

APOSTOLIC POVERTY

March 25th, 2002 - Letter - Rome

Dear brother Oblates,

This is the first of a series of circular letters I intend to write on our vows. I will start with the vow of poverty. My original plan was different. I wanted to consider mission first. However, the Inter-Chapter meeting made me aware that the Congregation has decidedly engaged in a reflection process on our missionary practices - the Immense Hope project. The Inter-Chapter and my visits have also convinced me that many feel a deep longing for spirituality in order to be faithful to our mission.

Through speaking about the vows I intend to emphasize what underlies all missionary work, namely the relationship with the One who sends us. The apostles are sent only after having been called to live with the Master. "And he appointed twelve, whom he also called apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message..." (Mk 3:14). Our Founder, too, felt strongly that we start in the same way: "How, indeed, did our Lord Jesus Christ proceed when he undertook to convert the world? He chose a number of apostles and disciples whom he himself trained in piety, and he filled them with his Spirit. These men he sent forth...." (Preface to our Rule)

Deepening the values that underlie our mission

At present there is a widespread conviction that we need to work on the spirituality that underlies our mission. From Africa-Madagascar I read: "We have not forgotten the mandate of the last consultation: Spiritual depth!" (...) "We need spiritual revamping." (...) "We need renewal." A report to the Inter-Chapter states: "Young professionals join us in a search for meaning; we have to stress... spirituality." Recently, a letter reached my desk, repeating: "When I suggested 'Mission and Mysticism' as the theme of the next General Chapter, I had in mind the need to elaborate a typically Oblate spirituality.... What is missing in many of us is a profound conviction, a life project which gives us the determination and strength to build the Kingdom, without hesitating, just like Christ who faced up to betrayal, insult, defeat, torture and death, without flinching from his purpose.... Passionately committed to Jesus Christ, to Jesus Christ present in the most excluded, those discriminated against, the oppressed."

One approach to our spirituality is through the vows considered as some of the basic values that underlie our mission. Our Rule even goes so far as to call the spirit of our vows a requisite for mission. "Our mission requires that, in a radical way, we follow Jesus who was chaste and poor and who redeemed mankind by his obedience" (C 12).

The vows are constitutive of our identity as Oblates. Without them we would be good and active Christians or good and zealous priests, but we would lack our specific identity. Our Oblate vows are not generic as if they were the same for every religious in the world. Made in our Congregation, they express a specific way of following Christ, animated by a unique charism, that of Eugene de Mazenod.

The vow of poverty: ideal and shortcomings

History and current experience teach us that there are two forms of poverty, one which is destructive afflicting the majority of the world's population, the other which frees energies for love and service. The latter we choose and vow. These expressions are from the 2002 Synod on Bishops to which I will return at the end of my reflection.

Why do I start with the vow of poverty? First, for a very practical reason. At the Inter-Chapter, special attention was drawn to the topic of finances, which are a matter of growing concern. Several Oblate units including the General Administration are facing a scarcity of financial means. Some units face the danger of bankruptcy or serious financial shortage over the short and medium term. These financial realities affect our mission as it is functioning now and they will touch our future. We cannot dissociate these concerns from our life and practice of poverty.

We are also aware that in the background, there is a still broader issue. The traditional patterns of our missionary practice are changing. We suddenly have come to realize that it is commonplace today for missionaries to be sent out by countries with quite limited material means. The type of Church they build will have to be different in the way it finds its resources.

In view of these facts, a number of Provinces have immediately shown decisiveness in tackling the issue. One Provincial states: "We simply have to cut our cloth to size." Then he goes further and proposes to seek a more profound perspective. Sometimes "getting rid of a pet" will mean "a sacrifice that could open our eyes to a deeper reality like St. Paul, 'to have suffered the loss of all things... that I may gain Christ and be found in him'." (Phil 3:8)

The theme is also topical in other religious congregations. The next assembly of the Union of Superiors General has chosen "Economy and Mission" as its topic.

Our financial situation is not the most important issue. For a good number of Oblates, the value of the vow of poverty is intrinsically linked to the plight of the poor in our world. To relieve the poverty of the people has been the primary motive for many to join a missionary Congregation and the corresponding vow liberates in them special energy for love and service. Surely this vision rests on good theological foundations. Did mission not first begin when He who was rich became poor for our sake (2 Cor 8)? "The option for the poor is inherent in the very structure of love lived in Christ," says Vita Consecrata (82). Like Jesus, many Oblates too feel sent mainly to become friends of the poor and abandoned, somehow sharing with compassion their deplorable state.

In passing I note that some authors simply give this vow the first place. They see in it "the key value in the vows... celibacy and obedience are ways of being poor."^[1] This coincides with the Rule in the time of the Founder: "Voluntary poverty [has been regarded by all the Founders of religious Orders] as the foundation and basis of all perfection."^[2]

Experience also teaches us that the deeper values we espouse in our life as missionaries often reveal where our human weaknesses lie. It should not surprise us that our practice of poverty falls short of the ideal. While it is normal to be tempted we must find the means to resist. Saint Eugene mentions such difficulties in words that are clear and he encourages us to be faithful:

"Have we nothing to blame ourselves for in the area of holy poverty which, no more than obedience, may be only an imaginary thing in our Congregation. What does the Rule say about it? 'Voluntary poverty [is] the foundation and basis of all perfection.' That is already enough to esteem it at its proper value. Consequently, everything among us has to be after 'the manner of the poor'."^[3]

"Holy poverty" challenges us in many ways. What are some of those challenges for an apostolic community? Are our buildings and organization really at the service of the poor and abandoned? Do we always respect the intentions of our donors? Do we exercise careful stewardship over the

maintenance and care of the material resources with which we are blessed? Do we respect the environment in our way of living and disposing of that which we have already used? Do we depend too much on the “easy” money of projects and funds instead of relying more on our own work and on the people themselves? Do we make enough efforts to seek out support or do we rely too much on others to find it for us?

In our personal life, the temptations may consist in being drawn into the logic of a consumer society and feeling too much at home in our comfort zones. There may be other circumstances. We may be content to have escaped from a personal background of economic misery or deprivation, and so be reluctant to choose voluntary poverty as a value. If our lives lack fulfillment, if Christ is not really the heart and soul of our existence, then we tend to take refuge in material things: cars and gadgets, money that is not shared, big institutions and high walls.

Something that could mirror back to us what is good and evil in the practice of poverty will be our contact with our candidates. What is it in us that attracts them? Is it our generosity and sacrifice or do they just want to share what appears as comfort, security and easy access to material goods?

Having considered some aspects of the contrast between the ideal and our shortcomings, let us now turn our faces to the light of the Gospel and its first beatitude. I propose a three-step reflection: about Jesus, about the poor and about community. According to our Rule, “Our choice of poverty compels us to enter into closer communion with Jesus and the poor...” and it makes us “hold all things in common” (C 20-21).

Following a Master who made himself poor for us

For an apostle, poverty is first of all a natural and very practical thing. The Oblates live out their vow of poverty by adhering to the apostolic purpose of the Congregation. Like the apostles we follow our Master and share his kind of life. He was sent to evangelize the poor and he proclaims as the first beatitude “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Lk 6:20). True to his word he became poor for our sake and had nowhere to lay his head. It is he who invites us to join him in the same experience.

If religious life means to live publicly like Jesus lived and that every charism expresses a special facet of Jesus' life, we Oblates follow Jesus in evangelizing the poor. Included in our mandate are the privations typical of apostolic life: staying close to the poor, sharing their worries, depending on their hospitality, being always on the road.

In 1819 Fr. Tempier writes to Eugene de Mazenod from the mission in Rognac where nothing had been prepared to receive them: “The result is that we are living like the apostles.” De Mazenod answers: “I envy your position.”^[4] At some periods of his life when he was less directly involved with the people, St. Eugene wanted to live very simply. As a seminarian he chose to sweep his room himself, as a bishop he preferred to wear old and worn-out clothes when he had not to appear in public. He wanted to follow Christ who announced the Gospel to the poor not only by word, but through his very life even to death on the cross.

This brings us to a still deeper and mystical dimension of a missionary's poverty. According to St. Eugene, we achieve the spirit of poverty through an intimate closeness to Jesus. He states: “The first means to acquire holy religious poverty is continual and fervent prayer. The second means is to consider attentively our Lord Jesus Christ as the model and reward of poverty.”^[5] How can this mystical poverty be described?

Even if we possess material means, as humans we are essentially poor. Christ became like us, even unto death, so that we in turn might assume our own essential human poverty. At our core we are empty, there is hunger, restlessness. Through the Gospel we understand more fully the human condition.

Following our master who made himself poor for our sake (C 19), the virtue of poverty leads us to understand our Christian being in a deeper way. Vita Consecrata says that "when poverty is lived according to the example of Christ who, 'though he was rich... became poor' (2 Cor 8:9), it becomes an expression of that total gift of self which the three Divine Persons make to one another." At the most radical level we possess nothing since even we ourselves are a gift from God's hand.

Oblate religious, express their practice of the virtue of poverty through the concrete preions of the vow. Fr. Fernand Jetté says: "The Oblate, as a person, is poor, even quite poor: he possesses nothing or almost nothing and cannot make use of anything except in and through obedience.... His situation is one of complete dependence, the situation of a 'minor'. This is the radical gift of himself that he makes to God."^[6] Of course one could misinterpret such a dependence in a childish way; what is meant is the true childhood of someone who has matured in faith. People expect to find in a religious a deep sense of such an evangelical attitude: "Blessed are the poor.... If you do not become like little children.... See the birds of heaven.... " Our lives should reflect the trusting relationship of Jesus with his Father.

What can we do on a day to day basis to become more faithful to our communion with Christ in his poverty?

We could strive to emulate St. Eugene's spirituality of dependence on Providence. In a November 1815 letter his father he writes about "a foundation of Missionaries whose duty it will be to cover the countryside.... We will establish ourselves in the former Carmelite monastery and go out from there on our apostolic travels." Then he comes to the point: "What is good about it is that I am forming it without a penny. We must trust fully in divine Providence."^[7]

Some Oblates are called to live an extreme form of poverty by enduring persecution, even martyrdom. We should be deeply grateful to our brothers who suffer in this way. From the beginning, religious life has been seen as taking the place of martyrdom; therefore communion with our own martyrs might help us to understand more fully the vow of poverty.

A short prayer that helps me personally to live this vow, and I guess it works for obedience as well, is the following: "Lord, I thank you for small humiliations." I use it when I suffer as a result of my own stupidity, or if I am put in my place by a defenseless person, etc. At such moments I have a sense of being poor.

Our blessed Mother Mary, our patroness, is a beautiful model of "practical" and mystical poverty. She concretely experienced hardship and early on came to know the poverty of being a refugee (Mt 2:13-15). She is truly one of the poor in the Spirit whom Jesus calls blessed. Vatican II says of her: "She stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord, who confidently hope for and receive salvation from Him" (LG 55.)

Towards a closer Communion with the poor

a) Closeness to the poor. - In our following of Jesus, the Spirit "compels us to enter into closer

communion... with the poor" (C 20).

In my contacts with the Congregation I am always amazed to observe how close the Oblates are to the people and how real their sharing in poverty can become. As an example I quote from a letter of a Latin American-born missionary: "Yesterday I was in a poor community, very poor indeed. I felt happy, I had a lively experience of the presence of Jesus in those people. I stayed to sleep in a family home.... They put my bed in the dining room; there was a Christmas tree at the head; the bed smelt of the baby's urine and there were visitors during the night - mosquitoes and how many of them! I spent the night awake in prayer. I feel very happy with the experience. I believe that is the way, to live with the poor. I am not satisfied with going once a month to stay with them for just an hour and a half and then go back home."

Poverty is so widespread in today's world! A recent issue of an Oblate newsletter from Africa reports: "We have no rain, the crops are drying up in the fields and people are going to bed hungry at night. [Our two Oblates in X tell us how] poverty is the talk of the day and is real, young and old people are dying, they go for days without food.... The urgent need of the people at the present moment is food.... They do not come to church, even for instructions, because of hunger in the homes. This has also been seen in the schools; children are not attending, and when they do, they faint during lessons."[\[8\]](#)

There is no shortage of statistics concerning poverty. For instance, the number of people living on less than \$2 a day amounts to 2.8 billion,[\[9\]](#) 56% of the world's population. Instead of poverty we could more accurately speak of misery. Poverty might allow for some human dignity but misery degrades the person. Misery creates resentment. It means that someone in the family will die because of the lack of a mere 50 dollars. It forces many into dishonesty because without bribing, without cheating, children will starve. As a young man St. Eugene felt specially called to serve those "poor without the least idea of their dignity." To reveal that dignity he used to teach them catechism during his holidays from the seminary.[\[10\]](#)

It is true that as religious we will seldom be like the destitute. For one thing we have the gift of a fine education, and enjoy a certain security by holding all things in common. Ours is a voluntary apostolic poverty, not the misery of those who starve. Our mission is to overcome the evil in poverty by our practice of the virtue of poverty. The reality is that not every Oblate is and can be in close contact with those who live in misery, but all can practice the virtue. The poor and the "most abandoned souls," as the Founder calls them, can have many faces. There are also different types of service to the poor. Rule 9a speaks of those Oblates who "identify themselves with the poor, sharing their life and commitment to justice" and of others who "are present where decisions affecting the future of the poor are being made."

Whatever the concrete circumstances of our life and service may be, what the abandoned and those in need expect from us is that our heart be with them, that we be close to them in some real way. Our conscience asks: Do the poor come to us? Do they feel comfortable with us? Do they feel welcome in our houses? If they do not come, do we visit with them? Do we make their voices heard? Have we ever been persecuted because of them? These are some of the questions that come up when we envisage the value of our closeness to the poor.

b) Evangelization. - For Oblates, love for the poor and closeness to them is only the first outcome of our vow of poverty. It is the typical Oblate path of mission and evangelization.

Oblate experience teaches us that there is a fundamental link between our practice of poverty and our evangelizing:

Evangelization means, of course, proclaiming Christ, because the worst form of poverty is not knowing Christ.[11]

The link between evangelization and poverty is found in our lifestyle. Already the novices are asked to “adopt a simple style of life that will make them sensitive to the needs of people, especially the poor” (R 56a). Rule 7c on the Brothers says: “Through their religious consecration, they offer a particular witness to a life inspired by the Gospel.... Their service, as well as the witness of their life, constitute their ministry of evangelization.” De Mazenod makes some strong comments on certain priests in Ceylon who fortunately are not Oblates: “The priests who provide the services are unfit to bear the name of missionaries. They are men who, in their eyes, occupy places of rest, follow a routine which is not sufficient to bring about the conversion of infidels or heretics, and who are little concerned about leaving the unfortunate Christians to wallow in their ignorance and what stems therefrom.”[12] Rhetoric aside, his conviction here helps us to discern apostolic poverty.

“Action on behalf of justice, peace and the integrity of creation is an integral part of evangelization” (R 9a). Can we “change the destiny of the poor,” as a vocational brochure once put it? The Kingdom is not the product of our work alone, but the stances we take have sometimes proved to make a difference. Above all they maintain hope. “As witnesses to, and prophets of God's love, we want to be men of hope, reflecting the attitude of a God who never abandons his people.... Hence the challenge is to work with thousands of women and men towards something that might well be called solidarity on a global scale” (EPM 8).

We also evangelize using the material means we possess and which “may be considered the patrimony of the poor” (R 22a). Our work of evangelization requires that we use the means at our disposal in the best way we can.

Both evangelization and the practice of poverty leave us seeking a deeper communion with the poor. What could this involve?

One way is to accept consciously the hardships of being in the service of the poor. Once we live in closeness to the people they will knock on our doors and may disturb us at any hour. For them we will have to make long and tiring journeys, even on foot or on horseback, sleep in beds that are not our own, risk climate and health conditions not of our choosing. This is a concrete way of living the vow of poverty. The same can be said if we do not use certain things we could afford because they might scandalize people, cause astonishment when they enter our house.

Furthermore we can make their voices heard in places where decisions affecting their lives are made, and be prepared to suffer frustration or even persecution with them. Our Rule makes explicit mention of such an experience. “When faced with the demands of our mission and the needs to be met, we may feel weak and helpless” (C 20). It is not however without its reward: “It is then that we can learn from the poor, especially making our own their patience, hope and solidarity” (C 20). Our reward is that we can be “evangelized by them,” as the 1986 Chapter said.[13]

Let me return to the topic of our use of financial resources, in the light of these reflections on the virtue and vow of poverty.

We may consider Fr Tempier, our first General Bursar, as a model in this regard. In his time he was called "our financial Caesar", and even by Fr. Fabre, "Providence incarnate."^[14] The Congregation had many financial struggles in its early years. A crisis similar to the one today in many provinces occurred in 1847 because of Fr. Léonard's success in bringing in vocations. Another parallel today is the hardship, created or aggravated by violence, that some units are experiencing. It is similar to the hard times the Congregation knew during the 1848 revolution. Gradually Tempier managed to build up a "a reserve fund," as the Founder had suggested already in 1826.^[15]

Following Tempier's example, one way of living our vow is by being responsible stewards, by trying to provide the means for an effective evangelization. St. Eugene's "reserve fund" and our present day solidarity funds are similar.

While we are caring for the needs of mission, we must always be mindful of the fact that our finances should never lose their connection with the poor for whom they were given to us and from whom, in many cases, they have come to us. At times we seem to be following the opposite path and want to become independent of the poor. The value of evangelical poverty will shine more brightly in the eyes of the people if we accept our dependence on them in our needs, begging them for help, doing local fund-raising, waiting patiently for their contributions. This kind of solidarity might even be the only way to go in a given situation. Can we reverse the present trend of reliance on investments to depending more on support coming from the people we serve? The expression "patrimony of the poor" would receive a more real meaning. It would also have the effect of making us more accountable and responsible in their eyes.

As a practical consequence we have to accept a lifestyle and a way of doing mission which are more at the level of the countries in which we are present. Will this be less effective? Let us use an example. Sometimes doing mission work without a car can limit us: we will reach fewer places, we will spend more time on the road. But is the equation true: "No car equals less effective mission?" or even "No car equals no mission?" The mustard seed of the Kingdom has its own rules of effectiveness.

Our Rule speaks of "communion with Jesus and the poor." Let me conclude with a text from the last Synod as I promised above. At the opening Mass of the assembly, gathered in Rome in October 2001 to deliberate on the ministry of bishops, the Pope spoke about the spirit of poverty that must characterize a bishop. The Synod took this up several times and its final message presents the following synthesis:

"Just as we must struggle to free those oppressed by a poverty which is destructive, so there can be a kind of poverty which frees our energies for love and service. This is the gospel poverty which we want to practice. We should be poor before the Father, like Jesus in his prayer, his teaching and his deeds. We should be poor with Mary, remembering God's mighty works. We should be poor in the face of our brothers and sisters, marked by a style of life which draws people to Jesus the Lord. The bishop is the father and the brother of the poor. When it is necessary, he should not hesitate to raise his voice for those who have no voice, so that their rights will be recognized and respected. In particular, he must do everything he can so that in every Christian community, the poor feel 'at home'.^[16]

I believe this simple summary eloquently expresses what I have tried to offer.

Collective witness to the first beatitude

The vow of poverty is not only a question of our personal following of Christ or a way of deepening our communion with the poor, it is also constitutive of a new type of brotherhood among ourselves. Through the vow, what happened at the beginning of the Church is made to happen again: "The Spirit prompted the first Christians to share everything. Under the influence of that same Spirit, we hold all things in common" (C 21). The vow thus constitutes community. If we fail to live it, community will suffer. If we live it out, our special way of being together can be a path of evangelization powerfully united to preaching and to our personal witnessing.

How can the community aspect of poverty become meaningful for people? Our choices of where we live, build our houses and facilities, make a statement. Many Oblate communities are established in poor areas. The 1992 Chapter is emphatic on this point: "Thus sharing in the life of the poor, they will be better able to announce more fully 'the liberating presence of Jesus Christ' and to accompany the poor in their efforts to construct 'a world born of his resurrection' (C 9). They will then be able to welcome the poor more easily...." (MTW 25).

At the same time not all the communities can be "inserted" in impoverished areas. The situation of small and large communities also differs. A small fraternity may more easily live at the level of ordinary people; big houses, on the other hand, witness to saving costs through sharing. But in any situation the vow of poverty lived as community should make us counter-cultural.

Greed and individualism thrive in the present system of global economics. In contrast, the major religions of the world proclaim very different values - care for creation, sharing with the less fortunate, holding out the hope of a better world. Can our communities become striking witnesses to a life based on Gospel values? Can our ways of dealing with finances evangelize society as the Benedictine monasteries transformed Europe centuries ago, or as the Franciscans did in Latin America, etc.?

Our holding all things in common will make an impact. More lay associates will take up some of the values enshrined in the Oblate charism; others, including leaders of society, will find inspiration in our communal use of this world's bounty. The 50,000 participants at the World Social Forum 2002 in Porto Alegre saw "solidarity economy" as an alternative to neo-liberal globalization. When, among us Oblates, "all we acquire... belongs to the community" (C 22) our sharing becomes a sign of the universal destination of the goods of this world.

Conclusion

Of course, all we have said about the vows and particularly about poverty may sound idealistic and I have acknowledged that our lived reality is not fully in tune with the Christian message. The Gospel, good news of human and Christian freedom, will always be in us and beyond us, offering "new energies for love and service." It is never too late to change, we are given the chance to start our religious life all over again every morning. A scholastic wrote to me saying that he renews his vows every month, on the same date as he made them for the first time.

For our ongoing conversion we need to be challenged by our brothers and our superiors. I intend this letter to challenge, encourage, and confirm. Saint Eugene as a superior was outspoken in many ways, caring even about details: "I want to advise those who have to wear glasses to be content with a steel frame which the laity generally use."^[17] This particular example belongs to the past, but the spirit of his advice remains a light for our path, as it flames out in every paragraph of the Preface to our Rule.

His words sound like a summary of the beatitudes, a page of the Gospel rewritten for the Oblates:

“Living in a state of habitual self-denial, they must work unremittingly to become lovers of poverty and penance, free from inordinate attachment to the world, ready to sacrifice goods, talents, ease, self, even their life, for the love of Jesus Christ, the service of the Church, and the sanctification of their brethren.”^[18]

Abbreviations

EPM: Evangelizing the Poor at the Dawn of the Third Millennium. Acts of the 33rd General Chapter (1998).

MTW: Missionaries in Today's World (General Chapter 1986).

LG: Lumen Gentium. (Second Vatican Council).

[1] M. J. Himes, “Returning to Our Ancestral Lands”, Review for Religious Jan-Feb 2000, p. 21.

[2] E. de Mazenod, Circular Letter No. 2, Marseilles, February 2, 1857. Oblate Writings, Vol. XII, Letters to the Oblates of France, page 216.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Dictionary of Oblate Values, p. 723.

[5] E. de Mazenod, Notes on evangelical poverty, Aix, 1818-1821. Oblate Writings, Vol. XV, Spiritual Writings, No. 150, page 162.

[6] Dictionary of Oblate Values, p. 723.

[7] E. de Mazenod, Letter to his father. Oblate Writings, Vol. XIII, Letters to Various Correspondents, No.1, p.1 He also often confides to St. Joseph the material needs of the Congregation.

[8] February 2002.

[9] World Bank figures for 1998.

[10] Dictionary of Oblate Values, p. 705.

[11] Missionary Outlook, (General Chapter 1972), No. 15b. See also Dictionary of Oblate Values, p. 698.

[12] E. de Mazenod to Cardinal Barnabo, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide. Oblate Writings Vol. V, No. 68, p. 137.

[13] Missionaries in Today's World, No. 16.

[14] Y. Beaudoin, Tempier – Second Father of the O.M.I. [Oblate Writings, Series II.1], pp. 103 and 140.

[15] Ibid., pp. 107-108.

[16] Message of the Tenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, No. 15 (October 25, 2001); see also *Novo millennio ineunte*, 50.

[17] E. de Mazenod, Circular letter No. 2. Oblate Writings, Vol. XII, Letters to the Oblates of France 1856-1861, p. 217.

[18] Preface, *passim*.