, and invites...*)

21. Each Oblate Region to:

21.1 coordinate Unit youth initiatives; and create and support international communities of Oblates in strategic places (as in Lourdes).

22. The General Council to:

22.1 organize, together with the Regions, an International Congress on Mission to Youth (in order to promote sharing of information and dialogue, with youth, espe-

cially those who work with us, as our collaborators);

22.2 create a portfolio or service at the level of the General Administration for Mission to Youth.

When asking about the Regional and Congregational levels, respondents expressed wishes and needs. The first need expressed is the sharing of information. There seems to be the greatest insistence in this regard.

A few point to international collaboration that exists in specific programs. Such experiences have a positive value and there is a desire to continue developing this kind of program. There is a desire to know and collaborate in what is going on in nearby Units. Some see the following as possible complications: finances, cultural diversity, different missionary objectives, etc.

On the regional level, there is only one Region that has an “institutional response:” a regional Commission for Mission to Youth. In this commission, they share the experiences of the different Units, they invite the Oblates and the youth to take part in the experiences of other Provinces, and they have developed some common projects. Some are asking for the creation of a sort of regional coordination office for their own Region, while others mention the difficulties of this kind of regional coordination: time, money, and travel.

The General Administration’s initiative should help to coordinate the response to the first need that was mentioned, namely, facilitating the sharing and exchange of information on what is being done, as well as collaboration. Some also would like animation and formation, as well as the creation by the General Administration of an office or a portfolio, as requested by the General Chapter. While the majority is in favor of an International Congress, others see many difficulties in doing so.

At this point, a long road is still ahead of us. While a desire to take these first steps is mentioned, few concrete ideas are provided. Perhaps the Regional collaboration experiences in other aspects of the Oblate life and mission might help find the most

adapted resources for each case.

Chapter 5. Summary of challenges.

When comparing the real situation in the Units that replied to the statements in the documents of the General Chapter, some challenges arise regarding the Mission to Youth. We would like to present a summary here.

1. The need to be closer to young people. We need to acquire a better knowledge of their world and discover (and help them to discover) their values. In this regard, we feel it is urgent to have a definitive (and scientific) study on young peoples' reality in order to be able to identify their needs in a better way and improve our response to these missionary calls. We believe it is important to develop the qualities required by the Oblates so they can **be with** the youth and walk the Gospel road with them.

2. Facilitate the formation of Oblates: It is a commonly believed that just because someone is young, he is prepared for this mission; this is not the case. Formation is especially needed in order afford to each young person a personalized companionship. We should promote specific formation that is very practical, but which requires its own time and quality.

3. Identify and promote Oblate values: We believe that it is urgent that we identify those Oblate values that serve the Mission to Youth. Once we have identified them, then we can study how to develop them.

A second point has to do with our relationship with young people. We have seen how some of them want to associate themselves with our charism or live and cooperate more intensely with the Oblate mission. Although it is impossible to offer the same response to all the different situations (even the concrete ideas we have received are amazingly broad and diverse), we believe that some common reflection is needed in order to allow the young people themselves to respond to a possible association with Oblate life and mission.

4. Collaboration with other youth ministers:

Even though this is recognized as a value, it seems to us that only a few do it in a systematic and organized way and they find it lessened when this collaboration reaches an institutional level. We believe that there are good experiences that could be shared and that could improve cooperation with the laity, other religious and different social or ecclesiastical agents. It is worthy of note to call attention to collaborative experiences with other religious or other Christian Churches.

The second aspect is the extent of the role we give the youth in this mission. If the ideal is that youth have a role to play in the Mission to Youth, we believe that we must go deeper by reflecting and finding the resources for an effective implementation.

4. Implementing our major statements. If all the Provinces state that Mission to Youth is a priority, they should accordingly implement policies consistent with that statement, policies that at least include: personnel dedicated to this mission; concrete and measurable programs; and the possibility of coordination at the Unit level. From those minimal steps, they should move toward the implementation of the ideals of the Chapter on the level of the local community.

5. Animate missionary daring. The work done must be appreciated, but in order to revitalize this mission, we deem it necessary to raise the call for missionary daring, for taking risks in order to get in touch with the most abandoned. This includes the need to define the role of the new media of social communications, where, as it is noted, there are few initiatives found among the Oblates.

6. Cooperation among Units: There is still a long way to go in order to increase the cooperation among Units. They would need to clarify their needs and find the appropriate way to achieve them. "On site" knowledge of the different experiences would have to be encouraged. From that, where possible, there could be collaboration and coordination of activities; one could study the feasibility and usefulness of creating structures for this. We need to be creative in exchanging formation, reflections and experiences.

7. Congregational Level. Needs are being identi-

fied at this level, but practical proposals have not been found. Future reflection is called for. For example, the General Administration is asked to coordinate the interchange of information (some even request personnel exchange), to animate and form

Oblates, and to provide financial assistance. We will need to discover how to do this and if this will really help improve the quality and effectiveness in the Mission to Youth. The experiences of other religious Congregations can be enlightening for us.

Part Two:

Directory; Replies received (see www.omiworld.org)

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