

**General Chapter 1986**

**MISSIONARIES  
IN TODAY'S WORLD**

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# MISSIONARIES IN TODAY'S WORLD



MISSIONARY OBLATES OF MARY IMMACULATE  
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**1.**  
**MISSIONARIES**  
**IN TODAY'S WORLD**

## INTRODUCTION

1. The call of Jesus Christ to take part in his mission ever resounds in the hearts of Oblates. As in the past, this call comes to us today through people's need for salvation.
2. Like our Founder, we are convinced that the first need of all people is "to know who Jesus Christ is". Primarily, our mission is to proclaim Jesus Christ and his kingdom both to those who do not know him and to those who have lost sight of the hope which he brings us; in this way to lead them to the fullness of life.
3. We are engaged in our mission at a specific moment of time, a moment characterized by special needs which challenge our work of evangelization.
4. As Oblates gathered together in General Chapter, each bringing with him the lived experience, expressed desires and the questions raised in his Province, we have listened attentively to today's world and have become aware of its special need for salvation. We have tried to discern the main challenges this world poses to our mission of evangelization; we have asked ourselves how we might be even better missionaries in our present day.

5. In discerning together, we have heard six calls that are particularly urgent. In our response to them, we believe that our mission must be ever more:
- a mission to the poor, one in which ministry on behalf of justice is an integral part;
  - a mission in a world which is largely secularized;
  - a mission adapted to a variety of cultures;
  - a mission in collaboration with the laity;
  - a mission accomplished within the Church;
  - a mission through an apostolic community.
6. While considering how to respond to these calls, we have not lost sight of those ever-present priorities: formation and vocation recruitment. In fact, our mission will have no future unless we can count on being constantly renewed by new members who have been well formed.
7. We refer often to our Rule of life. These references are not simply repetitions; they express our profound adherence to the Constitutions and Rules and especially our desire to implement them in our lives.
8. What follows is an invitation to action, a call to a renewed missionary dynamism in today's world.
9. This document is comprised of seven sections. The first six constitute a whole; they present one by one six special challenges to our missionary activity. Each section follows the three-fold process adopted by the Chapter as

a way of deepening the themes under consideration:

- a look at the context;
- a reflection in the light of God's Word and our Oblate charism;
- a call to action in the form of recommendations.

The final section has its own structure. While each of the six General Chapter Commissions sought to deepen its understanding of mission from a particular perspective, all were concerned with the question of formation and vocations. The section entitled "Our Mission and its Future" is the result of reflections from all the Commissions.

# **I - MISSION, POVERTY AND JUSTICE**

## **The calls of the poor**

10. The ever-widening gap between rich and poor in today's world is a scandal to which we cannot remain indifferent. In the Third World we see widespread examples of misery, hunger, infant mortality and oppression. In developed countries profit-making, competition, tensions and war give rise to many groups who are newly poor and voiceless: the unemployed, political refugees and minorities which are rejected. Everywhere in our world a grave form of poverty has become rampant: ignorance of the Gospel and the loss of all religious hope.
11. The causes of poverty are varied and numerous. Natural catastrophes, such as prolonged drought, place certain people in precarious situations. In many cases people themselves are responsible for poverty. Egotism and greed are often the source of unjust economic and political structures, with little concern for human dignity. "Poverty frequently finds its origin and its support in systems which, imbued with materialism rather than an authentic humanism, produce at the international level situations wherein the rich become richer at the expense of the poor who be-

come poorer" (Document of Puebla, no. 2601).

12. In the face of this reality the poor do not remain passive but they are organizing so as to take hold of their lives. They are supported by a variety of organizations and by Christian Churches which view the promotion of justice as an authentic living out of their faith in Christ. In several countries men and women of good will, putting aside their own local concerns, are helping to promote understanding and solidarity with poor nations. "Some Oblates", in their missionary work, "identify themselves with the poor, sharing their life and commitment to justice" (R. 9).

## **The poor, God's Word and the Oblate Charism**

13. As long as this situation lasts, the question posed to Cain, "What have you done to your brother?" will resound in our ears. We believe in the God of Exodus, the God of yesterday and today, the liberating Savior of history, fully revealed in Jesus Christ. In the Gospel Jesus identifies himself with the hungry, the sick and with prisoners. He wants us to find him in those who suffer, in those who are abandoned or are persecuted for their stands in behalf of justice.
14. We Oblates are sent to evangelize the poor and the most abandoned, i.e. to proclaim

Jesus Christ and his kingdom (C. 5), to be witnesses of the Good News to the world, to motivate actions which might transform individuals and society, to denounce whatever is an obstacle to the coming of the kingdom.

15. Eugene de Mazenod opened up the way for us by devoting himself to the service of the poor and the most neglected people of Provence in order to bring the Gospel to them.
16. We choose to be poor to enter more perfectly into communion with Jesus and the poor (C. 20). We want to be close to them so as to share what they have and what we have, in order that we might learn to see the Church and the world from their perspective and to see them through the eyes of the crucified Savior (C. 4). Thus we are evangelized by them and we become for them better witnesses to the presence of Jesus, who became poor to liberate the human person and the whole of creation.

### **Stance**

17. We believe that we must bear witness to Gospel detachment before the world. We shall do this if we constantly encourage and challenge one another to conversion in this matter.
18. When we announce a liberating God our words will have no force or credibility unless our communities are seen as places where that liberation is a living fact. We cannot

preach a God who has made himself poor unless we truly follow him in our way of living.

19. Wherever the poor try to take control of their future, we shall be supportive of those popular non-violent movements which we judge, after some discernment, to be at the service of justice. We shall learn how to encourage leaders in this work.
20. We are ready to accept the consequences of our stands in behalf of justice. We shall support both those Oblates who must suffer because of their involvement and the poor with whom they have bound themselves.
21. We believe that Base Ecclesial Communities are privileged places for Christians, especially the poor, to express themselves and to live out the link between their faith and their lives.
22. We acknowledge our brother Oblates who are missionaries "ad gentes" and we cherish the apostolic thrust they continue to give to the Congregation. We wish to continue this service for the Church. In accord with our vocation we shall accept the poorest and most abandoned missions "ad gentes".

### **Recommendations**

23. We ask each Oblate to question himself in prayer about his call to serve the poor and the most abandoned.



24. In the light of the same call we ask all Oblates, individually and in community, to re-evaluate their lifestyle and their use of material things. This re-evaluation will be motivated by their concern to be faithful to the demands of religious life and by their desire to give a gospel witness to poverty.
25. We encourage Oblates to establish communities in poor areas. 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, following the spirit of C. 41, and to learn from them "patience, hope and solidarity" (C. 20).
26. "The community's possessions may be considered the patrimony of the poor" (R. 14). We shall continue to share with them our resources in money, personnel and various skills.
27. In our ministry we shall take advantage of every opportunity to invite Christians to act in behalf of the poor. We shall also help them to realize that they themselves might possibly be a cause of poverty without knowing it, by their attitudes, the values they espouse, their lifestyle, their political and social decisions. We shall engage in this same type of discernment ourselves.
28. We strongly urge Oblates to study, with the poor themselves as well as with other in-

volved Christians, structural and other causes of poverty. This will enable them to deepen their understanding of the moral aspects of certain issues which affect the plight of poor nations. Examples of such are the question of the payment of their debts by Third World countries and the unjust conditions underlying commercial trade between rich and poor nations.

29. We affirm the right of people to self-determination; we shall accompany them in their efforts to obtain it.
30. Our Congregation is spread over five continents. Our international bonds allow us to raise each other's consciousness about events or situations which focus on justice issues. We shall continue to take initiatives such as the Justice and Peace Network and the dialogue initiated between Oblates of North and South America.

## II - MISSION AND SECULARIZATION

### A secularized world

31. We live in a world which is secularized or quickly becoming so. As people gather in huge cities, as science and technology penetrate minds and radically transform living conditions, secularization becomes a universal phenomenon. It touches every aspect of life and shapes a new type of person. This new person is eagerly looking for autonomy, is trying to discover the meaning of earthly realities and is anxious to take charge of his or her own destiny. Whatever is not seen to be directly at the service of these objectives is considered suspect or is even left aside by society as a whole. All religions and all the major ideologies are confronted with this challenge from secularization.
32. Vatican II characterizes secularization as a true social and cultural metamorphosis having repercussions even for religious life (GS 4, 2). Such a change evokes a profound crisis in traditional values, but it also opens up new horizons for humanity. Thus secularization is at one and the same time a source of fear and of hope.
33. To the extent that secularization seeks to give legitimate autonomy to earthly realities and

discerns in them the laws of the Creator, it is in no way incompatible with faith or religion (EN 55). Unfortunately, it may easily slip into secularism which proposes an understanding of society without any reference to God who is considered "superfluous and a nuisance" (ibid.). Atheism finds a fertile field for itself in this slide toward secularism (Paul VI: in AAS LXIII, 1971, pp. 283).

34. In a world in which explicit reference to God disappears slowly but surely and religious structures cease to be an indispensable framework for social life, those believers who are more sophisticated can find an opportunity to purify their faith. Unfortunately, many others who are deprived of social support for their religious belief, easily fall into indifference or practical atheism.
35. **Aspects of secularization:**
  - a) In a secularized and at times secularist world one no longer speaks of God. Traditional value systems are greatly weakened, since they are often founded upon faith or religion. The search for a new common agreement on values is greatly hindered by accelerated social changes.
  - b) While some adapt well to such a situation and are able to find their balance therein, others are seized by fears and anxiety. They are disoriented and no longer feel like masters of their own destiny; they cannot keep up with the rapid evolution of society.

c) The loss of traditional values leaves the door open for ways of finding happiness proffered by a consumer society: the quest for an easy way out, for money, comfort, materialism. Disappointed by their failure to find happiness in these things, some look for an escape in alcohol, drugs or sex.

d) In a world marked by science and technology, a Christianity that emphasises the sensational or the miraculous is repugnant to the modern mind. Such an approach begets scepticism rather than faith.

e) Secularization impels one to abandon what is pseudo-sacred and to return to the essentials of the faith. Unfortunately, if it causes one to abandon what is truly sacred, one risks "sacralizing" certain aspects of society itself, v.g. progress, race, national security, individual freedom or profit.

f) In a world where everything is transitory, many no longer believe in the possibility of permanent commitments; they feel unable to pledge themselves to an unforeseeable future.

g) In a secularized world, the State takes over institutions which were formerly the domain of the Church. The missionary then has to find his place within structures which no longer belong to the Church.

h) In our present-day world, there are a number of organizations concerned with fundamental problems which transcend confessional, geographic and cultural boundaries, v.g. peace, disarmament, respect for human rights, the promotion of women, food for the

world, health care. These movements, in which believers and unbelievers work side by side, belong to the whole of humanity.

### **Oblate attitudes**

**36.** While being aware of the fact that this current evolution is ambiguous, we have to discern the positive values of the secularized world. We do not have ready-made answers to the questions of the world; it is with humility that we acknowledge our limitations (C. 20).

**37.** It is useless to complain about the world or to seek to flee from it. For us Oblates, cooperators with Christ in the work of salvation (CC. 1 and 2), this world cannot be alien territory. We are part of it and we are constantly influenced by it, for better or worse.

**38.** With an open heart and completely disposed to listen, we exercise our mission in this world which God loves and for which he has sent his Son. The world is indeed wounded by sin and its dreadful consequences but God is nevertheless present in the hearts of all who work for the good of humanity, even in the hearts of those who have not yet heard the Good News.

**39.** Christ's disciple brings a message of joy and reconciliation to the world. Christ's compas-

sionate love and availability to people are ideals for the missionary who wants to be present to the secularized world, whether visibly as a light on the mountaintop or invisibly as leaven in the dough.

40. Our awareness of our limitations does not prevent us from preaching to this oft-divided world a message of reconciliation grounded in the saving power of the risen Christ (C. 4). This power allows us, after the example of our Founder, to dare everything in order to lead people, "especially the poor", to a full awareness of "their dignity as human beings and as sons and daughters of God" (C. 8). This same power is the basis for the hope which we want to bring to the world.

#### **Pastoral strategies in a secularized world**

41. To our world in the throes of disintegration we bring the witness of a life unified in Jesus Christ (C. 31).
42. To a fear-ridden world we shall bring the serenity of our faith in a future life which gives meaning even to that new person born of secularization.
43. In the explicit preaching of the Gospel and especially in those places where the preaching of missions, in accordance with our Oblate tradition (R. 2), is a Province priority, we shall

strive to nourish a strong faith which can express itself boldly even in a social context where there is little or no support for it.

44. In some places where indifferentism and practical atheism reign, courageous actions and a clear witness of love and solidarity are imperative. We shall encourage and support those Oblates whom the Spirit impels to involve themselves in these milieux through professional or technical work. Their difficult mission will place the Church in a new light and help to assure her credibility.
45. The world needs to see our faith. A simple, open friendship with people, without any hidden thought of proselytizing, can be more effective than many words. By our intense living of Gospel values in a way understandable in today's world, we can indirectly reveal the "unknown God" (Ac 17, 23) for whom many are searching without knowing it. This will help prevent superstitions and idols of all kinds filling the gap caused by the rejection of religious values.
46. In a further attempt to reach this new world shaped by science and technology we shall not be afraid to use those signs and traditional symbols which still have meaning or to find new ones adapted to the modern person.
47. The most fundamental sign for us missionary Oblates is always the community. Community life centered around the vows is a protest against the abuses of a consumer society, the search for domination and the glorification of

sex. The vow of perseverance is a challenging symbol of fidelity in a world incapable of permanent commitments.

48. In places such as airports, department stores and hotels, space has sometimes been set aside for recollection and prayer. We shall be attentive to this and lend our services to this apostolate.
49. We consider certain special works, such as places of pilgrimage, centres of Christian renewal, Base Ecclesial Communities or their equivalent, places of recollection, prayer and counselling as important for the formation and deepening of faith.
50. We shall become involved in movements in behalf of peace, human rights or other movements with similar values, so as to nourish them with the leaven of the Gospel. In our world, which is sometimes hostile to the Church and careful to keep its distance from the institutional Church and from those who exercise authority in it, Oblate Brothers will often have a gospel influence which the priest could not have.
51. We shall be creative in the use of the mass media so that spiritual values will touch men and women of today in a way adapted to their mentality. If we are going to be effective in this area, specialized training is indispensable.

### III - MISSION AND INCULTURATION

#### A diversity of cultures

52. The universal aspiration for unity among peoples brings into sharp focus the great diversity of cultures: different ways people have of organizing their lives and of giving meaning to them, their reactions towards each other and the way in which they express their values held in common. This diversity of cultures is manifested even more clearly in the migration of entire populations and by the alienation from their own culture as experienced by groups of people such as the poor, the young, workers and other minorities.

Modern culture is characterized by an advanced technology which is constantly reshaping the consciousness of the human person. This brings about a dramatic change in the way we understand ourselves and our world. The evolution of cultures has been so accelerated by technology and the mass-media, that peoples' religions are affected.

#### Oblate values and missionary attitudes

53. It is in this context that a challenge is hurled at the Gospel: that of penetrating a given cul-

ture and taking root there in such a way that the faith is enriched as it is lived and expressed in languages, signs and symbols that are new. This is a challenge that the Church herself took up at the Council of Jerusalem (Ac 15, 1-29). Moved by love and the grace of the Holy Spirit and in obedience to Christ in whom God's love has been revealed, the Church has proclaimed that same incarnated Word as living and present in the diversity of peoples and cultures. Being aware that the "seeds of the Word" are already present in other religions and cultures (EN, 53), our task is to enter into dialogue with them so as to discover in them those values which resonate with the Gospel. The Word of God is thus a new treasure for them and it becomes the most intimate aspect of a culture, through which a given people understands itself, establishes relationships with others, adores God, organizes and celebrates its life

54. "My brothers, my dear brothers, my worthy brothers... You are God's children." With these feelings and in the language of the people our Founder approached the culture and the subcultures of his time. Inspired by his example, many Oblates have contributed greatly to the development and the evangelization of the cultures to which they have been sent and have fostered respect for them.
55. To "establish Christian communities rooted in the local culture" (C. 7), Oblates have to be "very close to the people with whom they work" (C. 8). In communion with them and

with an attitude of profound respect, we shall discover new aspects of the inexhaustible riches of God in the hearts of people, in their history and religions. "We shall let our lives be enriched... and thus we shall hear in new ways the Gospel that we proclaim" (R. 8).

56. This requires a profound spirit of faith on our part, a faith rooted in the conviction that we can recognize God's Spirit working within people of differing beliefs and cultures. In this dialogue with them we are certain that we shall encounter God. We share our faith with them and at the same time we accept and foster everything that is good in their faith and culture. Even our religious life may be expressed and lived out in new ways within these different cultures.
57. Inculturation is not only a way of acting, it is also a way of being. It implies a spirituality which affects our entire being as well as our missionary outlook. We allow ourselves to be challenged by others and at the same time we have the courage to share with them our own convictions and our values — in other words, what we are. Only when we appreciate our own can we begin to appreciate another culture properly. Inculturation does not demand that we renounce what we are. In fact, we can never take on another culture completely. Inculturation demands the spirituality of an "oblate", that is, a person completely available to others, having the innermost dispositions of Mary.

## Stance

58. We believe that inculturation is an important dimension of the work of evangelization and that it has to be one of our concerns wherever we exercise our ministry. We also recognize that the process of inculturation is complex and that it does not take place without the risk of ambiguity.
59. We acknowledge the fact that the local people themselves are the first artisans of inculturation. Therefore we accompany them with humility and trust in their efforts to make the Gospel their own and to express it in their culture.
60. We shall use every possible means to understand the culture of those to whom we are sent so as to proclaim God's Word in a manner adapted to them. This will often take courage and creativity. We shall also learn the language of the people among whom we are fulfilling our mission. In these ways we shall promote a new presentation of Christ in their language and symbols.
61. The Congregation has historical commitments to certain ethnic groups (v.g. the Indians and Inuit in Canada). For this ministry of evangelization to be solid and lasting, it has to be shared with other apostolic workers: local leaders, diocesan clergy and other religious communities.
62. Finally, we acknowledge the fact that our mission implies the promotion of the values of

the kingdom already at work in different religions and cultures. In prayer and dialogue we shall learn how to collaborate with men and women of good will for the building of a better world.

## Recommendations

63. We shall make sure that all Oblates, from whatever culture they come, feel completely at home in the Congregation and especially in their local community. We shall provide for the Oblates of newly evangelized countries a formation which will facilitate their entrance, without delay, into positions of responsibility in formation and government.
64. We encourage the pursuit of studies in subjects such as "parallelism" (the simultaneous practice of Catholicism and of another religion without integrating the two), "syncretism" (the practice of a religion in which there is a mixture of elements taken from Catholicism and another religion), "faith-healing" and certain practices proper to particular cultures.
65. An adequate preparation shall be given to Oblates who have to enter into a new culture so that they can understand and adapt themselves to it before they take on any pastoral responsibility within it.
66. The Congregation shall encourage certain members to specialize in issues touching upon

inculturation. In this way we shall be better able to support those Oblates who face the risk of ambiguity in their efforts to inculturate the Gospel.

67. Everywhere we shall give preference to the poor and the marginalized. Nonetheless, we shall not neglect the efforts needed to encounter in a meaningful way those great cultures which influence humanity, e.g. those of Asia and the new Western culture. We encourage Oblates to experience one or other of the great cultures or religions so as to be able to enter more easily into dialogue with them.

## IV - MISSION WITH THE LAITY

### The place of the laity in the Church

68. "The entire Church is missionary" (EN, 59). It is together with all our brothers and sisters, members of God's people, that we take up our part of the mission, because without them the Church cannot be faithful to this fundamental task.
69. The laity constitute the vast majority of God's people, yet many of them take no significant part in the life of that people. Many of the young no longer find in the Church the meaning they are looking for nor the challenges needed to stimulate them. In some places women are involved in the ministry and Church organizations but in other places their role is not sufficiently recognized. The voice of the poor all too often is not heard in the Church where decisions are made. Certain ways of exercising power and authority in the Church sometimes become an obstacle to the full involvement of the laity. All this explains why some have distanced themselves from the institutional Church.
70. The Church's teaching, whether touching upon the dignity and the proper duties of the baptized within it, or upon their mission in the world, is nonetheless clear and strong:



"The Church has not been truly established, it is not yet fully alive, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ among men, unless there exists a laity worthy of the name working along with the hierarchy" (AG, 21).

71. Serious efforts are being made to secure for the laity their rightful place. Nevertheless, their vocation still has not reached its full potential and at times it is even completely ignored.

### **Oblate values for our mission with the laity**

72. The Constitutions and Rules recall the unique role of the laity in the Church and encourage us to work towards its implementation (R. 6). In responding to that call we underline these Oblate values:

- availability for service to the local Church according to our Oblate charism (C. 6);
- closeness to the people with whom we work (C. 8);
- dedication to serve the poor with and through the poor themselves (R. 9).

### **Stance**

73. In the light of what has been said, Oblates are called to involve themselves more fully in promoting the mission of the laity in the Church and in the world. This implies study

and updating in the theology of the laity, especially the issues of the meaning of baptism and the royal priesthood of the faithful (LG, 34-36).

74. It likewise involves for us Oblates a conversion of thought, heart and action as well as a greater trust, openness and willingness to share power and responsibility with the laity.
75. Furthermore, mission with the laity demands that we fully respect the primary, irreplaceable role of the baptized in all the circumstances of their daily lives: their interpersonal relationships, their social and political commitments, their places of work and relaxation and especially in their families. It also demands that we respect their specific role in the ecclesial community, since evangelization is a duty of every baptized person. For our part we shall continue to make our own specific contribution to the world: word and sacrament.
76. We shall take seriously and put into practice the opening given in Rule 27 which speaks of new ways of associating the laity with the Congregation. This possibility lies open, first of all, to those laity who show a special attachment to our Oblate charism.

### **Recommendations**

77. In our works, our parishes, our missionary activity, we shall be evermore disposed to work

collaboratively with the laity. With them we shall look for new forms of evangelization adapted to the need of today's world.

- 78.** We shall motivate and even prod the laity to take their rightful place in the decision-making within the Church: in parish councils, finance committees, on pastoral planning boards.
- 79.** We shall be attentive to the aspirations of women and the demands they are making in respect to their place in the world and in the Church. We shall support their participation in decision-making in the areas of pastoral ministry and mission.
- 80.** In our apostolic ministry we shall willingly involve those former Oblates and laicized priests who might be disposed to serve the Church in collaboration with us, to the extent that Church law permits.
- 81.** We shall support the participation of the laity in those organizations which are actively engaged in the transformation of society. Many of these, such as community and civic organizations, professional associations, popular movements, labor unions and political parties, are vehicles for authentic gospel values. In this same area the ministry of the Brothers finds a privileged place.
- 82.** Gospel values can penetrate the mass media only if committed Christian lay people work in social communications. We shall encourage all those who can exercise an influence on the press, radio or television by their position

or profession to make this their primary apostolate.

- 83.** We shall not hesitate to place our resources at the service of the laity whose missionary activity is exercised at the heart of the world. We shall open our seminaries, our retreat houses and our parish facilities to those members of the laity who want to meet there, either to come to a better understanding of society or to deepen their own spirituality.
- 84.** Our religious community life will be enriched by working, sharing and celebrating with the laity. These common activities are a privileged occasion for mutual formation and evangelization. They also promote the development of an incarnate spirituality, one which makes the gospel, our life, our faith and commitment come alive.
- 85.** We hope that structures or at least some consultation will be set up to facilitate an exchange of lay missionaries throughout the Oblate world.

## V - MISSION WITHIN THE CHURCH

### The Oblate experience within today's Church

**86.** The Church and the world of today are subject to constant change; this in turn affects our life and ministry as Oblates. The Second Vatican Council in particular and the events which followed it have profoundly modified the life of the Church. The Church has come away from this experience with a greater understanding of herself. As a result, we Oblates have a clearer understanding of the place God has given us in the Church so that we might serve the world.

**87.** Through an ongoing dialogue with the world we recognize the call we have received to respond creatively to new needs. In our efforts to respond to that call from within the Church we experience certain tensions. Some come from the very nature of the Church — God's people on a journey of faith, Christ's body slowly growing to maturity (LG, 48). Others come from special situations and problems of fairly recent origin. For example:

- different ways of understanding the Church often lead to varied pastoral practices, all of which are not well received;
- differing opinions about the way of exercising authority in the Church are a cause of

uneasiness for many; some are searching for new structures in decision-making.

- some Oblates emphasize our prophetic role and its critical dimension, which leads others to question our fidelity to the Church.

**88.** Change and tension are not restricted to members of the Church; this is also part of the world's experience. In fact, the political, economic and cultural spheres are constantly being reshaped, and we are not always able to adjust easily to them. In addition, some political situations have serious consequences for the life of the Church and our Oblate mission. We need to think only of dictatorial regimes, whether of the right or of the left, which often persecute the Church; pastoral options in these situations are taken only with great risk and anxiety. Finally, the very people we serve are affected by social changes: the breakdown of family life, for example, or economic hardship. Their relationship to the Church and to her teaching is greatly affected by these things.

**89.** Accepting the fact that change and tensions go hand in hand, we shall face the situation with evangelical confidence, recognising in it a source of growth and new life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. To discern what God is saying to us in these times, we must constantly listen to his Spirit speaking to us through the needs of the people, the experience of the Congregation and the leadership of the Pope and the bishops.

## **Oblate values**

90. Our Congregation exists because Eugene de Mazenod loved the Church deeply, "that glorious inheritance of the Savior... purchased at the cost of his own blood." That same love for the Church is an essential characteristic of an Oblate. "Our love for the Church inspires us to fulfill our mission in communion with the pastors whom the Lord has given to his people" (C. 6).
91. By turning toward the cross of Christ, a sign of hope and a call to live the paschal mystery, we can overcome the tension we experience within the Church and in the world. The Founder gives us an example of a fidelity to the Church, which is able to endure such suffering. For him, the renewal of the Church begins with personal conversion.
92. In the Church we have a special service to render: "to make Christ and his kingdom known to the most abandoned". We have as our goal "to establish Christian communities... fully responsible for their own growth" (C. 7).
93. We fulfill our service in the Church through a great variety of ministries: priestly ministry which remains essential to our charism, as well as many other ministries in which we act together as priests and Brothers bound by the same vows and united in the same apostolic community.
94. Called to move ever forward, we shall draw the strength to be faithful to our charism by

having the courage to be open to new ways of being missionary.

## **Our service in the Church**

95. Our love for the Church and for the poor inspire our commitment for life to the mission.
96. We want to share in the Church's effort to renew herself under the impulse of the Spirit.
97. Our fidelity to the values of God's kingdom may lead us to take critical stands within the Christian community. But we shall do so constructively and with respect.
98. We seek to be men of dialogue, coordinating our missionary efforts with other Gospel workers.
99. In spite of the decline in our numbers in many Provinces, we shall be attentive to requests made by bishops, as well as to the needs of the diocese. We shall respond to them, remaining faithful to our charism: missionary mobility, work with the poor and the most abandoned and our desire to live in an apostolic community.
100. We cannot allow the difficulties we experience within the Church to cause us to forget the serious problems of today's world: lack of faith in God, finding meaning in life, the struggle against poverty, the making of peace, welcoming of refugees, the sharing of re-

sources, the reduction of armaments, the defense of human rights, and the confusion of youth who are without hope.

## Recommendations

101. We recommend that each Province establish missionary priorities keeping in mind our Oblate charism and local needs. These priorities, accompanied by precise criteria, will help us to make decisions about the apostolate and will make it possible for us to explain these choices to others.
102. We shall maintain structures to promote dialogue with the bishops; this should help us to be aware of the needs of the local Church, while making known to others the demands of our charism.
103. Diocesan needs have led us in the past and shall continue to lead us to accept parishes. In this ministry we shall preserve our missionary spirit:
  - by focusing our attention on the poor and the marginalized;
  - by promoting access for the laity to greater pastoral responsibilities;
  - by emphasizing the re-evangelization of Christians who are indifferent or separated from the Church;
  - by keeping alive a concern for social justice.

104. Even in those Provinces where the average age is rising, Provincials will make every effort to foster among all the members a spirit of availability for new ministries.
105. In many countries we work side by side with other Christian churches. We shall take care to maintain a spirit of collaboration with them, whether it be in pastoral ministry or in efforts to promote human development. We recommend that Oblates become even more involved in ecumenical dialogue and in this way share in the Church's ministry of reconciliation.
106. Wherever the multiplication of sects threatens the faith, we shall help Christians to achieve a mature understanding of their faith and to express it in ways that are alive and life-giving.
107. We recommend that each Oblate submit his apostolic projects to the discernment of his community so as to receive fraternal support. We shall give special support to Oblates who are in danger or are suffering persecution because of their fidelity to the Gospel.
108. Because of their importance for our Oblate identity we must engage in theological reflection upon apostolic religious life and ordained priesthood within the Church.

## VI - MISSION THROUGH AN APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY

### Oblate community

**109.** Oblate community is an essential dimension of our vocation. The report of the young Oblates to the Chapter reminds us of that again. Community life is not only necessary for the mission, it is itself mission and at the same time it is a qualitative sign of the mission of the whole Church.

When we considered the Oblate life as it is being presently lived, four issues appeared to merit special attention:

**110.** *The link between mission and community* - During these past twenty years we have given up several important works, each of which was staffed by a significant number of Oblates united by a single apostolic objective. Today, many of our ministries are individualized. The link between community and mission is less evident. Thus, the community is in danger of losing its vigor and the mission its support.

**111.** *A spirituality still under study* - There is still too much separation between ministry and prayer. Prayer is not sufficiently nourished by missionary life, and mission is not adequately lived as a praise of God. This dualism im-

poverishes both prayer and ministry; for many this is a source of frustration.

**112.** *The influence of society* - Money is such an important part of everyday life that it is impossible not to be affected by it. It is easy for us to become accustomed to a comfortable lifestyle; in fact, we sometimes live better than the majority of people whom we serve. Our credibility and our life witness are diminished as a result.

**113.** *Difficulties inherent to religious life* - In the Congregation as a whole there is a desire for community renewal. This desire, however, does not make renewal any easier to achieve. Obstacles remain: individualism, activism, a lack of initiative, fatigue or simply the human limitations of each individual.

### Gospel values and Oblate values

**114.** Having recognized these obstacles to community life, we should look at them again in the light of the Gospel and our Oblate tradition.

**115.** *Mission and community* - Constitution 37 — expressing the historical heritage of the Founder — underlines the bonds which unite community and mission. Constitution 77 opens the door for other forms of apostolic communities, notably district communities.

Theological reflection and lived experience show how the community is missionary; it is a gift from God, it is a sign of the Spirit's power to transform hearts and to inspire a form of social life in conformity with the Gospel. In this way it becomes a message to today's world. Theological reflection also shows that mission is communitarian: it does not belong to individuals but is a mission within the Church, which prolongs the mission of Christ. Thus it is the community which sends, and the mission is received in obedience and guaranteed by perseverance. The missionary is responsible to his community and to his superiors and it is with the community that he gives thanks.

116. *Apostolic spirituality* - While our Oblate spirituality is still under study, we have, nevertheless, come to some definite conclusions. By our very vocation we are called to walk in the footsteps of the Apostles, "our first Fathers", and like them, to leave everything to follow Jesus in his mission.
117. For Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, missionary work is the spiritual worship which the risen Jesus offers to God his Father in the Spirit (Rm 15, 16); he also views his own mission as an offering inserted into the offering of the Christian community (Ph. 2, 17). He sees the world as the place where salvation is brought about through God's action.
118. In imitation of the Twelve and St. Paul, we bear in ourselves the characteristics of the

apostolic man: openness to the signs of the times, availability, closeness to people, love of the universal Church, and a fraternal spirit.

119. We have our own symbols and traditions: our Oblate cross, a manual of Oblate prayers, feasts and events such as mission-sending which we celebrate with a special solemnity.
120. A special dimension of our relationship with the Virgin Mary in our life and in our prayer is expressed in our Founder's words, retained in every edition of the Constitutions: "They shall always look on her as their Mother" (C. 10).
121. *A simple and poor life* - We live our poverty, the gateway to the kingdom (Mt 5,3), in opposition to the seductions of a consumer society. We do not have to look for an illusory security in the possession of material things nor in any choice we might make of a particular work or ministry. Our security, our wealth is a community that is open to God, to our Oblate brothers and to others.
122. *Personal and communitarian conversion* - As the Capitulars said repeatedly, following the example of our Founder, our communities will be truly missionary only if each of us is rooted in a total availability which makes us "the servants of all" (C. 25).

## Stance

- 123.** The context of our society and the demands of our mission cause us to affirm more than ever the importance of community life in relation to mission, based upon the inspiration of our Founder and expressed in the Constitutions and Rules.
- 124.** We are convinced that our communities must be missionary by their very being and by the quality of our relationships. They must bear witness to the world of the power of the Gospel. By their prayer and through their suffering, older Oblates and those who are infirm share in the work of evangelization.
- 125.** We have just begun to discover our Constitutions and Rules. We must study and meditate on them tirelessly, so that they might be an ever greater source of life and bond of unity.

## Recommendations

*On the level of the Congregation  
we recommend:*

- 126.** — that the "Association for Oblate Studies and Research" include in its agenda a study of missionary spirituality, as reflected in the experience of Oblates from the time of the Founder.

- 127.** — that we share our spirituality with the members of the M.A.M.I., since they are linked to us in a special way.

*On the Province level we recommend:*

- 128.** — that means of fostering reflection during community and district meetings be developed.
- 129.** — that each Province try to set up one or other common apostolic project which would bring the Province together in the pursuit of a common objective.
- 130.** — that each Oblate acknowledge the Provincial's role in those areas which touch upon poverty and allow himself to be challenged whenever there are abuses which affect community life.
- 131.** — that the Provincial support district communities as real Oblate communities having a special purpose.
- 132.** — that programs and other events for the formation of superiors and animators be organized.
- 133.** — that each Province take steps necessary to help older and infirm Oblates to live their special ministry in an atmosphere of serenity.

*On the local level we recommend:*

- 134.** — that in addition to the monthly retreat, each community will provide an appropriate



means to share its faith, its prayer and its apostolic experience on a regular basis. In this way each Oblate receives the support of his community in his ministry and becomes more aware of the communitarian dimension of his apostolate.

- 135. — that each community periodically review its lifestyle, using its surroundings as a measure.
- 136. — that the community reflect upon the hospitality it extends or could extend to fellow Oblates, to its neighbors and to the poor.

*On the personal level we recommend:*

- 137. — that each Oblate set up his own program of ongoing formation and that he submit it to a community discernment.

## VII - OUR MISSION AND ITS FUTURE

- 138. After a period of study and groping for answers, the Congregation is showing more confidence in its mission; plans for new missionary endeavors are taking shape. What kind of apostolic man will we need in order to respond to our present-day challenges to be the missionary of the future? How can we ourselves be prepared to face the demands of the future, and how can we attract others to share in our mission? How do we best prepare them to continue our apostolic ministry in a creative way?
- 139. We do not pretend to have all the answers to these questions. We simply want to gather together our reflections upon ongoing formation, vocation recruitment and first formation as they were expressed during our discussions on our mission in today's world.

### Ongoing formation

- 140. To the able to respond to the demands of his mission each Oblate needs to be renewed continually both in his spiritual life and in the way he sees and does his ministry.

- 141.** A spirituality adapted to our situation as missionaries will help us to be present to men and women of today's world, to experience their doubts and fears and to be in their midst as peace-makers and witnesses to the serenity of Christ. Our spirituality is founded upon the contemplation of Christ, who was available to respond to the needs of those whom he met and who also spent many silent hours praying in the presence of his Father (Lk 5, 15-16).
- 142.** The study of God's Word and of theology, reflection on our ministry and the deepening of our Oblate charism are indispensable for renewal in our ministry.
- 143.** "Oblate formation takes place in the context of an apostolic community. We are all involved in a process of mutual evangelization, supporting one another in a healing and empowering way" (C. 48). Formation demands the renewal of community life described in the preceding section.
- 144.** In their first years of ministry, Oblates need guidance in order to integrate their new and various experiences. Older Oblates, for their part, might need to be retrained so as to be able to take on new ministries. Some might also need help in preparation for retirement.
- 145.** Ongoing formation is one area in which Provinces could help each other by sharing programs and directors.

## Vocations

### *The vocation ministry*

- 146.** Why should we call others to join us?
- because we believe in a God who wants to save all;
  - because we believe that Jesus' Spirit is at work in the hearts of the young;
  - because we deeply desire to make Christ known to those who have not yet heard of him;
  - because our Oblate mission has shown itself to be worthwhile and remains so today.
- 147.** All the dimension of our missionary vocation should be clearly indicated: our religious consecration, our priestly service, the special significance of the vocation to be an Oblate brother.
- 148.** Convinced as we are that every vocation is a gift from God, we shall pray and ask others to pray "that the Master send workers into his harvest" (Mt 9, 38).

### *Our approach to the young*

- 149.** We shall make an effort to welcome the young and to help them grow in Christ. Our communities will be open to them in common prayer, through the sharing of our life and their participation in some of our works. We shall strive to take the time to listen to them.

150. We shall be dealing with young people who are affected by secularization; we must not allow their apparent indifference to hide from us their search for the deeper meaning of life. Perhaps our way of life might awaken their enthusiasm and give it some direction.
151. The young want to meet men who live what they preach. It is up to us to be genuine Oblates in our life and ministry.

*The discernment of vocations*

152. It is our duty to evaluate seriously the qualifications of those who feel called to join us. We must help them to discern their call to priesthood or to brotherhood, and we must support them in their decision.
153. Traditionally the Christian family has been the prime source of vocations. Today, however, many candidates come to us from broken homes, from unbelieving families or those of lukewarm faith. In these cases especially, careful discernment is necessary.
154. Before admitting anyone to the novitiate, we have to provide whatever is missing in his Christian formation so that he will understand the choices he is being called to make.
155. "The apostolate of vocations concerns all Oblates individually and as a group" (R. 38), since each of us is concerned about our mission and its future.

**First formation**

*The goal*

156. "The purpose of initial formation is to develop gradually those whom Jesus calls to total discipleship in the Congregation, until they are mature religious, capable of carrying on the Oblate mission" (C. 50).

*A formation which is adapted to individual needs*

157. More than ever our formation has to be adapted to the personal needs of each candidate, because each comes with different experiences, educational and religious backgrounds.
158. Today's youth, generally speaking, are spontaneously attracted to the common life. This is an excellent starting point from which to help them to discover what an apostolic community is. On the other hand, we have to caution them against too sentimental a view of this type of life.

*Studies*

159. Besides providing our students with a solid theological and philosophical formation, we must open them to several other intellectual fields in order to help them prepare for missionary life in today's world:
- to be missionaries among the poor: the study of the Church's social doctrine;

- to proclaim Jesus Christ in today's world: serious reflection upon a secularized society and technical training in the use of communications;
- to serve the Church wherever there is an urgent need: the study of missiology, of cultures, languages, an analysis of the Church's situation in various countries and an awareness of the Congregation's commitments throughout the world;
- to collaborate with those powerful movements and great institutions at the service of the faith: the study of the theology of the laity, of ecumenism, of the important non-Christian religions.

*Experience as an element in formation*

- 160.** Our formation houses will be located, whenever possible, in poor areas and they will be characterized by a simple lifestyle so as to provide a concrete experience of poverty.
- 161.** Initiation to ministry is now a regular part of our formation program. It will be beneficial if the student is helped to evaluate his experiences at various stages and to draw the best lessons from them.

*Formators*

- 162.** Formation is a real ministry to which formators must devote all their energies. They shall always be careful to be available to accompany the candidates in their journey.

They shall be present to them as models of the ideal Oblate.

- 163.** To prepare them for their work it is essential that they have previous pastoral experience. It is also good if they remain involved pastorally, as long as this does not interfere with their primary duties.
- 164.** For some years now, the academic training of our candidates in many Provinces has taken place outside our scholasticates. It is desirable that Oblate formators be on the faculties where young Oblates study.
- 165.** In many places in the Congregation there is an insufficient number of formators. For this reason priority should be given to the preparation of men for this apostolate. Each Province should faithfully pursue that priority.

## CONCLUSION

- 166.** The reflections, stances and recommendations which are found in this document set forth our present vision of the world in need of evangelization and our corresponding apostolic convictions. They are not presented here as the last word on the challenges which face us, nor as the final word on the responses to be given to these challenges. Rather, we believe that they are but one step in our taking stock of Oblate life.
- 167.** This document will be worthwhile only if it serves as the beginning of a reflection process for the whole Congregation. We are all called to this common reflection so that we might draw up concrete missionary strategies and achieve a personal and community conversion.
- 168.** We are convinced that a missionary renewal capable of responding to the needs of today's world can be achieved within the Congregation. This conviction rests largely upon the signs of hope given in the reports of the Provinces to the General Chapter: a spirit of faith in Christ the Savior, of trust in the vitality of our charism and of solidarity in our missionary work.

- 169.** May Blessed Eugene communicate to us his love for Christ, for the Church and for the poor. May the Virgin Mary inspire us by her availability to the calls of the Lord. With their help and protection we can truly become missionaries in today's world.

Your Brothers in General Chapter

Rome, October 1986

**2.**

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE MEMBERS  
OF THE XXXI<sup>st</sup> GENERAL CHAPTER**

(October 2, 1986)

Dear Sons of Blessed Eugene de Mazenod  
and Members of the XXXIst General Chapter,

Aware that you represent nearly six thousand religious consecrated to evangelization, particularly among underprivileged peoples, I experience great ecclesial comfort in welcoming you. May the Lord himself preside over our encounter so conducive to a communion of minds and hearts.

1. I turn first of all to the one you have just elected as your new Superior General, Father Marcello Zago, whose good work at the Secretariate for Non-Christians I have appreciated. I offer him my wishes of fruitful service to the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. In the Church's name I am equally duty bound to thank warmly Father Fernand Jetté. Each one of us knows that he has worked unsparingly to impart a new Gospel inspiration to the great Oblate family. May his health be less overtaxed and allow him to serve for a long time to come his beloved Congregation, which seems to him — in a certain sense — “to be just starting its task, since the field of work opening up before it is still more vast and difficult than in the Founder's time.”

2. The Chapter of 1980 called all the Oblates of Mary to interiorize the Constitutions and Rules they had just updated, and therefore to commit themselves to a path of new conversion. After two decades that had seen many Religious Institutes question themselves and multiply experiences, at times beyond the threshold of wisdom, there has been a return little by little to primary sources, to a serene and profound rereading of the founders' charism. You yourselves, dear Sons of Bishop de Mazenod,

are experiencing a better perceived and better lived Oblate identity, even if there is still some way to go.

The Chapter of 1986, whose theme is "Oblate Mission in the World of Today", appears to me to be in direct line with the preceding one and reminds me of the scholastic adage "*operatio sequitur esse*". It was a pleasure for me to cast a glance on the preparatory works of this Chapter. I noticed an acknowledged convergence of the Congregation's various regions toward a community missionary labor more clearly dedicated to disadvantaged peoples, even at the cost of sacrificing more personal commitments. This first convergence, in fact, gives rise to another, namely the stressing or even the resumption of authentic community life, transparent, fraternal, joyous, open and therefore generating fervor for your religious and apostolic life.

For over 160 years the Oblates of Mary Immaculate have for their part written a marvelous chapter of the missionary history of the present-day Church, from the Far North to the Equator. You will permit me to hold up as examples the very great figure of Bishop Vital Grandin, in the past, and in our day that of the courageous President of South Africa's Episcopal Conference, Archbishop Hurley. I give thanks to God for hearing that at the present time a good number of Oblates, desirous of involving all their brothers, want to grasp firmly the ideal which swept along their Blessed Founder into a Gospel missionary adventure whose astonishing development he did not dare imagine, given the thousand obstacles that arose in his path.

**3.** This "Oblate mission" is now developing in places and in a cultural context no longer those of

Provence and of the first mission "*ad gentes*" in Bishop de Mazenod's time. Alas! the modern world breeds new miseries and new poor. Who will give us accurate statistics on the number of isolated person, of families and populations, victims of unceasing socio-economic and cultural changes, engulfed by problems which overwhelm them, discouraged by unbearable injustices to the point of losing the meaning and taste for life? Sons of Eugene de Mazenod, whose zeal to proclaim the Gospel has been compared to the mistral wind, heirs of a lineage nearly two centuries old of Oblates impassioned for Jesus Christ, let yourselves be drawn more than ever by the vast and poor masses of Third World regions, also by this Fourth World of the West, stagnating in misery and often in ignorance of God!

**4.** The syntheses prepared for this Chapter also bring out a condition "*sine qua non*" for the Congregation's vitality, namely that Oblates be as though gripped, inhabited by the Founder's spirituality. All of you remember the grace, undoubtedly of a mystical nature, that was granted to de Mazenod on Good Friday of the year 1807. His contemplation of the bloody Passion of Christ was decisive. It urged him irresistibly toward the poor of Provence and, later, by means of his episcopate, to the poor of the entire world. The basic question he asks today of all his sons, by the voice of Peter's Successor, is brief and deeply stirring: "Is Jesus Christ really at the heart of your life?..."

**5.** This fervor of each Oblate and of each community is the key to the problem of vocations. How



could youths come knocking on the door of mediocre communities lost in secularism? Within the past five years, the Congregation has received notable encouragement through its establishments in Poland, Italy, Lesotho and Zaire. You have doubled the number of your novices and scholastics from 1981 to 1986. Be vigilant also to call not only to Oblate missionary life in priestly ministry but equally to the well prepared and very precious service of Oblate Brother. Continue to widely associate the Christian laity to your tasks of evangelizing the poor. Know how to listen to the voice of the young Oblate generation. Indeed, the young cannot possess the wisdom of the elders. Their aspirations, however, when generous and judiciously sustained, form a grace of renewal for Religious Institutes. I cannot fail encouraging very strongly the General Council and the Provincials to give to these young men a formation that is philosophical and theological, spiritual and pastoral and in total harmony with the Magisterium of the Church. So saying, I think of the fact that your Congregation, like so many others, is called upon to take up a tremendous challenge: That of announcing Jesus Christ to the man of today who is so easily dazzled by science and technology and who is the victim of a deceptive and destructive materialism. Wherever you are, in Europe, in North and South America, in Africa and in Asia, unite more than ever and cooperate to the utmost between regions and provinces to proclaim Christ and his liberating Gospel.

6. I wish to end this family conversation by inviting you to look afresh at the place of the Immaculate Virgin in your personal lives, your communities

and your missionary work. You recall that Blessed Eugene, having first decided upon the name of "Oblates of Saint Charles", while in Rome had the intuition of a different one: "Oblates of Mary". On 22 December 1825, he wrote to Father Tempier: "Oblates of Mary! This name satisfies the heart and the ear!" You also know that on 15 August 1822, after wonderfully exalting the Mother of God in the church of the Mission, situated in Cours Mirabeau at Aix, and having blessed a statue of Mary Immaculate, your Founder attributed to this Good Mother a singular grace: an interior assurance of the excellence of his society and of the good that it was going to do in the future.

Dear Sons of Blessed Eugene de Mazenod, always and everywhere be the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate! Under her protection you are assured of never losing courage and confidence, peace and joy. I am happy to give you my Apostolic Blessing and to extend it to all the Oblates whom you represent.

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