



DE INFORMATION UND ERLEBENIS UNZ VERSTÄNDLICHE DIE SCHRIFTEN DIE WERDEN

OMI Documentation No. 290 (English)

December 2009

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Foreword

Father Oswald Firth, OMI, Assistant General in charge of the Mission Portfolio for the Central Government, has asked several Oblates to write brief essays on the topic of “Mission” from the perspective of their own experiences and expertise. This issue of *OMI Documentation* is the second in a series that will appear in the course of time.

The author of the first essay is **Fr. Jarosław Róžański, OMI**. He was born in 1961 in Biłgoraj, Poland; he is an Oblate, priest, missiologist and Africanist. He studied at the Oblate Scholasticate in Obra, Poland (1981-1987). In 1991, he finished studies of Polish language and literature at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. From 1991-1993, he ministered in Northern Cameroon. He also spent a few months in 1995-96 in the missions on the eastern coast of Madagascar. In 1996, he finished his studies in missiology at the Academy of Catholic Theology (now the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University) in Warsaw, where, in 1998, he defended his doctoral dissertation. In 2004 he received the state doctorate (habilitation). He is the author and the editor of a dozen books and many articles. Among his books (all in Polish) are: *Missions and the promotion* (Warsaw, 2001), *Inculturation of the Church among the peoples of central Sudan* (Poznań, 2004), *About the concept of inculturation* (Warsaw 2008).

From 1987 to 2004, he was a member of the board of *Misyjne Drogi* (a Polish Province periodical). Since October 1999, he has been a member of the Theological Faculty of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw where he is the director of Missiology Department and holds the History of Missions chair. In 2005-2008, he was Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Theology (about 2000 students). In 2001-2008, he was a member of OMI European Mission Bureau (Conférence Européenne de la Mission); since 1998, he has been a member of the Committee of the Polish Episcopate on Dialogue with Non-Christian Religions. Since 2002 has also been vice-president of the Polish Africanist Society.

The author of the second essay is **Fr. David N. Power, OMI**. Born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1932, he is Professor Emeritus of the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America, where he taught from 1977 to 2000. Prior to that, he taught at the Oblate scholasticate in Piltown from 1957 to 1971 as well as at the Milltown Institute of Philosophy and Theology, Dublin, and at Maynooth Major Seminary. During those years, he served as superior of the Oblate scholasticate; after that, he was also superior of the International Scholasticate in Rome. While in the Eternal City, he taught at the Gregorian University and St Thomas Aquinas University. He has been a visiting professor at St. Paul University, Ottawa; Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio (USA); St John's University, Collegeville (USA), and at seminaries in Tahiti and South Africa (Cedara). Twice he was visiting lecturer at the East Asian Pastoral Institute in Manila, Philippines. He has also lectured in Australia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. He is the author of 12 books and has preached Oblate retreats in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the Philippines, the United States, Japan, Southern Africa, and the Anglo-Irish province.

On Oblate mission today in the face of challenges in Eastern Europe

By Fr. Jarosław Róžański, OMI

The subject formulated in this way points to three dimensions for reflection: reference to the tradition of the Congregation, in particular to the legacy of St Eugene de Mazenod, taking into account the current situation of the mission and also the particular place in which the mission takes place. I will begin the reflections from the third dimension--the changes in Eastern Europe, so that in this way I can underline that which was always central to the Oblate Charism: the challenge for our evangelisation is set by a particular place in the world. Here we answer the basic question: how would Jesus Christ Himself react here today? How would his follower St Eugene de Mazenod behave?

Political changes in Eastern Europe after 1989

After World War II, the term “Eastern Europe” covered those countries which were part of the Soviet Union or were clearly under its domination in the Eastern Bloc, e.g., the Baltic States, Poland East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria.

These countries were governed by communist parties, introducing socialist systems into the economy. The ideology of these parties was penetrated by atheism and they battled with religion.

The Communist Governments showed open animosity towards the Catholic Church and all religious organisations, resigning from the most drastic forms of repression only from the fear of open social revolt. The strongest battles with religion were during the nineteen sixties; later, more hidden forms were used, nonetheless clearly discriminatory.

With the influence of social pressure and the solidarity of the Church authorities with the clergy, the most freedom was won by the

Church in Poland, becoming the support for the opposition and democratic changes. The Church in Poland and opposition movements were undoubtedly strengthened after the election of the bishop of Krakow, Karol Wojtyła, to the See of St. Peter in Rome as Pope John Paul II. After his pilgrimage to Poland, the opposition movement gained strength and in particular, the workers, after the mass protests in 1980, formed the first independent trade union, “Solidarity,” in Eastern Europe; it numbered several million people. Among the first postulates of the workers, there were a number of demands for religious freedom. Despite the “Solidarity” Trade Union being made illegal and efforts to silence its activity during the marshal law declared in Poland in 1981, the Union continued to work underground, helped to a large extent by the support of the Catholic Church. In 1989, a compromise was reached between the government and “Solidarity,” leading to partially free parliamentary elections in which the communist party decidedly lost, keeping only those seats which had been reserved by prior agreement. This event began a landslide of radical changes in Poland and also abroad. The symbol of these changes was the fall of the Berlin Wall and the joining of Germany into one country. In the following years, there were changes in the Soviet Union, leading to “perestroika,” which allowed many states which had been an integral part of the Soviet Union to gain independence, including the Baltic States, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldavia.

The situation of society and religion in Eastern Europe today

Today – according to the divisions used by the United Nations – Eastern Europe includes the following countries: Belarus, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Moldavia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine and Hungary.

On May 1 2004 the European Union was expanded by 10 new countries, including countries from Eastern Europe. At that time, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary joined the Union. On January 1 2007, Bulgaria and Romania also joined the European Union. The new countries in the European Union are undergoing rapid economic and political transformation, making their economic, social and political systems similar to those of all members of the Union. This transformation is not sudden and is associated with the weaker economic condition of these countries and a relatively high unemployment rate. However, there is a clear creation of a wide middle class which significantly levels social and economic differences.

The countries in Eastern Europe with the highest populations are Poland (38.2 m) and Romania (21.6 m). As far as religion is concerned, the new countries of the European Union from Eastern Europe are quite different. Some of them came out of communism in quite a good religious condition with regard to Church structures, religious practices and general acknowledgement of the role of faith in private life and its need in social life. Certainly the leading countries are those with a strong Catholic tradition such as Poland and Slovakia. In Poland, the Roman Catholic Church has the leading role (over 90%) next to religious minorities: the Greek Catholic Church, Russian Orthodox, Protestantism and Judaism. In Slovakia, the Catholics form the majority (about 70%) and the minority churches are protestant and orthodox. In these two countries, few people declare themselves to be atheist.

In terms of external declarations, the last "Orthodox" members of the European Union stand out well -- Bulgaria (Orthodox over 80%, Catholics 0.6%) and Romania (Orthodox 87%, Catholics 5.6%). These statistics and declarations differ significantly from the actual engagement of the faithful in religious life and the Church, since the declared faith -- especially in Romania and Bulgaria -- is more a declaration of their cultural or national roots than actual participation in a religious community.

Of the countries not belonging to the European

Union, there are Moldavia with a small population (above 4 m people, with 98% claiming to be Orthodox); Belarus (less than 10 m people, 60% Orthodox, 8% Catholic); Ukraine (47 m people, the great majority Orthodox); and Russia which has a European and Asian part (141m people, about 60% Orthodox, 1% Catholic). The economies of Moldavia, Ukraine and Belarus are strongly dependant on Russia which is politically and economically powerful in the region if not in the world. It has many rich natural resources, especially oil and gas. Also the Ukraine and Russia have a wide economic gap: a very rich oligarchy and a large percentage of the population which is poor. The middle class is hardly developed. A somewhat different economic system operates in Belarus where the president-dictator tries to maintain a state controlled economy.

The Oblates in Poland

Poles began to join the Congregation at the end of the 19th century. Initially, they worked within the framework of the Canadian and German Provinces. After Poland regained its independence, the Oblates settled in Poland, setting up a junior seminary, a novitiate and later, a major seminary. In 1925, the Polish province was established as the sixth Oblate Province in Europe. From that time, the Polish Oblates developed dynamically. In 1939, there were 275 Oblates and 14 Oblate establishments in Poland with many Polish Oblates working in the missions in Canada and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). The development of the Polish Province was halted by the five years of World War II and then the rule of communists in Poland. The Oblates shared the difficult times with the whole nation and any missionary activity was suspended.

In 1945, the Communist government which was imposed on Poland broke off Poland's Concordat with the Holy See. In 1949, they passed a decree dissolving all religious organizations in the country. In 1950, the Catholic charity "Caritas" was closed down. In 1952, the government began open warfare with the Church. Poland's co-operation with the missionary movement was reduced to praying for the missions. In 1956,

relations between the government and the Church relaxed to some extent, but travel to missionary territories was still not considered.

In 1970, after further worker protests, including bloodshed, the communist authorities changed their policies and the Church in Poland gained more freedom. Missionaries were allowed to travel, something that had been a rarity until this time. In 1970, Polish Oblates began their mission in the Cameroun. The Church gained even more freedom after the creation of “Solidarity,” mentioned earlier, and full freedom soon after the political changes in 1989. Diplomatic relations with the Holy See were reestablished. Certainly a big impulse for the life of the Church in Poland was the election to St. Peter’s Chair in Rome of Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, John Paul II. From this time, the Church in Poland experienced an unprecedented increase in vocations to the priesthood.

Generally, it is said that the Church in Poland came out of the communist era much strengthened. Statistics showed the highest number of practicing Catholics and the highest religious awareness. De facto, the situation of the Church in Poland was rather more complex. In practice, many structures and nearly all Church organisations had been destroyed. To a large extent, all publishing activity was paralysed; there was no Catholic radio or television. The laity – very supportive of the Church – stood on the sidelines, badly organised. During the Communist era, the Church was not so much an evangelising community but more a defence of the nation against an aggressive, totalitarian and atheistic state. Even the great changes in the Church arising from the Vatican Council developed very slowly, due to the isolation of the Church by the state. What was certainly a success was the maintenance of parish structures. This was the place for religious and community life.

After 1989, religion was allowed back in schools. The Church began to rebuild its old structures. But it was also met with sharp criticism and a tendency to be discredited in the eyes of society. Beside this, it seems that the Church did not cope with the challenges of a pluralistic society where there is not one “Obvious Enemy” but

where there is a great “market of ideas” of which Christianity is only one of the many propositions.

As in the earlier period – so after 1989- the great authority of the Church in Poland was and is the person who is the Pope. Certainly John Paul II helped to strengthen this authority. Hence the saying “Roma locuta – causa finita” has such power in Poland today. Among the clergy and theologians there is a predilection to base everything primarily on papal texts or other official Church documents.

Religious life in Poland continues to thrive; however, it is not without its paradoxes, e.g., a rather free treatment of articles of faith and moral principles. However, compared with the rest of Europe, there is still a surprising percent of people regularly practicing their faith. It is also surprising that there is still a large number of vocations, with the peak in 1987 (the number of students in seminaries was 9 thousand). At present, the dynamism of vocations is falling, partly due to the demographic crisis but not only that. There is a noticeable falling off of religiosity among young people, and also a large number of broken homes, something that does not bode well for the awakening of priestly and religious vocations.

Even though there is no shortage of priests, there is a fast developing home grown movement of the laity and of organisations existing in the Church in Western Europe. This effort of the laity is focussed on the deepening of religious life, charitable works and education, rather than replacing the priest in his priestly function.

This summary characterisation of the Church in Poland says much about the dynamics and approach to the church of Polish Oblates. They experienced the ups and downs of the Church together with all the Polish clergy and the nation. They took part in all the elation and weaknesses of the Church. This is why the characteristic mark in the thinking and formation of Polish Oblates can be seen as arising from the “experience of history”.

This “experience of history” has clearly shown that great threats to faith and the church can be overcome by faithfulness to the tradition of the

Church described by the Holy See. It was also important to be close to the people, particularly the poorest inhabitants of the country and the workers, since their support saved the Church and allowed it to live also materially. At the time when the Church was excluded from social life, its main activity was the parish and spiritual activity mainly associated with the parish church. This was the model of a “defensive priesthood”. The formation in seminaries was focused in this direction, putting emphasis on personal holiness and parish activities confined mainly to the parish church grounds and the presbytery. With this, there developed a clear stance of service to those who came to the church and the presbytery. There was a lack of initiative and few examples of moving “outside” “to the world”. Ideas flowing from the Church in Western Europe – which could be implemented after 1989 – were not sufficiently attractive, particularly since the period after Vatican II is seen in Poland as a period decline of these Churches. Their ideas lack conviction because they are not supported by the “experience of history”, particularly, since the Church was closest to the very poor. Those ideas seemed to show no understanding of the requirements of the Holy See – and the Pope; they demonstrated an abandonment of religious symbols (e.g. clerical dress); a disregard for liturgical regulations in the sacraments, in particular Holy Mass; left wing social views, etc. Hence the ideas of the Western European Church are seen rather as new “dangers”.

In recent years, the attitude of Polish priests, including the Oblates, are more varied, with more understanding and positive attitudes towards the Western European Church. However, the old attitudes do remain, and so there seems to be a tendency to be locked into their “own individual world” or “local Oblate world” without the former strong contact with people (in particular, workers and rural communities) and the local Church. Hope lies in the solid work of the older Oblates and the initiatives of some of the younger ones.

Today the Polish Province of the Oblates has impressive statistics. In 2006 there were 477 Oblates whose average age was 43.85. Of these, 336 were in Poland and 141 assigned

to missionary work. In Poland, they work in 21 communities, including 16 parishes. Some Oblates are chaplains in hospitals, in the army, and convents; others work as lecturers at universities. The Polish delegation in Europe has 43 Oblates in France, Belgium and Luxemburg; the delegation in Madagascar has 55 Oblates; the delegation in Ukraine has 28; the mission in Belarus has 7; and the mission in Turkmenistan has 2 Oblates. To this number, we must add 121 Oblates of Polish origin working in Austria and the Czech Republic, Canada, Sweden, Norway, USA, Argentina, Cameroun, Paraguay, Thailand, Hong Kong, Germany, Spain, Denmark, Brazil, France, Chile, Pakistan and the Generalate in Rome.

The human resources are great, in spite of the many tasks in Poland and the large number of ill Oblates. However we have to take into consideration that a drastic decrease in vocations in Poland in the near future seems to be unavoidable, resulting from a demographic crisis which will last at least twenty years. Maybe if the Province undertakes a totally new “independent” mission, this would awaken a new enthusiasm rather than the “scattered” journeys of individual Oblates, especially since such “Province Missions” are strongly rooted in the tradition of our Congregation.

The Oblates in the Czech Republic

The first contacts with the Czechs go back to 1911 when a Czech Oblate from Vienna led a mission to this land. However, wider contacts began after the World War I, resulting in the creation of the Czechoslovak province in 1927. (The Czech Republic and Slovakia then were one country.) World War II and the communist government destroyed the presence of the Oblates in the Czech Republic (the last Oblate dying in 1970). In 1989, Czechoslovakia regained its independence. In 1993 the country divided in a peaceful way into two independent republics: the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Today, both countries are in the European Union and the Czech economy is regarded as one of the most stable among all the countries of Eastern Europe.

In 1990, Bro. Zdenek Cizkowsky returned to

the Czechs after working in Africa since 1948. Soon he was joined by Oblates from Poland and Austria. Quickly the first Czech Oblates joined them. In 2007, the Oblates in the Czech Republic joined the Province of Central Europe. At present there are 7 Oblates in the Czech Republic.

The Czechs are at present one of the most atheistic nations in the world – in terms of people declaring themselves to be atheist -- despite being historically Christian. This must certainly be one of the greatest challenges for the Church in the Czech Republic and also for the Oblates. Theoretically, a large group of Czechs were brought up in a Catholic Tradition, which today has the largest number of people practicing their faith (5%); however, the attitude of the Czechs towards the Roman Catholic Church is rather negative, mainly due to historical attitudes linking Catholicism with German domination. The Church in the Czech Republic today certainly needs new evangelisation among the Catholics to enliven their faith and engagement in the process of de-Christianisation which has led to atheism. It seems that much more can be said about a dialogue of the Church with a lay society in the Czech Republic than in Western Europe or in America. There is a wide field for ecumenical dialogue with the protestant churches which are suffering an even greater crisis of identity and are therefore much more open to ecumenical dialogue.

The Oblates in Romania

Romania found itself under the domination of Russian communism after World War II. In 1965, Nicolae Ceaușescu came to power and partly disengaged Romania from these influences. He did not however seek links with the West, introducing a bloody dictatorship in the name of communism. In December 1989 Ceaușescu was deposed as a result of a bloody revolution. Representatives of a moderate wing of the communist party came to power and were followed by democrats in 1996. In 2007, Romania joined the European Union.

87% of the inhabitants of Romania declare themselves to be Orthodox and 5.6%, Catholic.

From the year 2000, evangelical work has been undertaken by Italian Oblates, of which there are seven at present. They have met with a positive response from the young who wish to join the Congregation. The challenges before Oblates and Catholic clergy are certainly a need for a new evangelisation in the Catholic community and the development of ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox majority and protestant minority. This dialogue is aided by openness on the part of Orthodox clergy to the initiatives of the Catholic Church. As a result, joint efforts may be possible to help in the large areas of poverty which largely characterise Romanian society.

The Oblates in the Ukraine

The Ukraine declared independence on 24 August 1991. The new country in Europe has one of the largest areas. 78% of the inhabitants declare their nationality to be Ukrainian, but only 67% declare that they speak the Ukrainian language. Among believers (about 50%), the majority are Orthodox, belonging to three separate groups. The largest is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the patriarchy of Kiev, based mainly in the central regions. The Patriarch of Moscow was against the creation of this Church since Moscow only recognises the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate which is located mainly in the east of the country. These Churches are fighting each other. The third group is the smallest Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church brought to the Ukraine from the USA and Western Europe.

A small but vigorous group is the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church is located mostly in the west of the country. This is a Catholic Church belonging to the Byzantine Ukrainian tradition, also known as the Uniate Church. After World War II, this Church suffered persecution and was later officially incorporated into the Orthodox Church.

The Roman Catholic Church in the Ukraine has small numbers and has been traditionally identified with the Poles. Destroyed during Communist repression, it has restarted following Ukrainian Independence.

The Oblates began work in the Ukraine in 1990, just before the declaration of independence. The work was started by Polish Oblates. Their work began in the centre of the country and then in the east of Ukraine. On the 14 September 1997, the delegation belonging to the Polish province was established. In 2006, the delegation in the Ukraine had 28 Oblates: 19 priests, 2 brothers and 7 seminarians. They worked in 8 locations. The work of the Oblates in the Ukraine is focused above all – as in Poland – on pastoral work associated with parishes. A few Oblates are engaged in giving retreats and one works in the Catholic media.

The challenge facing the Oblates in Ukraine is primarily the creation of a local Ukrainian Roman Catholic Church. This is emphasised from the beginning by the introduction of the Ukrainian language in the Roman liturgy in place of the Polish language. They are also aware that in their position, an international community is required to underline that the Roman Catholic Church is not a “Polish Church” – which was the rule for many centuries. Apart from this, there is a need for greater activity outside the parish, thereby breaking with the Polish model of ministry and evangelisation to others, since 50% of Ukrainian society does not admit to any religion.

Since the work of the Oblates takes place in central and eastern Ukraine, and therefore in lands which are inhabited largely by the divided Orthodox Patriarchates, it is an obvious challenge for the Oblates to engage in the difficult dialogue with the Orthodox Church. This dialogue usually takes place at the level of meetings and joint social work. Certainly, there should also be deepened contacts on a theological level, which would require the preparation of individual Oblates by university studies dedicated to dialogue. It is difficult to say whether, in the future, reference can be made to pre-war Oblate practice associated with joint rituals and efforts of the Oblates to work in the Greek Catholic communities?

It is clear that there is also a challenge for the Oblates to engage in work with the poorest people. This can be achieved by developing charity projects. The Ukraine has been troubled

by a great economic crisis from the moment of independence. The situation markedly improved after 2000; however, in the last few years, the Ukrainian economy has again been in trouble, with a negative effect on the standard of living of many people.

The Oblates in Belarus

The road to independence of Belarus was associated with the break-up of the Soviet Union. The declaration of independence was agreed by the Highest Council on 27 July 1990. The political system in Belarus was transformed into a presidential republic with clear attributes of an authoritarian state. The president Aleksander Lukaszenko, who is accused of human rights violations, remains without change. The power of Lukaszenko and his supporters is countered by opposition groups. There are many areas in the country where there is great poverty.

Oblates from Poland worked in Belarus before the war. After the war, only one remained, Fr. Wojciech Nowaczayk, who had been a prisoner of Soviet gulags. The renewal of Oblate ministry started at the end of 1980 and was associated with sporadic help by Fr. Kazimierz Jędrzejczak. In 1992, he settled in Belarus and ran a country parish and taught in the local seminary. At present there are 7 Oblates working in the Belarus mission: 5 Priests, 1 brother and 2 seminarians.

The challenges for the Church in Belarus and for the Oblates surely start with re-evangelisation and often re-Christianisation of the local people. It must be carried out in a spirit of dialogue with the Orthodox Church which is also undergoing renewal. A great challenge and hope is in work with the young, from which come the first new priests and seminarians from Belarus. Another major challenge is a response to the great poverty in many communities. A much greater problem is with the support of human rights since this results in immediate deportation and no chance of return. It seems that thorough preparation of the laity will be vital help in the re-evangelisation of the country.

The Church in Eastern Europe has a common past – the struggle with the inhuman communist system. However, this struggle was very different in individual countries. The common lesson is certainly the need to root the Church in the communities of working people. They were a rock for the Church, thanks to which it survived persecution. The Oblates have great experience of working in simple and poor communities. This experience is being continued today in individual countries.

However the rebuilding of the Church is also associated with a need for the formation of the laity, the creation of schools of theology, seminaries and other centres of learning. It seems that our involvement in this area has been overlooked – similarly in many other parts of the world. We still do not give enough weight to good high-level education of academic cadres or creation of academic centres, publishing, the local press, etc. This is even more needed since countries liberated from communism can easily fall under the spell of liberal systems. These -- according to Catholic social teaching -- have their own traps and ways to degrade man. In this area, the faithful need a prophetic path indicated by the Church.

In the life of the Church in Eastern Europe, there

is also a need for engagement in ecumenical dialogue, also on a theological level, and this is associated with developing a spirit of openness and necessary education. It seems also that the Congregation could be more involved in the re-evangelisation of Eastern Europe, not leaving this task mainly to the Polish province, since there is a need for international communities, speaking about a dimension of life which is above cultural differences and Church action. This international engagement is all the more necessary as there are large areas in this part of Europe without the presence of Oblates and which are full of potential. At this point, one can mention engagement in Catholic Slovakia or in Orthodox Russia which has and will have an important role to play in the politics and economics of the world. The spread of Oblates to neighbouring countries always was a tradition in our Congregation.

These are only a few tasks and perspectives which can be implemented in Eastern Europe with its people and their rich culture. Being open to this challenge will be positive evidence of the courage and spirit of the Congregation and its dedication to the Church – and this is the legacy of St. Eugene de Mazenod.

Scriptures and Mission

By David N. Power, OMI

Since it is essential to the Oblate charism to evangelize, to preach the Gospel, it is only right that we ask how well versed we are in the knowledge of the scriptures and what place they have in our missionary work. The thoughts offered here are some points from the Episcopal Synod on the Word held in Rome in 2008 that are pertinent to our Oblate renewal, followed by some attempt to place this in the current context of the Oblate apostolate.

Synod on the Word of God

We would hope that the forthcoming General Chapter may help the congregation to reap the fruits of this Synod in its inner renewal and in its apostolic mission. It is likely that by that time the post-apostolic exhortation will have been issued, but for the moment, something may already be gleaned from the final message and propositions of the Synod. All of the propositions of the Synod on the Word of God are available on the Vatican website but some points may be singled out for their pertinence to the renewal of Oblate mission and evangelical way of life.

This call to a better knowledge of Christ as God's Living Word through the scriptures has been present in the life and in the teaching of the Church through the whole period of renewal of life and mission since Vatican II, ever since indeed its importance was enunciated by the Council itself in the constitution on Divine Revelation. It was reiterated by Paul VI in the postsynodal document on Evangelization, affirming that the scriptures as God's Living Word are at the very heart of the "new evangelization" called for by attention to the signs of the times and to the cultures of peoples. John Paul II came back to this when he convoked the millennial year of 2000 a.d., being so bold as to say that "ignorance of the scriptures is ignorance of Christ" since it is through them in conjunction with the signs of his presence among us that we contemplate the face of Christ.

In the final *message* which the bishops participating in the Synod of 2008 addressed to the Church, they underlined the fundamental importance of knowledge of the scriptures in encountering Jesus Christ as the living Word of God within the Church. The scriptures are a Word or Voice which God addresses to us, offering us a vision of the Face of Christ, the Living Word. They are received and interpreted even in practical ways in the house of the Church. The bishops also underlined their part in spreading the news of Jesus Christ in travelling the paths or roads of the world. Through the scriptural word, Christ takes on new life throughout the world when God's Word travels the road around the world and among many peoples. Other points they underlined are the part scriptures play in a dialogue with other religions and their own holy books and the way in which they invite us to better hear the voice of the poor and God's compassion for the plight of the suffering.. What is most particular in Christ's living presence as God's Word is most universal and what is most universal is most particular.

The *propositions* submitted to Benedict XVI for inclusion in the post-synodal document envisage the knowledge that all Christians should be given of the scriptures, which are not the preserve of specialists or of priests. It is a task of pastoral leadership to bring the scriptures to all the members of the Church so that they become a living force in the life of ecclesial communities. Indeed, while writing of the place of the scriptures in the liturgy, the propositions gave particular attention to the place they have in the life of small communities, including those that seldom have the opportunity for the celebration of the Eucharist but fall nonetheless under the guidance of diocesan pastoral leadership. The Bible has a part to play in all ecclesial renewal, but the propositions single out for mention the hearing, studying and praying of the scriptures

in these communities in which it is that they encounter Christ as the Living Word of God, through a frequent praying of the Word of God, founded in their accurate knowledge.

Pastors, therefore, have to be attentive to this reality and do all they can to bring to such communities the assistance that they need in order to develop their study and their scriptural prayer. This is, of course, in line with the position of the Decree on the ministry and life of priests in Vatican II which points out that preaching the Word is the foundational role of the ministry and demands, first of all, that priests themselves be well versed in the knowledge of the scriptures and that they should exercise great care in spreading their knowledge among the faithful.

Some propositions speak to the place that a prayerful reading of the scriptures has in the spiritual life. The bishops recall the ancient tradition of the Church which goes under the name of *lectio divina*. This means first a study which unearths the proper meaning of a passage. On this is founded a self-questioning of what the text reveals of Christ and what pertinence it has to one's own life. From this, various kinds of prayer flow forth in the heart, leading often to a contemplative moment of a simple and still regard of the face of Christ. The importance of this in the renewal of consecrated communities is underlined, so that these communities may in truth be witnesses to the *evangelical* way of life. Of religious, it is also noted how the combination of the hearing of the Word with their following of the evangelical counsels enables them to read them with the "heart of the poor" and commit themselves more strongly to the service of justice, peace and integrity of creation.

At a time when the Church and communities of apostolic consecrated life are more committed to dialogue with cultures and living faiths, it is not to be forgotten how the Church must also speak from its faith in the living Word of Jesus Christ and so from a faith nourished by the Scriptures. This does not mean imposing faith in Christ but it means that dialogue with others and attending to the knowledge of the holy books of other religions can be properly undertaken only on the foundation of the scriptural nourishment of their own faith in Christ.

With all of this in mind, it would seem important that the forthcoming Chapter attend to the place of the scriptures in the evangelical life and in the apostolate of the members of the congregation, and to note strengths and weaknesses in this regard. It may indeed be desirable that not only appropriate exhortation but some specific plans be adopted in order to foster this. The Chapter is to meet at a time in the life of the Church when the call has come for encounter with the living Christ to be nourished by a deeper hearing of his voice in the texts of Holy Writ and so it has to be attentive to this in the life of the congregation.

Scriptures and the Option for the Poor

Having noted these points from the Synod, we ask how this relates to the Oblate charism to bring the Gospel to the poor and to live out a mission that is lived out as an "option for the poor." The preaching of the Gospel and life in the light of the Gospel has to take on new forms today in the light of promoting a global solidarity, grounded in the Church's option for the poor and in the light of the precarious hold on faith associated with the notion of secularity. This option for the poor today takes on a new urgency in face of the negative effects of globalization in increased impoverishment of peoples and in face of the ecological crisis which deprives peoples of sustainable development and the right to live their cultural heritage in communion with the earth in sustainable communities.

There was a time when, in many countries, being a Christian seemed to be imposed by social necessity. In the western world, most people could hardly find their place in society outside of faith communities and organization. When the Gospel was preached on other continents, it was presented as an obligation and as necessary to avoid damnation. In the process, missionaries denounced other living faith traditions and struck at the heart of many a cultural heritage. Today, for reasons specific to each society and culture, faith in Christ is one option among others, but even to those who do not wish to receive this Gospel, Christ is to be made known for what he means for us, for what we deem he reveals of God's love and forgiveness and saving power. As pointed out by magisterial teaching since Vatican II, Christ has to be offered as God's gift, as an invitation

to a fuller life, as a living presence and as an energy or force for hope in building a sustainable human and earthly future. It is through faith in him and through communion in him that the Christian Church may become a presence and a force in the world for the realization of a 'divine kingdom', a rule of love that works towards the good of humanity and the redemption of the earth. All missionary activity, in whatever part of the world, in word and testimony has to take the form of a living invitation from a loving God to a way of life that is a communion in the Word and Spirit that bring this love to being and act in the world, even as other faiths are respected. If evangelization is not a persuasive proposal that offers a ground for a hopeful human future in love and solidarity, it will be fruitless. Likewise, if it is not presented as a persuasive reason for why we live as we do, it has no place in the dialogue between faiths and cultures.

As the option for the poor takes shape in the life of the Church along the roads that the Word travels, we have noted how the Synod, following on experience around the world, has placed an accent on the importance of small communities in the life of the Church. Nourished by the Word, they represent a family of faith, an evangelizing presence, as communities that bring the resources of the Gospel for the service of all the impoverished in the world. This has been integral to the pastoral strategy of Churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America since the seventies (see the documentation in David Power, *Mission Ministry Order*, New York & London, Continuum, 2009, pp. 9-65) but its relevance is coming more and more to light as the need for change in the fabric of society becomes more and more apparent in the face of economies that exploit human communities and nature's energies at one and the same time. In face of corporate, global injustice, the Church has become more conscious of the service it must render in Christ's name to communities, to allow for sustainable communities, in sustainable economies and this includes offering them the guidance they need to build their lives and their hopes on the encounter with Jesus Christ in the living word of the scriptures. This has to do with the discovery of an alternative model of development in a world unjustly globalized. We need a dynamic faith and a vision that contribute to changes in the very fabric of society.

Communities of faith are obviously not only receivers of the message and of pastoral attention but are themselves agents of ecclesial life and of evangelization. They are to be helped to be communities that are enlivened by encounter with Christ as the Living Word, fired by the energy of the Spirit. Their life and mission must be rooted in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, given to us in the scriptures and coming to life within communities that seek peace and justice, and wish to serve the common good. Without a living knowledge of God's Living Word and without a firm hold on the teaching of the scriptures, it is not possible to deepen a pastoral presence within a fragile humanity, living on a fragile earth. As signs of the kingdom through evangelical commitment and as pastors, Oblates cannot exercise this mission without having themselves a living knowledge of the Word and without letting their knowledge and their faith be instructed by working with and hearing the communities they serve. A whole style of pastoral leadership and of teaching develops by guiding and acting with communities in their desire to be enlivened in their communion with Christ through the living Word of the scriptures.

Even in interfaith dialogue, with full respect for other faiths and working on common perspectives with them, we wish to speak authentically of Jesus Christ, out of our encounter with him as God's living word. Of what kind of Christ do we speak when we ourselves know him in this way? It is not of Christ as an obligation for salvation or as judge except to those who refuse to be merciful or to love their neighbour, but of a Christ who, through his being raised up, his giving himself unto death, and his teaching and working among the people during his ministry, is God's own self revealed through self-emptying, as a presence among the poor, as a healer, as compassionate and merciful, as one whose love is not bound by differences of gender, age, standing, race, culture, as a father who gives his Son and his Spirit without calculation. The prayer of the Chapter preparation asks for the grace of a radical conversion: the conversion we need is a conversion to Jesus Christ through a living word in a living sacramental action.

The Living Word in Living Communities

Without due attention to what is offered through the living word, the opportunity for testifying to the presence of Christ can be missed. Marcel Dumais, in his paper, offers many scriptural texts which cast light on Oblate life and mission, with clear pastoral consequences. What we also need is a sense of how, in practice, we draw constantly on the scriptures in our work with communities of faith and so I offer a few examples.

In Lent 2009, I heard sermons for the first and second Sunday of Lent in two different Churches (neither Oblate-run, by the way). On the Sunday when the Gospel proclaimed is the story of Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness as narrated by Mark, when he was tempted by Satan, the preacher gave a lecture, no doubt helpful in its way, on overcoming temptations prompted by one's evil inclinations. There was no community call, no unfolding of the way in which Mark's Gospel is about the coming kingdom of God, about its conditions and about its hopes. Mark connects the trial in which Jesus is comforted by the angels with his proclamation that the kingdom of God is at hand. It is offered this Sunday as an invitation to Church communities to live with Christ in the quest for this kingdom. Among the wild animals in the wilderness, the peaceful presence of Jesus is a sign of the restoration of the peaceable kingdom as this is evoked in the Book of Isaiah. But Jesus cannot testify to it except through confrontation with Satanic trial, with all its allurements to other ways of fostering an earthly kingdom. If a community is invited to a communal reflection on this Gospel, it can find the invitation to walk with Christ towards the Pasch, it can reflect on its own way of serving the kingdom, it can find hope in the peaceable kingdom. When in the scriptural lectionary of Cycle B, this Gospel is associated with the story of the covenant of God with Noah for the preservation of the earth; it is connected in the imagination with a new hope in face of today's societal trials and environmental trials that exploit the earth and ruin human life upon it.

On the Second Sunday of Lent, the preacher chose to speak of the divinity of Christ, comparing him in some odd way with Superman and Batman whose real natures are obscured by the masks they wear. In fact, the Gospel of the Transfiguration

is about the revelation of Jesus' Sonship and the offer of the Son to the world in his Pasch, in the repudiation and in the passion which he must undergo. The association in Cycle B with the story of Abraham and Isaac has the same sense as at the Vigil: God offers his son as a loving father to humanity and for its redemption. In the Markan story, the disciples had already pronounced a limp faith in Jesus as the Son of God but they refused to see this Sonship made evident on the way of the Cross. It is of this that Jesus speaks with Moses and Elijah; it is on the way of the Cross that Peter and James and John can come to know him as Son and Servant. But the promise of life endures and they are left with the question, "what can being raised from the dead" mean? It is with this question that a community of faith should be left this day, as something promised to all in the resurrection of Jesus, as a hope when they engage as God's children in loving service, even to the shedding of their blood for the sake of others. Both priests I heard showed a sense of compassion for the troubled and a desire to instruct, but they lacked the power to bring Christ's word in the scriptures alive within these communities of faith and service.

Missionary Oblates and Evangelical Life

Ever since Eugene de Mazenod, Oblates have proclaimed the words of Jesus at Nazareth as their missionary call and motivation, but the sense of these words is to be ever more and more and ever newly grasped. Some scriptural studies have drawn our attention to some things which help us to know that call of identification with Jesus in the mission given to him by the Father to bring the good news to the poor. In quoting Isaiah, Jesus does not refer to only one text but shows a way of interpreting the prophecy of Isaiah as a whole, as what runs through the book. Isaiah was speaking to the people of Israel at a time of loss and deprivation and attack from outside. The people knew in a concrete way what it was to be poor as a result of misfortunes that befall them. They are reminded by Isaiah of God's unfailing covenant promise but they are also reminded of their own call to live more faithfully to the covenant. This means justice for the poor, giving the blind and the lame (the ostracized) their proper place within the community. It means openness to gentile nations, the realization that

they are not to nourish hostility but that they as to be sign to the nations. They are reminded of the importance in their midst of servant communities who live by the image of the one (or many) whom he portrays as a suffering servant.

Jesus embraces all of this as expression of his mission and of the mission in which he wishes his disciples to share. His own situation was a very concrete one in which the situation in Galilee in particular created its own poor. Something was the fault of the people themselves, because of a rigorous sense of ritual purity and their ready exclusion of the ill (lepers, blind beggars), their tendency to exclude and condemn those whom the rabbinic interpretation of the Law would dub sinners, because they were not always respectful of the heritage of the land, failing to live the prescriptions of Jubilee or the sabbatical year about care of the land and its natural resources. Something however was the consequence of outside intrusions (Herodians, Romans, even the High Priests) and what went with this by way of taking over land, of imposing taxes, of absentee landlords, of overusing water resources to use constructions such as those at Sepphoris and Tiberias. The parables of Jesus reveal some of the consequences of the breakdown of normal, sustainable, life: absentee landlords, hired servants, slaves, day labourers, untilled fields figure quite constantly in these stories. When Jesus says "blessed are the poor," those who suffer the poverty of injustices are intended. Jesus, however, also points out that they fail to live as sign to the nations when they harbour enmity towards others, when they do not embrace the full extent of love of neighbour: his stories about Elijah and Naaman given at Nazareth show up this failing. What embracing Jesus' mission as a mission to the poor when the Word travels the road of the world is ever a call to Oblates in living their founding charism.

Eugene de Mazenod thought of the community of Oblates as a communion which has a model in the relation between Jesus and the twelve. This might be developed to include the texts which speak of sending the twelve or the seventy-two to be, as it were, "Jesus figures" in bringing the Gospel to the poor (Luke 9, 1-6; Luke 10, 1-12). All the texts concerning this relationship provide possibilities

for a collective exercise in *lectio divina*.

Oblates may also find that their own evangelical commitment takes on new missionary life when it is related not only to the community of the twelve but to the rule of the community of disciples given in Matt. cc 18-29. The invitation to a life lived by the evangelical counsels is at its liveliest when heard within the hearing of this community rule as the invitation rings out ever new in the encounter with Jesus Christ through the Word. The rule is about the Church as the presence and sign of the kingdom, living by God's word and transformed by God's saving and redemptive power. The signs of the kingdom that are to the fore are the forgiveness of sins, the communion in charity, the primacy of little children and the least of society, the fidelity in persevering love of marriage partners, living poverty and response by some to the counter-cultural way of virginity. In service to this kingdom, some are invited to virginity, which, with marital fidelity, is made possible by Christ's transforming love as a life of service so that they are together signs of the kingdom.

All are invited to the poverty that feeds charity and a common life; all are invited into the hundredfold of the kingdom. The promise made to the poor and to those who become disciples is first and foremost the hundredfold of the community of followers, for it is therein that the blessings of the poor and the meek are made known. No activity of mission can be undertaken except by those who are of the hundredfold.

In the course of history some, monks and pastors and apostles, have chosen particular forms of life as a way of keeping this invitation alive among God's people. Today, many lay communities, inclusive of families, have discovered new ways of living evangelical poverty in communal life. However, the way of discipleship to which Jesus invites is meant for all and by reflecting on these texts with small communities, Oblates may help them to see the implications for themselves and appreciate their own call to be witnesses and to evangelize their milieu. These people are agents of the Gospel alongside whom the Oblates now work. If the poverty preached and exemplified by Jesus in the scriptures is a drawing apart and not a service to the whole, it loses its savour.

When Oblates see their evangelical call here in the scriptural model of evangelical life and in the story of Jesus at Nazareth, they see more fully how they live their call in the midst of others who also respond to Christ's invitation and testify the kingdom of God at work in the world.

Transcendence

Among Christians and in the Catholic Church there seems to be much concern these days about "transcendence" and so an appeal to philosophies of transcendence. This often takes shape in efforts to respond to "secularism." If, as hearers of the Word, we are to speak of the transcendent God, it has to be in the form of the incarnate Word, of the living gift from above that lives and speaks in our midst, scandal or folly though he be to many. Understanding eschatological and apocalyptic discourse better is pertinent to a sense of a transcendent God who has entered human history, since these embody visions held out before God's people and before the world in times of catastrophe, whether natural or most especially brought on by human actions, it being with this latter that we are most bothered in these times.

One can always engage in philosophical discussions about this, with no doubt some fruit, but also with cultural and practical limitations. In the European middle ages, some dialogue was engaged between Christians and Muslims on the basis of uses of platonic and Aristotelian philosophies but this reached something of an impasse and resulted perhaps in two abstract ways of presenting a Christian vision of Divine transcendence and Divine presence in Creation. What counts in the preaching of the Gospel is how in the mystery of Christ transcendence is seen. For one thing, this is present in the form of a gift, the gift the Father makes to the world and the gift of the Spirit and if we do relate it to

an act of being it is to the gift of being and to the form if that gift given in Jesus Christ. For another thing, it may be envisaged in the form of eschatological discourse. Before all tragedies, calamities, catastrophes, we await the gift of God's new creation and we find human action submitted to the judgment expressed in the vision of the Son of Man who calls the elect together but before whose face those who cut themselves off from love cannot appear.

Engaged in intercultural and interfaith dialogue, we know better than to be exclusivist, so we do not affirm a Christian notion of transcendence in condemning others. Even, however, in learning, to mutual enrichment, of the sense of transcendence in Islam, in Judaism, in Hinduism, in Buddhism, in traditional religions of Africa and the Pacific, or of Indigenous Peoples around the globe, it is from our own tradition of faith in God's gift of Word and Spirit known to us from our reception of the scriptures that we enter the exchange and the discourse. We cannot look simply for common philosophical principles. Bridge-building, peace-building, concerns for a just and peaceful humanity, has to mean a coming together of honestly affirmed different traditions and beliefs.

Conclusion

By the invitations of the Synod on the Word of God, we have been invited to renew our capacity to hear and to preach God's word in the service of the people and in the midst of the poor. The few examples offered here are but an endeavour to show how the return to the scriptural word belongs within the renewal of life and evangelical mission lived as an apostolic service in a world where the urgency of proclaiming Christ's love is sharpened by an awareness of the fragility of the world in which we live and the new shapes taken by the call to serve the poor.

DOCUMENTATION OMI is a non-official publication
of the General Administration of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate
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