

INTERIORIZING THE NEW CONSTITUTIONS

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What are we going to do with this gift? - The importance of the present moment. - Knowing the text well. - In terrorizing the Constitutions. - A second conversion.

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February 17 reminds us of the approval of our first Constitutions in 1826. I want to take advantage of this feast and reflect, together with you, on the spirit in which we ought to welcome and receive the Constitutions and Rules which the 1980 General Chapter has given us. On December 3, after the voting had taken place, the Capitulars wrote to you: "This is an intensely moving moment. There is an awareness of a gift, a special grace from the Lord...".

What are we going to do with this gift?

We are now in possession of this gift. What are we going to do with it? For it is a gift which challenges and puts us to the test.

The members of the General Council have been the first, I believe, to hear this challenge. It completely colours their present working session. How are we to live the Constitutions and Rules today? and how can we further their being lived?

I remember a reflection made by Father Deschâtelets when he recalled the beginnings of his term as Superior General in 1947. "At that time", he wrote in his *Mémoires*, "we had so many solutions to give to so many problems. We never felt that our decisions were not being received or that they were accepted with regret: quite the contrary. There were no problems of authority or obedience at that time. The Rule decided everything; we had only to refer to it on each occasion..." (*Mémoires*, ch. V, p. 33).

Even if we were to indulge in day-dreaming, even if we consider the quasi-unanimous vote of the Chapter, I am not at all sure that the situation is that simple today. But I am sure of one thing: for us and for those who come after us, the Constitutions and Rules are already – and will be even more clearly so once they have been approved by the Church – the concrete road of the Gospel, the Oblate way of living the Gospel today.

It is in them and through them that we will discover Jesus Christ and learn to love people, especially the poor, as our Founder has asked us to.

There is a challenge here that no Oblate can escape if he wants "to save his life", if he wants to live it fully and not "lose it" (cf. Mark 8: 35). As far back as 1821 – and thus prior to the approval of February 17, 1826 – the Founder wrote to Father Bourrelrier: "Remember that we no longer belong to ourselves...; we belong to the Rule which ought to govern us; we can belong to God only through it..." (*Letter to Bourrelrier*, August 27, 1821).

The importance of the present moment

"The Congregation is at a turning point in its history", we said at the Chapter. "It shows signs of renewal but also of great fatigue. To enter renewal fully and to regain the clear vision and missionary thrust of the Founder, it must decide to go beyond itself and its internal difficulties, and to take a

step forward. It has to kindle afresh the gift that God has given it, a gift which is not a spirit of timidity, but a Spirit of power and love and mastery of self (cf. 2 Timothy 1:6-7). It has to renew its radical choice of Jesus Christ and its mission of evangelizing the world. To this end, the sincere and unanimous acceptance of the new Constitutions would be a grace for the Institute as was the beatification of its Founder" (Report of the Superior General to the 1980 General Chapter, no. 54).

As a matter of fact, we are experiencing the beginnings of this grace. Through the voice of the Capitulars, the Congregation has accepted the new Constitutions and Rules. It has accepted them sincerely, in thanksgiving and with joy, well aware that a future filled with promise for all Oblates is in them.

The Chapter experience strikes me as being, on the level of the Institute, the equivalent to the first profession in the life of a novice. A novice is happy to make vows, has been preparing himself at length for it, and pronounces them with generosity and joy; but he has not yet experienced the full import of the gift he is making, and he does not yet know all that being faithful to the commitments he is undertaking will cost him.

It is only with time, with the passing of years, that this gift will completely pervade his being, transform him and make him the religious he has chosen to be.

It is the same for the new Constitutions. A long period of time is beginning which, in a sense, is even more important than the Chapter. It has been called "the period of interiorization", a space of time during which the Constitutions and Rules are progressively to become an integral part of our lives.

Knowing the text well

First of all, we must know them well: we must read them, re-read them and meditate their content. We must not allow ourselves to be put off by this word or that literary expression which we may not like: rather, beyond the word or expression, we must try to grasp the meaning and hear the call of God addressed to us through the medium of these words.

I know that different aids and various means of facilitating this knowledge are being prepared within the Congregation: commentaries, retreats, prayer and meditation guides... This is excellent and I wholeheartedly encourage it. We will never know too well this text which is to inspire and guide our lives.

This reading of the Constitutions must be done with love, with the intent of allowing ourselves to be imbued and nourished by them. We must also read them with perseverance, not hesitating to return to this or that passage which may relate more to us or to read them again in order to stress certain topics: what do they say to me about Jesus Christ, the Church, the Blessed Virgin Mary, about the world of the poor, the life of prayer, preaching the Word of God, poverty in my life, about love for my brothers...?

It is in this way that, little by little, we will come to know the Constitutions. At the same time – and this is essential if we wish really to know them – we must make the effort of putting them into practice. Only when we have given ourselves to him do we really know Jesus Christ. If the Constitutions are to become a book of life, we have to live them. Otherwise they will remain only a dead letter.

Interiorizing the Constitutions

The intellect may very well accept them, the will may indeed accept them, but the heart, too, must

accept them. They must penetrate to the sensitive and instinctive levels of our life. Only then can we truthfully say that we have "interiorized" the Constitutions.

As long as the most intimate part of our being has not been touched by them, has not been transformed by the love of Jesus Christ, by a concerned awareness for the poor and a sense of justice, by an authentic devotion to the Blessed Virgin, by the spirit of prayer and of community, by the integration of the vows into our very selves... we will not have reached the goal, we will be only on the road towards it. The objective of the Constitutions as a book of life is to create a new life in us, a new being, an evangelical and Oblate being, the apostolic man of whom the Founder speaks and who spontaneously acts and reacts in an Oblate way according to the Founder's spirit.

A second conversion

In this task we are not starting from absolute zero. We have been living the Oblate life for ten, twenty, thirty or forty years. Nevertheless, it is precisely in our Oblate life that we are today being called to a second conversion. A second conversion is often more painful than the first because it penetrates to greater depths, draws us out of attitudes and habits that are more firmly rooted, and reveals to us an attachment to our own self and will that we may never have suspected. If we want to put the Constitutions and Rules into serious practice, we will be called to make choices, difficult choices, not only in regard to our works but, first of all, in regard to our way of seeing things and manner of living.

On this February 17, we thank God for our 155 years of official existence in the Church. We can also thank him for the graces received at the last General Chapter.

May the Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of the Oblates, give us all the courage to accomplish and complete the work she knew how to begin so well during the course of the Chapter!