

CATECHESIS AND EVANGELIZATION

October 30th, 1977 - Letter - Rome

Evangelizing today. - Examining ourselves. - The authenticity of our lives. - The anonymous Oblate.

L.J.C. et M.I.

Yesterday marked the ending in Rome of the Bishops' Synod on catechesis, following by three years the Synod on evangelization. For us Oblates who have the mission to tell people "who Christ is", this reflection of the Church on catechesis and evangelization takes on a major importance. I would like to speak to you about this today, in the light of what I experience when visiting the Congregation.

Evangelizing today

A first observation: it has become impossible today to evangelize without taking into account man's social dimension and the economic and political situation in which he lives. A few days ago, while I was visiting the Province of Italy, a laborer helped me put on the chasuble. A passer-by made the remark: "That's a communist!". Whereupon my helper looked at me with a smile: "Yes, a communist... just slightly pink... one must live!".

To teach people who Christ is! Today we can no longer separate the individual person from the social being who is committed to this or that group or party, who is moulded by this labor union or that kind of society. He is the man who less and less goes to church and whom we must try to reach where he is – at home, at work, in the union hall...

Another observation, which Fr. Arrupe, S. J., made at the Synod, is this: the classical "loci" used in catechesis have become radically inadequate. "We fall back too much on these traditional means. The problem is to reach people wherever they are, to form apostles and to draw up catechisms particularly designed to evangelize the most estranged from the Church. The Church must be present on the scene of secular schools, of professional work and spare time activities". A third observation: there have been great changes in the language of people, changes more rapid and profound than in the language of the Church: language of gestures, of words, of the image and of sign. I remember boarding a bus one day in Ottawa and giving the required fare to a young girl who had no money. I thought I had performed a good deed. She simply told me: "You're rich, you priests!".

For a Congregation whose purpose is to evangelize the poor, we find here a terrible and fascinating challenge, one that invites us to re-examine our missionary pastoral activity as well as the formation of our members.

I well know how, in all the Provinces, certain Oblates are striving to take up that challenge! I have seen this in the compounds of South Africa; I have seen it in the laborers' quarters of Spain and France; I have seen it at the Centre Saint-Pierre-Apôtre in Montreal and in the renewed apostolate of the National Shrine at Cap-de-la-Madeleine. I know the marvellous work being done to renew the language of faith by the AVEX sessions in Lyons and by the Novalis Center in Ottawa, and I am aware that commitments are being made pretty well everywhere in the Congregation to promote justice in the world... These are only a few examples. They invite us all to deep reflection.

Examining ourselves

As Oblates, as an apostolic group, is our spiritual sensitivity sufficiently developed to hear the new appeals of man today? Do we have enough creativity and boldness? Are we interiorly free enough to find new ways of evangelizing? Are we adequately initiated in spiritual discernment to pass truly evangelical judgments on situations? Do we have the courage to submit our apostolic commitments to our community for a real evaluation? Do we have enough doctrinal consistency and interior strength not to let ourselves be carried away by the groups we contact, but rather to evangelize them truly and to remain faithful to the Christ we proclaim?

All these questions come to mind when I think of apartheid in South Africa, of leftist gains in Europe and the selfishness of wealthy nations, of totalitarian regimes under which we labor in Latin America and Asia as well as in the socialist countries. At times, letters I receive from certain Oblates make me dwell on these problems all the more. These words, for instance, of a confrere who left after many years of spending himself with us for the poor: "You have been waiting for this letter for a long time... I write it after several years of searching, of study and struggle... My present situation: I am a member of a Marxist-Leninist group. Our principal concern is to prepare the revolution... That is what is basic for us... I therefore ask to be laicized in order to normalize my juridical status".

What was lacking in the life of this Oblate? Could the Congregation, that is to say, you, I, his close confreres, have helped him more?

The authenticity of our lives

Proclaiming Jesus Christ to the people of today remains our primary mission in the Church. To proclaim by word, yes, but still more so – and that is my final observation – by deed and life.

It is impossible to preach charity, dialogue, peace between men if there is no fraternal community and love between us. On this score today's youth especially remain adamant. There is no way we can preach sharing, unworldliness, poverty, if the witness we give remains that of the rich man, even of the rich with a generous heart.

At the present time in South Africa, several of our brothers have to suffer because of their sense of justice and their faithfulness to the Gospel. I want to assure them of the Congregation's support. We want to extend this fraternal support in a very special way to our Oblate Bishops for their stand, which is both so evangelical and courageous.

The spirit of total dedication to souls to the point of giving one's life is still very much alive in the Institute. One year ago, on December 23, an Oblate, Father Raynald Beaugard was killed by thieves in an isolated mountain mission of Lesotho. A few weeks later, another Father who lives in a quite similar isolated situation, wrote to me: "I'm always happy here... This death did not make me afraid. Should God ask me the same sacrifice, let him give me the same courage!". When I read these lines, the words of St. Paul came to mind: "You did not receive a spirit of slavery leading you back into fear..." (*Romans 8, 15*).

The anonymous Oblate

Such a witnessing appears to me to be that of the anonymous Oblate of whom no one ever speaks but who silently devotes himself among the poor, for twenty, thirty, forty and fifty years, as long as he possibly can. We meet him on all continents and in all ministries. I have seen several this past summer in the Canadian North and I find some everywhere in ministries that are ordinary, without glamour, like parish work, teaching and the great variety of chaplaincies that are ours. The vast majority of the Congregation is made up of such men. They too are prophets, and they are so by

their silence, their humble dedication, their unswerving faithfulness. They are the backbone of the Institute.