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In preparation for the General Chapter 2010**

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The Pre-capitular Commission has asked a number of Oblates to write a reflection on some aspect of the theme chosen for the 35th General Chapter. Over the next few months, *OMI Documentation* will be publishing those reflections. They can be found under the **General Chapter** link of www.omiworld.org as well as under the **Documentation** link on the same page.

They are meant for the personal and communal reflection of Oblates and their Lay Associates. A General Chapter is not an event that involves only the elected and “ex officio” capitulars. It involves everyone who shares the charism of Saint Eugene de Mazenod.

**Centered on the person of Jesus Christ, the source of our mission,
we commit ourselves to a profound and communal conversion.**

Reflection on “Conversion” In preparation for the General Chapter 2010

By Scholastic Brother Jens Watteroth, OMI

Brother Jens Watteroth, OMI, is a 29 year-old student of theology at the Oblate Scholasticate in Lahnstein, Germany. He is a member of the Central European Province.

Personal Conversion

What comes to my mind first, when I think of conversion in my personal life, is that it has much to do with turning towards God, towards Jesus Christ. As an Oblate, I want to follow Jesus in my life, which means to come to know Him better and to consider Him to be the model for my whole life. This is not something already finished, as if I could do it only once and then I would be a perfect Oblate, a perfect Christian. There is in fact the need to ask again and again, if the direction in which I am going is still the direction towards the Lord and if it is not, to correct it, to convert myself, to change the way. There are a few aspects that come to mind.

First, personal conversion has to do with me, with me as the person, who I actually am. That sounds obvious, but I think it is good, to mention that. Conversion can only take place, when I begin to open my eyes to look at myself, to look at my life just as it is and where I am able to look at my life with its good and bad sides. To be able to convert myself towards God, I first have to admit that I turned away from Him, away from the way He wants to go with me. St. Eugene said that we shall go for holiness in our life, that doesn't mean to do anything special, it doesn't mean that we shall seem holy, but that we actually try to *be* holy.

Though this has to do with myself, it is not me alone who has to do anything. Conversion can't be made by me. It is true that I can and have to turn towards God, to convert myself towards God, but it is still Him who helps that this conversion is fruitful. We are talking about a “new heart”, but this new heart I can't give to myself. It is the heart I already have, that I can

offer to God, and of which He can make a new heart, if it is His will. Every effort, everything I do, I also have to bring before God in prayer and to rely on His sanctifying and renewing work.

Conversion is not only a thing for special occasions, for the great changing points in life, or for special times during the year like Ash Wednesday and the time of Lent. Conversion is for everyday, and is necessary also in the normal life of every day. The question is, am I actually following Jesus in what I am doing, or have I turned away from Him? This I have to ask everyday and with every little thing I am doing or am not doing. Conversion is not only concerning prayer life and vows, but also the usual and normal things of daily life. How am I behaving toward other people, towards my Oblate brothers? How am I doing the service in the kitchen, preparing breakfast? How am I doing my studies? What am I doing in my free time? The question I have to ask every time is—am I doing things in a way that I can meet God in these things or do I need conversion? Holiness is not of great deeds, but holiness is a way to live everyday life. An Oblate is a man who is offering himself to God – himself with everything he is and does, especially with the normal things of everyday life.

To live conversion it is important to open my eyes for my life with all its faults and with all the good things. Therefore I have to look at my life in prayer, to listen to what God is telling me, to talk and listen also to a spiritual director and to people who are telling me what I did right or wrong. Community life can be a good help for all this, and so we should find a good way to help each other seeing clearer our own life, seeing

clearer which steps can bring us into the direction toward the Lord and which steps otherwise lead in a wrong direction. Sometimes conversion doesn't mean to say that the things I did or the way I did things was wrong, it can also mean to say it was good, but it isn't helpful anymore, so I have to change. In all this we mustn't forget God and His role; it has to be a spiritual process all the time.

Community Conversion

Conversion in community can also mean conversion toward community. The founder says, we shall be "one heart and one soul." Life in community is based on everyone's personal conversion toward Jesus Christ, because He is the center, around which the community is gathering. It is He, who is calling us into this community. If He is the center and everyone converts toward Him, goes toward Him, ultimately everyone comes closer to the other members of the community. Conversion toward Christ in this sense includes turning toward the people surrounding me, the people who live in community with me, because also in them I can meet Jesus Christ.

Usually the community I am living in has not been chosen by me. There are people living in community with me, who aren't automatically friends, are not those I sympathised with, there are also people, with whom it is not easy for me to live. In this case conversion means to go on toward each other, not to judge the other because of what he seems to be, what he looks like or what he did or said in the past. It is necessary to keep in mind, that he was called to this community by Jesus Christ as I was, that he is also on his way of following Jesus, that he has to turn toward me, the same way I have to turn toward him. But much more it is necessary that I am willing to give something from myself. Life in community, being "one heart and one soul," means not only living in the same house and eating at the same table, but being a life-community, to share each other's lives.

To share life means, to give something from my own life, out of the joys but also out of the

dark and bad times, out of what moves me and what I am thinking about, out of my spiritual life, but also out of my daily and ordinary life. And it also means to receive something from the life of the brothers, to be interested in how the brother is doing, to be interested in what he is doing, in what he likes or dislikes, in what he lives and for what he lives. This is not going to be as easy with everyone nor with every other one, therefore this step is also a conversion that has to be repeated again and again, a conversion towards a life with Christ.

St. Eugene says, we have to live according to our constitutions and rules to be real Oblates. Conversion to a life following Jesus as an Oblate is only possible in community. In particular community life, the life with my Oblate brothers, for it can show me, where I left this way and turned away from Jesus. That can be someone who in a brotherly way tells me, what I did wrong or what I could make better. But it is also in the conflicts, which are there every now and then, where I can learn by myself, what I have to change in my life, where conversion is needed.

But there is also conversion in community. If we are real Oblates, we can see, when we ask, if we are living according to our constitutions and rules, which we can only live in community. Therefore it is necessary to ask together, how we can live these constitutions and rules in our concrete life, in our daily life and in our community life. The question is, if we are talking about our lifestyle, if it is according to our constitutions and rules. The question is, are we willing to correct our style of life or do we insist on what we ever did or on what is easier to do. The question is, is it possible to have an exchange about these questions in our communities, not only in the houses of formation, but also in other communities and if we see this as a spiritual process.

Mission Conversion

As *Missionary* Oblates we are very conscious of what you can say of the whole church: we have a mission to this world. Conversion and our mission are connected in the way that personal conversion and conversion in community affect

our mission. We shall try to be holy, not for ourselves, but to make our mission fruitful. We only can be a sign for what we want to tell the people, if we convert ourselves personally and in community, again and again towards God. Authentic Christians, authentic Oblates we can become, if we try to become holy.

Conversion towards God also means conversion toward a new mission. Especially in Germany, especially in Europe, we are facing a totally new situation, in which we have to ask if we are still following our mission. In the preface of the founder we see a good observation of the world around him, of people and of how they are living. Also for us that should be the first step: look at the society, at how people live and what they are living for – especially in the time of a changing society. In what we see there, we have the possibility to understand what God is calling us to do in this particular time in which we are living, where he is sending us – or maybe it is better to say: to whom He is sending us. These two things only go together: look at the situation and listen to God. We must never forget that it is God, who is sending us. Listening to His word and looking at the signs of the time we can understand what our mission is in this time.

Conversion to a new mission is never easy. It also means to let go of an “old” mission. It means to say clearly: what we are doing was good, but now it is necessary to do other things, to see - what we are doing is not bad, but our mission is another one. To be able to do that, we need courage, because we have to leave things behind us in which we lived and worked well and in which we felt at home. To be able to do that we have to rely deeply on God, because we never can exactly know where He wants to guide us and where we are ending up. And we need courage, because being sent means that we actually have *to go*. Mission – and that is essential in my opinion – includes that there is a “*to*.” Being sent doesn’t make sense if there isn’t anyone we are sent *to*. And that means, that we have to go, that we have to cross the borders of our community, the borders of the Church, and go to those

people to whom we are sent. Mission doesn’t mean to stay and to wait for people to come, it is not a question of what we have to offer to make people come to us, but the question is: are we actually going to the people, to the people who don’t know Christ?

Conversion toward a new mission also mean to ask *how* we are going to the people to whom we are sent. Following our founder, the mission of the Oblates is to tell the people who they are: loved children of God. That means that we don’t have anything to bring to them or that the sense of mission is, to make people come to us. It means, that people, but we, also, have to find out, where and how God is already present in our lives. That they have to learn how that affects their life and what they have to do with their life. Also for this step we have to remember that God is also working on that, that it is not we alone who have to achieve this, but that God has to do and is doing His part of the work. And we have to remember that God, the Holy Spirit, actually is working in a “new” way, that He creates something “new”, what we couldn’t even imagine. Conversion to a new mission doesn’t mean to carry “old” things to the people, but finding “new” ways of living ones faith, finding new ways of living with and for God. When we really come to live that, it will have consequences for our own understanding of the gospel and therefore open a new way for personal conversion also.

Conversion to a new mission is only possible if we ask ourselves, what our particular mission is – personal and in community and if we can talk about this question in our communities and also in our provinces, to see if we are open to find new ways to go to the people. Also this has to include prayer, because it is important not only to follow the things I like to do, but to take the risk, to try new things. The most difficult point perhaps is to cross the borders, to leave behind the safety of community and of the Church and to go to the people. To be open to the thoughts that my way of living my faith, that my way of living with and in the Church isn’t the way of everyone, won’t maybe be a way for me in the future either.

General Aspects

Any kind of conversion is only possible, if we open our eyes and in particular our heart, to look in the light of the gospel to that what was, and to point out precisely at what point we are. It is only possible, if we try to find out in prayer, not only in personal prayer, but also in prayer in community, which way God wants to go with us. It is only possible, if we talk to each other about these questions, if there is a real exchange about this, and if this exchange is understood as a spiritual process. We have the great advantage that we are living together with people who are following a vocation that isn't too far away from our own. That should open the way to have a spiritual exchange in many different ways, and not only in our houses of formation, but in all our

communities, in our provinces and everywhere Oblates are living or working together.

Conversion means not to stick on that what is, but to be able to leave it behind. As Missionaries, we should live in a special way the fact of still being on our way. That includes, not to see only ourselves and what we like best, and what is the most comfortable thing for me, but to be open to what God wants in this very moment, that I do and how I do it. It is necessary to remember, that it is not me who is the measure, but that God has to say a word to this, has to say His Word, that is already present in this world and in our life. The other side is, that in this process, we can also rely on Him, that we know, that it is not us, who have to do miracles, but that it is God who does his part and that he can make our work fruitful, even when it isn't successful in our eyes at all.

A Personal Story of Conversion

By Scholastic Brother Devin Watkins, OMI

Brother Devin Watkins, OMI, is a 25 year-old, 1st Year theology student from the United States Province studying at Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas.

Every story is told for a purpose, and I would be remiss to proceed to tell you my story without at least letting you know on what I intend to focus my attention. As we all know, of primary importance in conversion is acceptance of God's unconditional love and mercy; St. Eugene's Good Friday experience bears witness to this. Now, let me proceed to share how God's radical gift of healing has given me 'a new heart, a new spirit, a new mission'.

Much of my conversion story centers on an event that occurred when I was 14 years old. On February 5, 1999, my mother (SueAnn), her parents, and two of my little sisters (Julie and Kristin) died tragically as the small airplane in which they were flying crashed. This left my father (Richard), my sister (Allison), and me to carry on and grieve our loss. Prior to that event, we had been a happy, Catholic family living on a cotton farm in West Texas. Normal, busy days,

with plenty of love mixed in, characterized our lives together. However, after that day it seemed that any semblance of a normal life was shattered forever. Shock dominated the next couple of days, and as we knelt praying the rosary with the community at the wake service, I stared at the five caskets in front of me and almost wished that I was in one of them. Suddenly, through the darkness and pain that clouded my mind, I felt a ray of God's peace burst through the mist. I vaguely perceived that Jesus had given me his own Mother, Mary, to be with me as my new Mother, and I knew that someday this gaping hole in my heart would be filled. That was my first real connection with Mary.

As the events of that week passed and life began to resume its normal pace, I forgot that sense of peace and hope. In high school, I gradually began to fill that emptiness in my heart with partying, drinking, and dating. University life

was similar but even wilder; I had nothing and no one to limit my excesses and I drifted from one hazy night to the next. Sundays were the worst. I would go to Mass on most Sundays, but afterwards I would feel the depression, loneliness, and emptiness that inevitably crept up when no one was around to distract me from who I was becoming. Occasionally, when I was feeling very low I would reach for the rosary that hung mostly unused on my doorknob and say a couple decades. Solace and comfort would envelop me for a moment but I would then go on my way like a man who looks in a mirror and promptly forget what he looks like. My first three years at Texas A&M University were thus, but God started a process that would start to open my eyes to His mercy waiting to fill me.

During the spring of my junior year, I attended a weekend retreat in the style of the *Cursillo de Cristiandad* called “Aggie Awakening.” (Students at my university are called “Aggies” since many study agriculture.) A month after this, I was invited to a conference given by a prominent Catholic preacher. Then, that next summer, while at home, my sister Allison gave me a book called *True Devotion to Mary* by St. Louis de Montfort. As I read, I felt inspired to go through the process of consecration to Jesus through Mary by renewing my baptismal promises and dedicating the whole of my life to God. However, I wrongly judged that I was unworthy and that I should work to be a better person before attempting something of this magnitude. This lack of acceptance of my finitude led me to even worse extremes, and I slid deeper into darkness. Now, when I had finished reading the book the first time, I promised myself that I would read it again that fall. Luckily I kept my promise and after reading the book again, I saw that perfection through surrender was what was required and not perfection through lack of blemish.

Thereafter, I began the 33 days of preparation for my personal consecration by reciting the rosary and daily uniting myself to Jesus through Mary. During that time, I found that my deeply ingrained inclination toward grievous sin was diminished considerably. The opportunities were still present, but my attraction to them was

not. In the beginning of the process, I felt light and happy, but as the days advanced, things got harder and I began to understand the weight and gravity of what I was freely choosing: the Cross of Christ. During this process, a question kept sticking in my mind: Was God calling me to be a priest? This thought manifested itself one day at daily Mass during the words of consecration. ‘Do this in memory of me’ echoed in the depths of my being, and it was as if Jesus was asking to say these words through me. Yet, I was still hesitant; was I just making this up?

Then on the day of my consecration, December 8, 2006, I went to Confession and Mass and recited my prayer of consecration. From that moment, I perceived that a burden had been lifted from my shoulders. I went to a chapel for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and spent nearly three hours praying with great fervor. As I knelt and prayed my rosary, just as I had so many years before, I knew with every fiber of my being that Mom, Julie, and Kristin were right beside me praying with me. At that moment I felt the same ray of peaceful, penetrating light from God that I had experienced the night of the wake service. Joy penetrated my senses, and I knew that I would never again walk alone. The pain and misery that for years I had known was gone and the emptiness in my heart had been filled with unconditional love and mercy. Besides this, I also knew with certainty that I was truly called to be a priest; how else could I respond to such generosity shown me by God?

Then the truly hard part began: to which community or diocese was God calling me? This decision did not come so easily or dramatically. As I left for home at the Christmas break, my father told me that our diocesan bishop, Michael Pfeifer, OMI, was in a community with Mary in the title. Considering my newfound devotion to Mary, this sounded like a good place to start so I met with him, and he put me in contact with the vocation director, Fr. Charles Banks, OMI. Fr. Charles’ persistence in keeping contact was pivotal, and he introduced me through a pamphlet to St. Eugene de Mazenod. This man’s fiery temper reminded me of my own and his time in exile took me back to the years I had spent as an

outcast from true happiness. But it was his love for the poor and most abandoned that eventually opened my heart to the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

Eventually I decided to enter, and with time, I have found that the peace that I once felt only occasionally has now taken up a permanent

residence in the depths of my being. Now I understand that Jesus allowed me to feel all those years the crushing weight of darkness in order to be able to sympathize with those who have lost their last strand of hope. "If we bear in our body the death of Jesus, it is with the hope that the life of Jesus, too, may be seen in our body." (OMI CC&RR 4)

Conversion

We greet you in the name of Jesus Christ and our mother Mary. We are grateful that you are thinking of us. We have dedicated some time to reflect on conversion, the theme for the General Chapter. This is the result of our reflection.

Scholastics at "Blessed Joseph Gerard" House -- Asunción – Paraguay

First of all we must remember our Oblate identity and option. Who are we? What are our ideals? To whom do we commit ourselves as Oblates? We should not forget that fundamentally, they are the poor and the Church and the proclamation of the Kingdom of God through the witness of a simple and committed life, advancing the Oblate ideal: *preach the Good News to the most abandoned, being the prophetic voice of those without a voice like so many Oblates who went before us.*

Being an Oblate always requires a constant and progressive conversion, recognizing our limitations and dependence on God and recognizing the values and virtues of the charism expressed in community life.

Personal conversion should be sought and expressed in community and among Brothers. The community should be the means and, at the same time, the place of conversion. This conversion points always towards our identity as Oblates; working seriously to be saints and walking always down the paths followed by so many evangelical workers; seeking to renew and grow constantly in the spirit of the vocation to which we have been called.

For this we need community, the brother who follows the same path. It implies a gospel attitude of watching, of taking care of a brother and when

necessary, practicing fraternal correction with a spirit of charity.

Living in community implies and requires humility, dedication, self-giving and acceptance of limits as well as valuing its virtues and values. This experience lived in community is the strength that leads us to extend our charism in the Church and in the communities where we are present, that is to say, the missions.

It is in this community where we should help each other to grow and mature in the spiritual and affective life, beginning to work on these aspects already from the moment of first formation; to motivate and nurture Oblate values and the integrity of life.

What is Conversion?

It is walking always in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. It is a slow and progressive path and sometimes can be conflictive. Therefore, it is necessary to have a patient and humble attitude to follow. It is centering our lives again on Christ, setting up an intimate relationship with him. It is being a prophetic sign of Christ and of his Kingdom among the people to whom we dedicate our lives. It is placing all our strength and energy so that the Glory of God will be made present among the people to whom the Church sends us.

We need to deepen our spirituality and not neglect our following Christ. We should love and nurture our vocation in prayer, the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, reconciliation and in a fraternal and supportive community life. We should not lose sight of the charism and that call which Saint Eugene de Mazenod heard: afire with the love of CHRIST and his Church, he was left profoundly impressed by the abandonment of God in which the people found themselves. He decided to be a servant and priest of the poor and sacrifice his whole life for them.

Our Congregation is living a very significant development in Latin America: the number of Oblates is increasing in the region. This is a sign of hope and encouraging on the one hand, but a challenge on the other hand, because the needs force the Oblates of the region to assume more responsibilities in the Congregation and to feel the demand of the mission, since the coming of Oblates from other places is notably decreasing.

Therefore, the Oblates in Latin America are living a reality which we could call “evolving” and, using psychological terms, we are going from adolescence to young adulthood. The Region and every province depended on other provinces for economic sustainability and personnel (missionaries). The past few years, provinces see themselves with the responsibility of taking up the work, service and Oblate missionary life of the Region.

In this way, we notice ever more the decrease in dependency, even though it is still present in some provinces. We see that there are fewer and fewer European Oblates in our region, and with this, we also observe that our provinces are “nationalizing”, to use a sociological term. This means that Latin American Oblates are the ones taking over more of the missions, without forgetting that we continue to count on personnel from other countries, but in fewer numbers, compared to years before.

We acknowledge that in 2009, we were four

hundred sixty-seven Oblates in Latin America, 65 % of them being Latinos, and one hundred and one are in first formation.

With respect to conversion, the theme that inspires the next General Chapter, we believe that in the Region, we should look for and discover how to do everything we do, in pastoral ministry, projects, parishes and other works, so that they are not solely personal tasks but of the Congregation, of the brotherly community that makes it possible to transmit the aroma of Christ which should run in our blood, should form part of the personal “yes” that each of us pronounces but which will be in the end a definitive yes of the community. What should we do so that we can incarnate the apostolic community which allowed itself to be led by Truth, the words of the Lord and left aside its subjectivism and individualism so that Faith and Love could grow in each one? On the other hand, how can we determine if it is necessary to keep or not keep the missions begun by the provinces that don’t really respond to the actual reality or that are not run well, due to lack of personnel, so that new Oblates are not simply plugging up holes in the missions? How? This is where our uncertainty lies, and where we can collaborate greatly in the manifestation of the Kingdom of God in Latin America, as sons of the same Father and Mother and brothers in Saint Eugene.

This whole “ideal” mentioned above, we believe, is possible if from the time of first formation, including the first steps, all are on the path of dedication, of a profound “yes” founded on faith and vocation. We believe that during the time of formation we should already be polishing that “aroma”, that “figure and profile” of Christ in every candidate being formed on behalf of the Congregation as well as the Oblate himself who tomorrow and later on will be or should be the image of Christ incarnated in his vocation to be an Oblate.

Conversion: to be a faithful and human servant

By Scholastic Brother Ronald Abad, OMI

Brother Ronald Abad, OMI, is a 36 year old scholastic of the Philippine Province, studying at Our Lady of Assumption Scholasticate, Quezon City.

Almost two hundred years ago, our founder, Eugene de Mazenod, started a small missionary society of men. Driven by the need of the people for an effective preacher of the youth who were eaten up by moral degradation of their time, and of the Church in one of Her most deplorable states, because of the effects of the French Revolution, his first apostolic initiatives were born. Then the inevitable happened: he became the father of one of the most ardent missionary congregations of men in the Roman Catholic Church.

Then seventy years ago, the first group of Oblate missionaries from the United States arrived in the Philippines. They founded parishes from densely populated areas of Christian migrants in Mindanao to a minuscule population of Christians in the Moslem-dominated areas of Jolo and Tawi-tawi. They planted the seeds for Notre Dame Schools which today number more than a hundred, including the ones renamed and run by other religious congregations. These pioneering Oblates also ventured into media ministry and, for the first time in the Philippines, a Catholic radio went on air to broadcast a noble apostolic mission. And they even provided decent shelter to impoverished Christian and Moslem Filipinos by building up villages through housing projects, and so forth.

Archbishop Gerard Mongeau, who had not the slightest idea of the Philippines and could not even spot it on the map when given his missionary assignment, became one of the pillars of the Oblate mission in the Philippines. St. Eugene de Mazenod, who, at first, was only concerned with the people and the Church in the southern part of France, became the founder of a congregation whose members today are serving in almost every part of the world. We have indeed a treasure trove of great Oblates. From Blessed Joseph Gerard, the apostle of Lesotho, to Bishop de Jesus and Fathers Inocencio and Roda, the martyrs of Jolo and Tawi-tawi, the love

of Oblates for the people of God throughout the world is undeniable.

There are countless Oblates who dedicated themselves to work in the mission because of their immense love for the helpless and the hopeless men and women of all generations. They have succeeded in bringing the Good News to the impoverished and the unlovable, the addressees of the Beatitudes. We concede that they became great, not by what they accomplished but what God had accomplished through them. They proclaimed the Good News, not because of their eloquence and perfect witnessing to the Word, but because basically it was God's Good News and not theirs. Adjectives may fall short in describing them but I will tirelessly say that they are the giants of our congregation. As I may endlessly speak of them, I have nothing to say about myself compared to them. I am just a temporally professed Oblate, struggling academically with my theological studies, and whose religious identity is still being molded in formation. Who am I compared to the great men of Oblates of Mary Immaculate? Whatever I may accomplish, still, I am standing on the shoulders of giants.

Two realities pervade my consciousness. As I am standing on the shoulders of giants and look down, I cannot help but experience vertigo. If I fail and cannot keep my balance, surely I will fall and it will be a hard fall. As I think of the expectations hurled upon me by my formation, I also think of the consequences if I fail. Will there be something like a net to catch me or will I hit the hardest surface of our existence? What if I will not become an accomplished missionary – will that make me less than an Oblate? What if I cause something that will hurt my brother Oblates – will that make me less than a brother? What if, after my formation, I will not become an effective minister – will my formators regret

in promoting me? My many “what-ifs” are a manifestation that I do not feel comfortable standing on the shoulders of our giants.

Those great men hold a special place in our congregation and the Church. If it is my intention to be like them -- a measure of my being an Oblate -- then I cannot be another giant standing on the shoulders of a giant. But if I am looking for my rightful place in the reign of God, then there is no sense in jumping off from the shoulder of the giants for God Himself provided the giant. There is no sense to look down and measure my altitude, for that will only give me a meaningless, uncomfortable feeling. The place provided for me is not to make me sick of heights but to give me clarity about how vast the opportunity is to proclaim the kingdom of God. This is the second reality.

Formation is more than keeping my balance. It is more a trusting that formation is providing me a balanced life which I greatly need to be a true servant. It is not about finding my place in the congregation but about giving myself to the congregation without yearning for achievements. It is not about asking God for something and instructing Him as if He does not know what to do with my life but it is about cooperating with His will and being obedient to His command. It is not about studying in school for the sake of passing a requirement and becoming an ordained Oblate but it is about willingly opening myself to understand God by trusting others like my theologian-professors. It is not about going to my apostolate area every weekend for the sake of pleasing my superiors (or myself) but giving my eyes a vision of the reality in this world. It is not about living in a community so that there is someone to commend my achievements or ridicule me over my failures. Instead the community provides me the privilege to share a life with lovable and unlovable brothers for a common mission.

I realize that it is not about struggling to live but striving always to love; not of balancing but of trusting. And in trusting, I am led to a deeper question of who am I to God. Incarnation provides a clear answer for this. But more than answering my seemingly selfish question,

incarnation is God’s profound way of telling humanity how special we are.

John 3:16 provides a glimpse of how special humanity is to God and His plan for them. But we should consider that the Son did not come like super heroes in comics or movies. Missionaries do not go to the mission and play the messiah. Rather, they proclaim the messiah. If one day I become a missionary, I would appear foolish if I deal with people the way my professors taught me in theological courses. It would be pointless to quote great theologians and philosophers like I am ready for a debate. When the Word was made flesh, God embraced the lowly, not from above but where humanity was. As a missionary of the future, I can only fulfill what God has given me to do if I proclaim Him from my lowliness. I can only be His missionary if I keep Him and His teachings at the core of the mission.

There is something special in our humanity which can help us in our mission, something we should hold on to as we approach different facets of the mission. Jesus taught humans how to be humans. Jesus Himself learned how to be human -- a challenge for us since the Son Himself was not spared from the known (and always negative) attributes of being human. The story of an adulterous woman made Jesus to stoop and write -- He Himself experienced how it feels to be in a dilemma. He could have remembered how His mother was caught in a situation that could possibly have resulted in her being stoned to death. He could have remembered as well His foster father, Joseph, who could naturally have yielded to anger but chose not to. Jesus, from secondary causes, also learned virtues. He is, then, teaching humans to learn from experience because it can be a source of virtues -- and to be human is to live in virtue. Only humans have the privilege of experiencing many things and rising up virtuous. Our great Oblates were not spared from the harshness of life and the “humanity” of the mission. But they grabbed the opportunity to experience truly how to be human and to act in virtue. I do not have the right to complain of the difficulties in formation for I have opened myself to conversion, a conversion which emanated from my commitment to always live a virtuous life

Jesus' whole life, His actions and His teachings, are a paradigm of how to be human. It is by becoming a true follower of Jesus Christ – in thoughts and in deeds – that one will discover what it means to be human. One of the instructions of our founder for those who are in formation is “to teach them how to act like humans.” Some are offended by this for they consider it an implicit address to animals. They missed the important point our founder would like to convey, a message Jesus Christ himself lived out.

The notion that to be human is offensive can be traced to how our society actually experiences its humanity. Slavery, oppression, violence, poverty and injustice are only some of the faces of a dysfunctional society dreaded by the people who long for the opposite. Many Filipinos have the belief that it is alright to do wrong and to be sinful as a consequence of being a human when they say “*Pagkat kami ay tao lamang*” (because we are just humans, we are limited and prone to do wrong). But Jesus keeps on reminding us that to be human is not a trap leading us to sinfulness but an opportunity to prepare ourselves to be worthy of His Kingdom by overpowering the evil that preys on us. There is no other shortcut to the Kingdom but to live and act like a human by emulating the life of Jesus. Humanity is like a furnace where the best gold is tested through fire. The human Jesus effectively demonstrated the battle between the good and the evil. It is the very same battle where the Oblates are soldiers, schooled and trained in the virtues of Jesus, commissioned to help in the salvific act of God and to which I cheerfully commit myself by becoming an Oblate and in the process fortify my own humanity.

The discovery of what it means to be human does not end in one's self. It is not a question of who, what or where am I in this world, but a recognition that I am a part of this world – that my existence does not end in myself and that I have a connection with other human beings.

When Jesus walked here on earth, He proved the skeptics were wrong. Jesus showed in our humanity that the Ultimate Reality – our absolute origin and absolute destiny – can be known. It is

by being aware of this Ultimate Reality that will keep us attuned to our mission. Our relationship with the Ultimate Reality is based on the love He Himself shared with us and exemplified in the Eternal Son. Our true humanity is defined by love: the existence of this world is caused by His love, and the union with the Ultimate Reality is the “perfection” of that love.

We may be constantly looking for a new mission and forget the center of our mission. We may be anxious to accomplish something and tempted to edge out our great Oblates. We worry about the world today: a corruption of values among the youth; philosophies of the new age; the internet's threat to interpersonal relationships; too much professionalism with the abundance of psychiatrists and preference for them over religious counselors; territorial disputes and the resolution of problems by armaments; and a lot more. Putting up structures like the ones built and established by the Oblates in the Philippines seventy years ago or the foundation of a religious congregation such as at the time of St. Eugene are things of the past. Our great Oblates had no foreknowledge of their greatness, like a humble person who can never claim to be humble. They allowed themselves to be led by God and fully cooperated with His will. They allowed their humanity to be fully anchored in the life of our Savior. Although they also had an insight into the vastness of the mission, they could only see the horizon but they never considered themselves the giants of today's generation.

I may not be a perfect scholastic or may not become a perfect Oblate. I may always have the “what-ifs” and sometimes need to work hard to keep my balance. But keeping the teachings of Jesus Christ, His life and His mission, and striving to be fully human, I always open myself for conversion; a conversion which has a communal dimension. The mission does not belong to me alone or to any Oblate alone. It may be overwhelming to stand on the shoulders of the giants or awe-inspiring to look up to them. But sometimes it diminishes our capacity to discover the great missionary within each of us. And to this end, Paul enlightens us. “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came

to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building." (1 Corinthians 3:5-9).

Our great Oblates do not overshadow us; rather,

they form a great and proud tradition. A tradition which does not belong only to the past but is faithfully and creatively passed on to the next generations like ours. God allows every Oblate to participate in this great and proud tradition. We offer ourselves to be God's workers in His Kingdom. He calls for our constant conversion by being servants working with other servants that we may always have a new heart, a new spirit, and a new mission.

The Call to a Conversion like Philemon's

By Scholastic Brother Thabang Nkadimeng, OMI

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St. Paul the apostle, out of love for the gospel of Jesus Christ, proudly considers himself a prisoner of the Lord – and rightly so he is. Paul underwent a radical kind of conversion that proved necessary, not only for him but for all people, and he became that instrument through which many came to be converted to Christ Jesus the Lord. In his Letter to Philemon, he demands a different kind of conversion from his friend, but nonetheless a real conversion. Philemon is the master of the useless slave Onesimus (a name meaning 'the Useful One') who, after being with Paul his fellow brother in the Lord, becomes useful to Philemon his new brother in the Lord.

Paul calls Philemon to a radical conversion that shakes the political and sociological barriers of the time. He asks of Philemon — based on an appeal to his free will — to accept and to be faithful only to the Lord, to see himself as a brother and not a master of the slave Onesimus. It could be perceived that Philemon had many other slaves. However, by accepting baptism, Onesimus ceases to be a slave of the devil and of Philemon, but becomes a liberated person, a new man. This is too much to ask from one who is used to having slaves as part of his household. To

turn tools into humanity is an impossible human endeavor. Nevertheless, a change of mind and heart is what is asked for here.

Our Oblate congregation is on the verge of accepting or not accepting the message of St. Paul to receive back what we call "slave" and receive it as precious and useful to us. Not much comes to my mind when I think of what should come back as useful. However, what does come to mind is that our Oblate conversion is a personal and communitarian conversion – not just one, but both. The process of reflection is personal and yet 'one in mind and heart', as desired by St Eugene de Mazenod. If the aspect of having 'one mind and heart' is missing, then I proclaim: Voila! This should come back, for it is useful!

The world is in need of external signs of our consecration; otherwise we prove to be defeated by the spirit of modernity and relativism. When we accept ourselves as consecrated people, as fellow labourers for Christ, we shake the political and sociological barriers of our time, thus becoming a useful instrument for the Lord. When our task is undertaken personally and in community, then we are sure to say that we are apostles of the same Lord, and brothers to each other.

The era of total theism has unfortunately come to a limping point. As much as Christianity has been accepted as a culture that can be inculturated, in the same way atheism has entered our era as an accepted culture. Where are we in all this? If Philemon does not accept Onesimus back as a brother and not a slave, he is like a believer who believes in Christ with his mouth but in practice embraces the culture of non-belief. Likewise, if with our mouths we proclaim Christ and in practice do not embrace the whole Christ life, we clearly have embraced a culture of non-belief.

The external signs of religious consecration are not only the habit or the Oblate cross but these have an extremely important impact on the world that has accepted non-belief as a culture. Rome is known for its 'fashion parades' of different religious habits but this is not a fashion parade as the world probably sees it, but it is a manifestation of a religious cultural reality. Rome is a city of religious manifestations. It is a city that has

chosen to shake the political and sociological barriers of the modern world. When the Italian government removes crucifixes from the walls in the schools for reasons of religious tolerance, there remains a culture powerful and proud of its stand — this is the religious culture that is present at the foot of the tomb of the apostle Peter. This is who we are, we cannot separate ourselves from the great Catholic tradition that we have inherited.

We are present in 67 different countries all over the world. What culture do we embrace and manifest interiorly and exteriorly? It should clearly be a culture that does not embarrass us but makes us who we are; and what we believe is the way to go and live. A people without a culture are like a blank sheet of paper that is useless. "Useful" (Onesimus) indeed offers us a helpful model which can promote and encourage our own conversion process and mission to the people of God.

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