

Witness to the World

**Fr. Wilhelm Steckling, OMI
Superior General
International Oblate Youth Encounter 2008
Melbourne, Australia
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At big sport events, television often broadcasts interviews with an athlete right after the match. Why do the media like that? The champion is perspiring, or she is still catching her breath – why not wait until after they have had a shower? The reporters don't seem to care - what the media want to show is the excitement of the game and the passion involved. In other words, they are not going for a distanced, very objective report – they want to interview a witness with fresh impressions.

The theme of this international Oblate youth encounter2008 is about witnessing. More precisely it reads: "Witness to the World". In truth, the whole world is represented here, right here in this group and even more so at the bigger events of World Youth Day. The reality is that: The whole world wants to look at us, but it does not want to see reserved and distanced people, it expects witnesses. Are we excited about something? Are we passionate about something? This is the time to bring it out! Pope John Paul said in his mission encyclical: "People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories. The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission"¹.

Now, we may have a question: How do I become a witness? I am already a Christian and I have my convictions – but am I a witness? Is it even possible that I become one? I think the answer is "yes" because the theme of World Youth Day in Sydney contains a promise: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;

and you will be my witnesses" (*Acts 1:8*). Let us look at this as the first point of this keynote address.

As a second item we will turn to the world that surrounds us. Witness to the world – but how does this world look like, especially if we see it from the point of view of the Oblate charism?

After that, in a third and last step, we may ask ourselves a further question: what will I be a witness about? What is it that I am expected to transmit to the world, content-wise?

I will speak about all of this from an Oblate perspective and with a look at the whole Oblate Congregation present in 67 countries, since this is the International Oblate Youth Encounter 2008 and we are at the Festival of the Oblate Charism.

I. Could I become a witness?

A Christian will be a witness only if there has been an experience of Christ in their life. A witness speaks about things that actually happened to him or her, and of which he or she is convinced. For instance, the apostles and Mary had seen the Risen Christ, so they could not keep quiet about it. That is the **first** step in order to become a witness, an experience of God in Christ.

Our Oblate charism came to into existence when St. Eugene at the age of 25 experienced Christ on a Good Friday. He wept bitterly about his sins and at the same time shed tears of joy because of the love he felt. Before that, he had already gone through many other things: becoming a

¹ *Redemptoris Missio* 42

refugee as a child, feeling bored in exile as a lonely adolescent, enjoying parties sponsored by his friends in Sicily, making plans to marry back in France, the divorce of his parents, the difficulty to make sense out of all this. All this happened to St. Eugene.

There is a difference between things that simply happen and true experience. To some people things just happen and they do not learn, they do not reflect on it. This can break a person. Experiences need to be processed, digested and ultimately to be exposed to the sight of God. What others did to me may look ugly and I may not look very brilliant in my way of reacting to it. However, I can make it a worthwhile experience and even an experience of God if I show it to God. That is what Eugene de Mazenod had been struggling with several times before that Good Friday. Then suddenly the liturgy spoke to him and the breakthrough came about. He confessed his sins and the events of his life issued into an even stronger encounter with Christ the Savior.

On the basis of this he could become a witness to what he had seen and heard. We read the same in the Bible, in the First letter of John: "... what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands ... for the life was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it ... what we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you" (*1 Jn 1:1-3*).

There is a **second** step after the experience of God in Christ. The apostles and Mary and the other disciples had seen the Risen Christ on Easter Sunday but they did not become active witnesses immediately. They first needed to be empowered, and to reach empowerment took 50 full days. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses" is the theme of World Youth Day. We need a special gift of the Holy Spirit to become witnesses.

This special gift is also called "charism" and there are many different charisms of the Holy Spirit. You are here as Oblate youth, attracted by one of the Spirit's gifts, which is the Oblate charism. A reality that took shape gradually

after St. Eugene's experience of God on that Good Friday, its development took some time. More and more he felt empowered to work with the poor, the domestic servants, the prisoners. He started a youth movement with hundreds of members, very committed people. Finally he was able to transmit this power, this charism to a group of companions, when in 1816 he founded the Oblate Congregation.

Could I be empowered like that? Of course I can – in our Christian life this happens through the Sacrament of Confirmation. Yes, it is possible – the Holy Spirit is also for me, and everyone must hear its call, everyone has a vocation to be a witness, in his or her own way.

At the core of the Oblate Congregation, there appears a **third** element in the process of becoming a witness, and that is the beautiful surprise: as a witness I will never be alone. Remaining alone I would not last long, but the Spirit always creates a community to support and to challenge me. Pope Benedict says in his message to this World Youth Day: "Apostolic and missionary fruitfulness is not principally due to programs and pastoral methods that are cleverly drawn up and 'efficient', but is the result of the community's constant prayer." That was the case in the Upper Room on Pentecost; that happened when the Oblate charism came into being and it is repeated whenever the Church celebrates the Eucharist. The promise of Christ does not say: you will be my witness, but: "you will be my witnesses", in plural.

Personally, I Wilhelm Steckling, would hardly have become a missionary without the support and the challenge of the community, and in the case of the Oblates, this community feels like a good family that encourages me and sometimes pushes me.

So, now we already know how to become a witness: experiencing God in our life, getting empowered by the Holy Spirit and finding the support of a group, a community. But this is only the initial stage of the journey, although it would already be enough reason to be part of Oblate youth. But we cannot stop there, the

Holy Spirit, Spirit of Fortitude and Witness, pushes us beyond. Pope Benedict tells us in his WYD message: “Never forget that the Church, in fact humanity itself, all the people around you now and those who await you in the future, expect much from you young people, because you have within you the supreme gift of the Father, the Spirit of Jesus.” What else can the world expect from us?

The world of today is very critical and demanding. Our witness will have to take a special shape according to the context we live in. Let us reflect on this as the next step.

II. “Witness to the world” - which world?

After we have awakened to become witnesses, we will look at the world that surrounds us with new eyes. First of all we will experience its beauty, its enormous richness and potential. Many of you have made a long, long trip to get here; you have flown over countries you knew only by hearsay. At this youth encounter we have many countries represented. Let us appreciate the different cultures, enjoy them and let us praise God for them. We are different in so many ways – for instance when we greet each other: passing hands, or just bowing, or with a greeting. We are different in many other regards, too: an African family is not the same as a North American or European one and in Asia’s kitchens other food is cooked than in Latin America. Also the music, song and dance of this group must be full of variety. There is so much goodness in this, so much beauty and potential for a bright future of this planet.

We have also been in touch with the problems of other countries and the injustices in the world, and perhaps right here young people are present from a country I have taken special interest in and I want to know what they feel and how they think. We are a very privileged group in that we could make it to Australia to meet each other, and I believe that this in itself carries a big responsibility with it.

When looking at the problems let us do so in the spirit of the Oblate charism. The Rulebook of

the Congregation says that we look at the world through the eyes of the crucified savior. He is crucified, but we believe that he also saves.

The statistics about the world’s problems are well known and I quote just a handful of them.

- By 2050, the UN says, there may be 3.5 billion slum-dwellers out of a total urban population of about six billion. More than half of our cities will consist of slums.
- The number of nations described as least developed has increased from 25 in 1970 to 49 today. The number of poor nations has doubled since 1970!
- Again, half of the world — nearly three billion people — live on less than two dollars a day.
- Half of the world’s children live in poverty.
- And finally, in Europe alone, officials estimate that more than 200,000 women and girls are smuggled out of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics each year, into modern forms of slavery, especially prostitution.

How do we deal with all this? My reaction is always to realize that I live on a small island of prosperity. I am lucky, but I feel strongly that I owe myself to the people around who do not live on this island. We owe ourselves to the poor; “they are our masters”, Saint Vincent de Paul would say. I has been said that “Nobody gets to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor!” This axiom is attributed to Rev. James Forbes, the protestant pastor of Riverside Church in New York City.

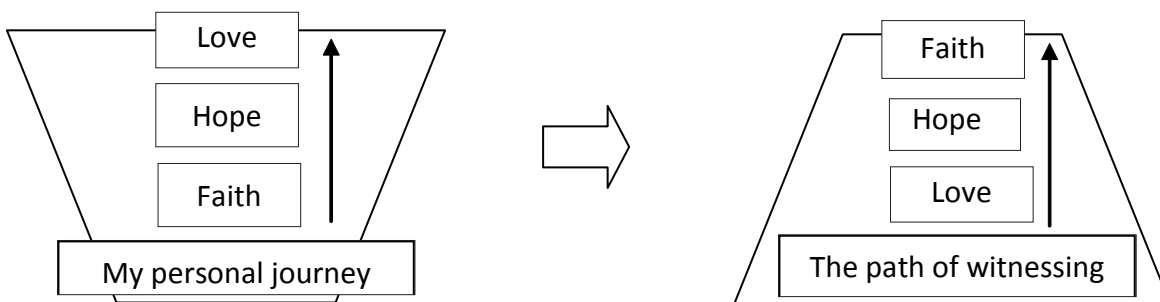
The temptation is of course to just give up when faced with the magnitude of these problems. Pope Benedict writes in the message already quoted above: “Many young people view their lives with apprehension and raise many questions about their future. They anxiously ask: How can we fit into a world marked by so many grave injustices and so much suffering? How should we react to the selfishness and violence that sometimes seem to prevail? How can we give full meaning to life?”

One thing is true: with its lights and shadows, this is the world into which we have been born, and it is here and nowhere else that we are called to be witnesses.

III. Witness to the world – through faith, hope and love

We now come to the third question: In my witness to the world, what will I be a witness about? What am I going to say? What is it that I am expected to transmit to people?

To make it simple, I propose that we use the three Christian virtues, faith, hope and love. However, we will inverse the order. On our personal journey we probably start with faith, move on to hope and finally become loving people. To witness to the world we might want to start with love, because that is the language everybody understands; then we will try to bring in hope and at the end share the faith that inspires us. In all of this, Christian tradition tells us that faith, hope and love come directly from God; if they are present in us it means that God’s Holy Spirit dwells in us.



1. Witness to Love

Love and friendship are universal languages; this witness, as I just said, is easily accepted and understood. It has two sides to it: that we are good friends within our group, I mean as Christians among ourselves, and that we have a heart for others outside. In both aspects the Oblate charism seems to contain something special; among us there is a family spirit, a simplicity that we have inherited from St. Eugene – that was his style. And towards those outside, we have a clear bias: the preference of the most abandoned and the poor.

Let us talk about this first, about the love of the poor. Eugene was a man of compassion. For instance in the prison of Aix, he would spend the night with those condemned to death. He also risked his life for the sick Austrian soldiers in the prison camp of Aix, when he contracted typhus there and almost died. His youth groups prayed for him intensively and he was cured. There are many examples for this preference for the most abandoned throughout the history of Oblate mission, the outreach to Northern Canada not being the least. Some of the missionaries have given their entire lives for just a few hundred of first nation’s people, or Indians and Eskimos as they were called.

There is a little story that describes well the preferences of the Oblate charism though it speaks of someone else. I got it from Fr. Ron Rolheiser and it is about the founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth. During a war a lot of people didn’t get enough food and a group of ministers of churches, many of them hungry themselves gathered to discuss how to distribute the small amount of food that they had. It was understood that each church was supposed to

take care of its own. The local Episcopal rector rose up and said: “My church follow me!” The Presbyterian minister rose and said: “Mine follow me!” And the other denominations did the same. But there were still a lot of people left over. Then William Booth stood up and said: “All of you who don’t belong to anybody follow me!” That could have been Saint Eugene as well!

We may have one doubt concerning the compassion for the poor and most abandoned. It is said, and rightly so, that it is not enough to give a fish to a poor person, it would be

better to teach people how to fish and even to help them to regain ownership of the river. It will be important to acknowledge that Christian love also cares for changing the world and its unjust structures. We will come to that when we will speak about hope. But for the change of structures to happen, at the beginning there must be genuine compassion and love. There is another saying that goes: Think globally, act locally. Yes, let us think globally about the 50% of mankind that live on 2\$ a day but let us also act locally with those in need who cannot wait until we will be able to change the structures.

Love for people seems not be able to change the big world – but who knows? Christian love witnesses to the respect God has for us and to the forgiveness and mercy we have experienced in Christ – and this respect and compassion helps people to recognize their own worth and it brings them to their feet. Low self-esteem, self-hatred is often the reason why the poor do not lift up their heads – others call them outcasts, treat them like slaves and the poor themselves end up seeming themselves exactly like this, as unworthy people. They need the encouragement our love brings to them. Does this ring a bell to those of us who know the sermon of St. Eugene which he preached one day to the poor? “The poor of Jesus Christ, the afflicted and wretched, the sick and suffering and covered with sores, etc., whom misery overwhelms, my brethren, my dear brethren, my dear 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...”.

You will know better than I do how this can be applied to youth work, in which you are involved; how friendship can be shown especially to those who need it most. There will be time for reflecting on this in groups.

I am firmly convinced that this first type of witness to the world, a witness of compassionate love is highly effective even though it first makes a difference only on the level of the microcosm. It starts just with our neighbor – like in the story of the Good Samaritan. It is quality what counts in the first place, not the quantity of

achievements – the quantity comes later.

In addition, the witness to love has a test to undergo, and that is community. Compassion for those outside will only be authentic if we are also capable of being good friends among ourselves. Today’s apostles of Christ must undergo this test like the first apostles who often had to overcome their disagreements. Here the microcosm becomes even smaller since we deal with a small world of people whom we only know too well. In his letters, St. Eugene insists often on the quality of relationships in the groups, in the communities. Love, if also lived in community speaks loudly to people. People will say about us what was remarked about the first Christians: see how they love each other.

Being witness to the world starts in these two places: in the compassionate love for those in need and in the friendship among the companions of Christ.

2. Witness to Hope

Hope gives love a further dimension to our witness to the world, it carries us, one could say, from the microcosm to the macro level. Love with time kindles new hope in people – they start believing that things can be different.

Where does our hope come from? The big horizon of hope which the first Christians were not shy to speak about, is the new heaven and the new earth, it is the **Kingdom** of God that will come. It will come no more in hidden ways as when Christ was born but openly, similar to the lightning that flashes from one end

The Goals

- 1 Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- 2 Achieve universal primary education
- 3 Promote gender equality and empower women
- 4 Reduce child mortality
- 5 Improve maternal health
- 6 Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- 7 Ensure environmental sustainability
- 8 Develop a global partnership for development

of the sky to the other. Christians live in hope for the second coming of Christ, and therefore they have no problems to expect changes even now on a smaller scale. Therefore they work, for instance, trying to achieve the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): reduce poverty, bring education, empower women, defeat malaria and Aids, and so forth. Our witness of hope should give others the impression that we Christians somehow “know” and are sure that things will change.

In St. Eugene’s life we find this virtue reflected in the spirit of **daring**. “Nothing is to be left undared” he used to say. He had about 40 Oblates in 1840 and they were already overstretched, but he dared to send them to Canada, to Ireland, to Sri Lanka, to South Africa – and it happened that 20 years later their number, as if by miracle, had increased to 400. Surely he and the first Oblates were men of hope, and they dared to cross borders to spread out this hope everywhere.

How can we live according to this hope today? A particular way to express hope today is **solidarity**. Solidarity means that our spontaneous compassion with people, our feelings of friendship will go beyond short-lived emotions. Let me give an example. In larger cities you often find young people at the traffic lights eager to clean the windscreens of cars, or to sell something. The first thing we owe to them is our compassion; let us not be harsh to them even if we cannot accept their services every time; occasionally we may allow them to earn some coins. Solidarity goes beyond this initial gesture of compassion. To build up solidarity we would have to come back to the traffic lights another day when we have enough time, we would ask these people how and where they live. Later maybe we would find ourselves struggling with them for their rights as immigrants and human persons.

Here in Australia there is an Oblate organization called ‘Rosies’; their members are on the street many nights during the year to meet people with problems, offer them a cup of tea but also to walk with them in solidarity in many ways. All over the world Oblates and people inspired by Saint Eugene are active for justice, reconciliation,

peace and the integrity of creation (JPIC), for instance facing the situation of war in Sri Lanka or defending the rights of tribal people in Bangladesh, and their solidarity brings them as far as the United Nations in New York where we maintain a regular presence.

Solidarity is an excellent expression of our hope. Let me give three reasons for it:

- Solidarity witnesses to the fact that we believe in changes – not only at the end of all times, but even now. “A different world is possible” has been the refrain of the recent World Social Forums.
- Solidarity means long term commitment, and that is what people need.
- Solidarity imitates the attitude of Christ who being like God, emptied himself and became human, and voluntarily suffered poverty until his death on a cross.

No wonder that we might not find it so easy to become witnesses to hope through solidarity. Do we earnestly believe in changes if, on the contrary, poverty is increasing and violence spreading? Are we ready for long-term commitments? Are we ready for voluntary poverty like Christ, and to risk our lives? Let us not forget that the word ‘witness’ is a New Testament Greek word which means ‘martyr’. We have before us the example of many Oblates who died a violent death in the exercise of their mission: Blessed Jozef Cebula from Poland, Bishop Benjamin de Jesus and Fathers Benjamin Inocencio and Rey Roda from the Philippines, Mauricio Levevre in Bolivia, Mario Borzaga in Laos, Bishop Yves Plumey and Fr. Allard Mmako in Africa and there are more, about 65 in total.

Using the language of Oblate spirituality we would say that solidarity requires a spirit of **oblation**. The word means “offering”. Besides Christ, the highest example is Mary Immaculate. She made a complete offering of herself when she said her ‘yes’ to God’s plan for her. In our spirituality, oblation means accordingly: to give one’s whole life to God’s plans. Oblation means to dare, to dream the impossible dream of solidarity. It also means to

accept the consequences, which is martyrdom in the extreme cases, but normally consists of apostolic poverty. I do not speak here of the vow the Oblates make but of the spirituality of poverty which comes from Christ's example. The Bible says of Christ that "he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." (2 Cor 8:9). Therefore witnesses also share their time and their resources with the poor, share their concerns and some of their poverty.

Is our meeting here, "*International Oblate Youth Encounter*" an act of solidarity? Yes, it is because you have come out of your comfort zones, you have made big efforts and sacrifices to come here and meet young people from all over the world becoming aware of all the challenges the world faces. This solidarity will give hope to the world. But it must not stop here. The solidarity must continue after the event, it should lead from education to action as someone has said. "The first act of solidarity is the willingness to be educated even when the information makes one uncomfortable. The second challenging task is to find ways to do something about the knowledge one gains."²

3. Witness to Faith

The witness to faith might be a hard one to give, at least in certain circumstances. Love is understood by all, hope is also readily accepted by many – but witness to faith? Think of those of you who live in certain countries where conversion to Christianity is considered a crime. Think of secularized cultures where the Church does not have a good press at all. Then, there are many who say that we must not force our convictions on others. Pope Benedict states in his message in preparation of world youth day 2008: "There are those who think that to present the precious treasure of faith to people who do not share it means being intolerant towards them, but this is not the case, because to present Christ is not to impose Him." Pope Benedict makes an important point here: to present Christ is not

to impose him. We can be sure that Christ still calls and sends out apostles today because he wants everybody to know that he is alive and not dead. Our witness to the world is ultimately to a living person and not only to a doctrine or a set of high but impersonal values.

It should be clear to us: sometimes we must also share the reason of our hope and love and show the countenance of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and the powerful acting of the Holy Spirit. We must openly proclaim the name of Jesus Christ. However, the moment needs to be right. It is a question of timing. When is it that we are supposed to witness to faith? The time will be ripe whenever people ask us: "why are you doing all this?" In some circumstances we will have to wait almost our whole life before we are asked this question and are enabled to speak up. St. Peter says: "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope". (1 Pe 3:15).

But when the question is asked, our answer then will be: we are able to love each other and to be friends to all because we know that God has loved us first; we can be exuberant with hope because we already expect the moment when Christ will return to the earth and make all things new. Through our witnessing to love and hope the moment will come to give witness to faith. This will be the climax of our mission. We have received the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Fortitude and Witness. Once we start our witness to faith the gifts of the Spirit can be multiplied. We do not want to keep God's power jealously for ourselves; we want to hand over to people this power and even the keys to the whole powerhouse.

IV. Conclusion

Witness to the world – at the beginning we asked ourselves whether we are capable of becoming witnessing Christians, and we said yes. We become so, step by step: First, God speaks to each of us personally and in unique ways; we need only to listen. God will then

² **Catholic Update**, *What Catholics should know about solidarity*, June 2007

empower us with the Holy Spirit, and thirdly, there will be a group of other witnesses around us. We then wondered in what our witness would consist. We found out: it is about love, hope and faith. Love, because our witness is to start from a compassionate heart for those in need and must be accompanied by harmony in the group of our friends; hope, which has to do with a determined, daring mind and tends to show long-term solidarity like Christ showed solidarity with us up to the end; and finally faith, because witnessing ideally should conclude with giving away the keys to the powerhouse of our faith.

I had been asked to look at the theme “Witness to the World” from the perspective of the Oblate

Congregation. You will soon be listening to five young people who will speak about Witness to the World in their Region, in their continent, and finally you will reflect in groups on your personal view, which is the most important part. All this will flow into the Congress on Oblate Youth Ministry scheduled right after World Youth Day, still here in Australia. It is the first of its kind and so we expect a lot from you, to show us how to bring young people to fullness of life.

Later on, when we will have returned home, our being witness to the world will really begin.

Thank you.

Fr. Wilhelm Steckling, OMI
Superior General

Closing Statement of the International Oblate Congress on Mission with Youth

On July 21-25, 2008, about 50 Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Lay Partners and Youth Representatives, along with members of the General Administration, gathered in Sydney, Australia, to re-emphasize the importance of ministry with young people at the First International Oblate Congress on Mission with Youth.

The words of Saint Eugene in the Rule of 1818, “*leading young people will be considered as an essential task in our institute,*” make clear to us that this ministry belongs to the charism of our Congregation. Recently, the Chapter of 2004 stated again that it is an authentic Oblate ministry by adding it to Rule 7b.

We were grateful to the Congregations’ leadership for the opportunity to come together to further the work accomplished by the 34th General Chapter and the Intercapitular Meeting of 2007. Blessed by the participation of representatives of the whole Congregation, this Congress gave us an opportunity to reflect on how we share our charism and mission with youth.

The mission with youth has become crucial now. *Witnessing to Hope* mentioned the “widespread poverty of today’s youth.” Indeed, they face the secularism, individualism and consumerism of the current culture of globalization. But at the 2004 Chapter, we also expressed the confidence that youth have an “enormous capacity to transform the situation” (WTH 17). They are not merely the future of the Church and humanity; they are also the present. Reading the signs of the times and responding to the needs of our mission, as Oblates, we want to leave nothing undared and we take up the challenge to walk with youth.

They challenge us in various ways. Listening to their expectations, we sense a strong call to be

personally faithful to living our lives in such a way that we truly give flesh to our Oblate values; we also feel called to open our communities (and not only our buildings) to youth. We must invite them to participate in the mission to which Jesus Christ has called us.

This statement on our mission with youth as a priority must translate itself into programs, personnel and finances. We have discerned some areas of mission with youth that need our attention as members of the Oblate Family:

- We have especially heard the challenge to renew our mission in parishes, schools and educational centres. We want to be especially at the service of marginalized and abandoned youth. In all of those places, we want to see new forms of evangelization, using methods through which we can share our responsibilities with the young themselves.
- We must be attentive to those young people who wish to share our charism in a deeper way. Therefore we must make available adequate means to share with them the charism of St. Eugene, creating programs for the formation and association of those young people who might feel especially called to work with us.
- Collaboration with everyone is a priority and should happen at all levels (local, provincial, regional and congregational). We believe that the local level should be first and foremost, and in addition, we also propose a better coordination of efforts on the interprovincial and regional levels.

- Finally, we have felt the necessity of preparing ourselves adequately as Oblate missionaries in order to respond to these challenges. We believe that every Oblate, during his first formation, should be initiated into this ministry and learn how to be a personal companion to youth on their road to maturity. Those who have been specifically assigned to youth ministry should help in this by giving scholastics and Brothers an adequate and thorough formation.

Mindful of the influence of new technology in youth culture, we have tried to take a first step by committing ourselves to collaborate in the new web page dedicated to our mission with youth in our Oblate family. It can be found under www.omiyouth.org. We will publish there all of the official documents of this Congress and, in the future, we will share our experiences, our dreams and our concerns.

We hope that the Holy Spirit will inspire us so that we may prayerfully reflect on the Congress' wishes and proposals and find ways to give them life in our local communities and Units and in the Congregation at large. The time has come to pass from the written word to concrete action.

May the youth continue to inspire us as they did in Australia during the International Oblate Youth Encounter, the World Youth Day and the First International Oblate Congress on Mission with Youth. May we learn to listen to the young generations and accompany them as did St. Eugene de Mazenod. And may we learn from Mary Immaculate, who is ever young, how to give an adequate response in evangelizing youth, especially the most abandoned among them.

We greet you in the Name of Jesus Christ,

The participants of the First International
Oblate Congress on Mission with Youth

OMI DOCUMENTATION is an unofficial publication
of the General Administration of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate
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