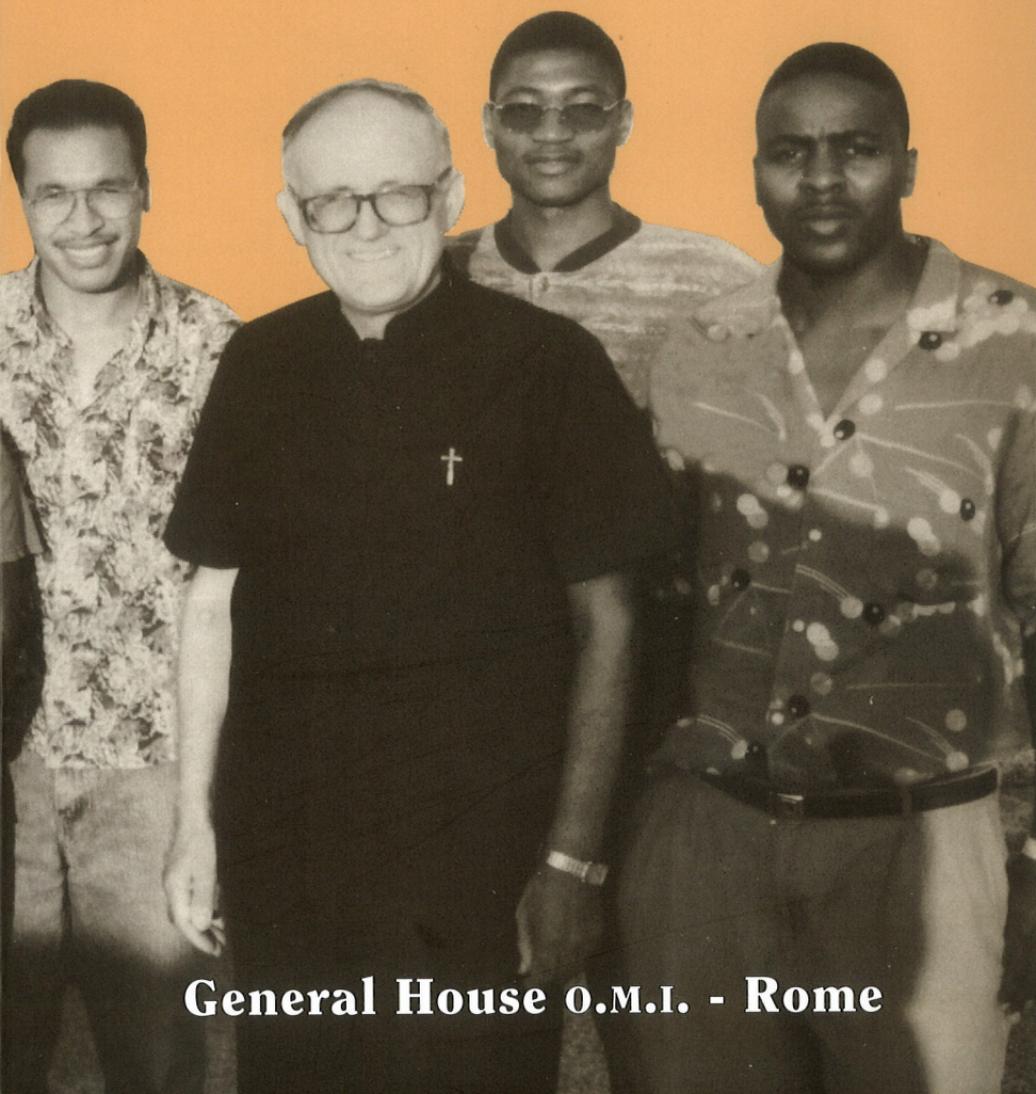


Marcello Zago

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ST. EUGENE

Letters and texts on formation



General House O.M.I. - Rome

MARCELLO ZAGO, OMI

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OF ST. EUGENE**

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INTRODUCTION

Each year during my service as Superior General of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, which began on September 13, 1986, I have addressed a letter on a special theme to the Oblates in first formation. My intention in doing so was twofold: to forge closer links with our candidates and to do a more in-depth study of some of the fundamental values in our Oblate vocation. In that way I hope to accompany those whom the Lord has called to share the charism of Eugene de Mazenod during their years of formation and help them to harmonize their lives.

Beginning in the first of this series of letters, dated January 25, 1987, I wrote: "I have decided to write regularly to all the Oblates in first formation; I am thinking of at least one letter a year. I would like to share my hopes with you and in this way to intensify communion with you and among yourselves. In my letters to all the Oblates I will probably dwell more on the Oblate mission today; in those addressed to you, I will rather focus on things that are basic to our way of life, that assure a positive and creative future for you and for the Congregation.

In my many, albeit brief, trips that are already scheduled, I consider visiting your communities a priority. As the Constitutions point out (cf. C49), the Superior General is, in fact, the first who is responsible for formation. In this domain I want to carry out my duties for the added reason that the Congregation's future depends on formation. Furthermore, there are personal reasons for my

interest in you. I was, in fact, twice involved with scholastics: from 1966 to 1971 in the International Scholasticate and from 1981 to 1986 in the Scholasticate of Italy, two periods that are important to me. I was also in the Laotian Seminary in Paksane and in the youth center of Vientiane in 1971-72.”

My travels during these years have been more numerous and longer than anticipated. I have kept my promise to be attentive to the houses of formation. My contacts with Oblates has enriched my knowledge of the Congregation and its missionary needs, and has also promoted communion and animation among them.

These letters have been of a familiar and informative nature at least in the first part which is omitted in this present publication. I frequently referred to the number of Oblates in formation and the visits I had made during the preceding year. The number of vocations has remained stable during the past twelve years, although there have been variations in their geographical distribution. This in itself is a grace from God, even if my constant wish is that they increase. The General Council has taken a number of steps to promote that increase.

Each letter deals with a particular topic and I now present all of them published together. In writing about each theme I have tried to take account of the lived experience of the Congregation, to study the experience, intuition and directives of the Founder, to see the theme in reference to the Constitutions and also, of course, in the light of the Chapter documents.

From the beginning of my term of office as Superior General, these texts were prepared with a view to publication. The letters addressed to all Oblates have been published in *OMI Information* and subsequently in *Acta Administrationis Generalis OMI*. Those addressed to Oblates in first formation were sent to these latter and later

published in *OMI Documentation* so that they would be available to all Oblates. They have not so far been published officially in printed form. In recent years a number of people have asked me to do so and this edition is the result. The booklet also contains other texts on formation which were frequently given as addresses to different groups.

In presenting this volume to the Oblates of tomorrow, I hope to provide them with material for reflection and study which will develop the Oblate identity and increase their love for the charism transmitted to us from the Holy Spirit by means of our saintly Founder. Our lay associates, for whom and about whom I have published articles elsewhere, may also find inspiration here as they seek to share the charism of Eugene de Mazenod.

One of the greatest graces we have received in recent years has been his Canonization which took place in Rome on December 3, 1995. In a message to the young people who assembled for that occasion Pope John Paul II wrote: "In Eugene de Mazenod you have a teacher, a guide and a protector. In his school you can discover how wonderful it is to be at the service of the Gospel". I hope that the reading of these texts will help to give you a deeper knowledge and love of our vocation as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

*Marcello Zago, OMI
Superior General*

I

LETTERS TO OBLATES IN
FIRST FORMATION

I

JESUS CHRIST, THE CENTER OF OUR LIVES

1987

In this first letter I would like to dwell on a particular aspect that is fundamental for our life, namely, Jesus Christ. During the General Chapter, the Pope asked us a question that struck me rather forcefully: "*Is Jesus Christ truly at the heart of your life?*"

You are determined to be authentic. Persons who are truly authentic are credible to the people of today. Authenticity in our Christian and religious existence and in our missionary activity depends on our personal relationship with Christ.

Only if he is at the centre of the way will we see persons and events, only if he is the deciding criterion for our choices and assessments, only if our relationship with him is personal and constant will our life be founded on the rock and safe from the destruction and damage of passing storms. Your future cannot be solidly grounded on mere personal qualities, specialization, missionary activities, not even on the poor: there is only one firm foundation on which you can build and risk your life, and that is Jesus Christ.

Each one of us needs to relive the staggering experience that the Founder had on that Good Friday of 1807; like him we need to grow continually in our awareness of and love for Christ. From this personal relationship with Christ the Congregation was born and formed as you can see from the preface to our Constitutions and the various texts of Blessed Eugene included therein.

Making this radical choice of Christ once and for all is

not enough: it has to be made again on important occasions such as when we make our vows and especially in times of crisis. You may at times ask yourselves why some Oblates do not persevere or why others live a drab and unenthusiastic life. Beyond the surface motives, the root lies, as I see it, in the fact that this radical and oft-renewed choice of Christ is not there.

Christ needs to be at the centre of our personal lives, of our communities, of our relationships with others, of our apostolic activities. I shall focus now on Christ in our personal life.

Becoming other Christs

Each one of us has his own personality, temperament, qualities and limitations. We need to know ourselves and to accept ourselves, to grow and to change, to prepare and to test ourselves.

“Formation is a process which aims at the integral growth of a person and lasts a lifetime. It enables us to accept ourselves as we are and develop into the persons we are called to be. Formation involves us in an ever-renewed conversion to the Gospel and a readiness to learn and to change in response to new demands” (C 47).

Now to what are we called, not only to do, but to be? The Constitutions remind us Oblates of our constant goal;

- to follow Christ (cf. Preface; C 2);
- to identify with him (cf. C 2);
- to let him live in us (cf. C 2);
- to reproduce him in the pattern of our life (cf. C 2);
- to the point of seeing the world through the eyes of our crucified Savior (cf. C 4);
- to the point of being able to love others with the heart of Christ (cf. R 12).

In the first Rule of 1818, the Founder stated that the

goal of an Oblate's endeavour was to become another Jesus Christ:

"Their chief concern will be, as much when out on missions as when in the house, to make progress in the paths of ecclesiastical and religious perfection; they will especially cultivate the virtues of humility, obedience, poverty, self-denial, the spirit of mortification, the spirit of faith, purity of intention, and others; in a word, they will strive to become other Christs, radiating everywhere the fragrance of his lovable virtues" (Constitutions and Rules, p. 40).

The objectives of the novitiate year are described in the same perspective. "The novice, led by the Spirit living within him, develops his personal relationship to Jesus..." (C 56), and concrete ways of listening to, meeting and recognizing Christ are spelled out. Only after "having experienced the Father's love in Jesus" does the novice "dedicate his life to making that love visible" (C 59). The novitiate is but the beginning of a process that is meant to last a whole lifetime.

During the formation period that comes after the novitiate, the Oblates will endeavour to "*become men of God, missionaries rooted in Christ, who are ready to give themselves totally...*" (C 65). Personal knowledge of Christ is required both for those who are preparing for the priesthood (cf. RR 59, 60) and for the Brothers (cf. R 65).

In this way we unify our human, Christian, religious and missionary life: "*we achieve unity in our life only in and through Jesus Christ*" (C 31). We grow only in his company: "*we are pilgrims, walking with Jesus in faith, hope and love*" (ibid.).

Prayer and Eucharist

As a means of living this personal relationship with Christ — a relationship that is the foundation and condition

of our life as missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate — I want to underline two things: personal prayer and the Eucharist. Just as there is no family life, no interpersonal friendship, no positive social relationships without dialogue, so there is no relationship with the Lord without personal, regular, daily prayer. The Eucharist is of necessity the high point of such a relationship. Article 33 says this explicitly:

“The Eucharist, source and summit of the Church’s life, is at the heart of our life and action. We will live such lives as to be able worthily to celebrate it every day. As we participate in its celebration with all our being, we offer ourselves with Jesus the Saviour; we are renewed in the mystery of our cooperation with him, drawing the bonds of our apostolic community ever closer and opening the horizons of our zeal to all the world. In gratitude for this great Eucharistic gift, we will seek the Lord often in his sacramental presence” (C 33).

Long experience has convinced me that a young man, who has not interiorized this reality to the point of feeling the need for it and living it consistently, is not yet mature enough to make his perpetual vows. Nor would a community that does not concretely help him to achieve this be formative.

This personal relationship with Christ is not solely the result of our striving. It is the Spirit who *“forms Christ in those who endeavour to follow in the Apostles’ footsteps. As they enter more deeply into the mystery of the Saviour and his Church, he moves them to dedicate themselves to the evangelization of the poor”* (C 45).

This is a rather long letter. You can reread and meditate it. I intend it as an expression of my love for each of you. *“Let’s arrange a rendezvous, the Holy Eucharist,”* the Founder used to say. For my part, as Superior General, I celebrate each Mass for the Missionary Oblates and the Eucharist is the highpoint of my own life and of my communion with each one of you.

II

JOURNEYING WITH MARY IMMACULATE 1988

In order to be in line with the Church, currently celebrating the Marian Year, I shall speak to you in this letter about Mary in the life of the Congregation, and, in particular, about Mary in the life of an Oblate who is in first formation. *"We are Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. This name is not a mere label: it is a definition of who and what we are..."* (1)

Involved in the preparations for the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, the Founder wrote: *"I consider it a duty to do all I can to make some contribution to the glory that this definition will bring to the Blessed Virgin."* (2)

To speak of Mary immediately after having spoken of Christ allows us to underline how much, in the Founder's mind and in our spiritual tradition, the Son and the Mother are indissolubly united.

Father Fernand Jetté said on March 23, 1979: *"For us who are Oblates, two persons should habitually be present within us: Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin. And it is in their company and with their sentiments that we should be attentive to people's misery and want to respond thereto."* (3)

1. Mary in the Founder's experience

The spiritual experience that is the key to Eugene de Mazenod's life is centered on Christ crucified and occurred on Good Friday of 1807 (4). His spiritual life was always

oriented and centered upon Christ; from this flows not only his spirituality based on the Saviour (5), but also his very missionary zeal which is so intent on evangelization. His Marian devotion too flows from the same source. Having deeply experienced the reality of salvation, Blessed Eugene sees Mary as Mother of the Saviour. In her he sees the person "*who has given us him who is the world's life and salvation*" (6), as the person who consecrates her whole self to Christ's life and mission. He stresses Mary's will "*to collaborate*" in the work of salvation (7), and calls her "*the co-redemptrix of the human race*" (8). Contemplating her at the foot of the cross, in the moment in which she accepts every human person as her child, is a favored theme of his meditation (9). Briefly put, we can say that the Marian aspect of our Founder's spirituality is eminently christological and soteriologically oriented; and thus, it is also ecclesial.

In the Founder's life we find several Marian spiritual experiences which have left a deep mark on his existence and on the life of the Congregation. Three are most significant: that of August 15, 1822, that linked to the approval of the Rules in 1825-1826, and that of his participation, in 1854, in the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854.

Mary confirms the Oblate charism

The first event occurred on August 15, 1822, a difficult time for the little Congregation that was coming into being. In his letter to Father Tempier, written in the evening of the same day, the Founder describes the fruits of this internal grace. Eugene, who from the outset of his spiritual formation had looked upon Mary as Mother, on this day fully felt what her maternity really is and what it means "*to put all one's confidence in her.*" In a new way he perceived the Congregation's true reality. He found it beautiful and

“*useful to the Church*”, in spite of the few vocations at the time and its great internal and external difficulties.

“*It seemed to me that what I saw, what I could put my finger on, was that within her lies hidden the germ of very great virtues, and that she can achieve infinite good; I found her worthy, everything pleased me about her, I cherished her rules, her statutes; her ministry seemed sublime to me, as it is indeed. I found in her bosom a sure means of salvation, even infallible, such is how they looked to me.*” (10)

This gave him courage and hope for the future; it enabled him to face the difficulties realistically and with serenity. This very realism impelled him to seek out the roots of these difficulties, not only in others and in historical circumstances but also within himself.

In the Congregation the August 15, 1822 experience is referred to as “our Mother’s smile.” The Founder’s description of it induces us to see it as an interior vision that he experienced as Mary’s smile. This “smile” fills his heart with new strength and prompts him to resume a serene and realistic struggle “to surmount such obstacles.” (11)

Oblate of Mary Immaculate, a sign of predestination

Changing our name from that of Oblates of Saint Charles to that of Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate was neither a fortuitous nor a secondary matter. Father de Mazenod was preparing the petition seeking pontifical approval for the Rules and the Congregation. During the novena and octave of the Immaculate Conception he discovered, in a context of prayer and meditation, that Mary was the best model of the apostolic life he wanted for his Congregation, that she was the person most consecrated to serving Christ, the poor and the Church (12). Thus he decided to change the Congregation’s name. Sure that the change would be made, he wrote to Father Tempier on December 22, 1825:

“Let us renew ourselves especially in devotion to the most holy Virgin and render ourselves worthy to be Oblates of the Immaculate Mary. But this is a passport to heaven! Avow that it will be as glorious as it will be consoling for us to be consecrated to her in a special manner and to bear her name. The Oblates of Mary! This name satisfies the heart and the ear.”

And immediately after the approbation, he wrote to the same Father on March 20, 1826:

“May we understand well what we are! I hope that the Lord will give us this grace, with the assistance and by the protection of our holy Mother, the Immaculate Mary, for whom we must have a great devotion in our Congregation. Does it not seem to you that it is a sign of predestination to bear the name of Oblates of Mary, that is, consecrated to God under the patronage of Mary, a name the Congregation bears as a family name held in common with the most holy and immaculate Mother of God?”

After he had returned to Marseilles, he said at the 1826 General Chapter:

“This is the happy beginning of a new era for the Society. God has ratified the projects that we proposed for his glory, he has blessed the bonds that unite us. From now on we shall be giving battle to the enemies of Heaven under a standard that is our very own, a standard that the Church has given us; and on this standard shines the glorious name of the most holy Virgin, Mary Immaculate. This name is now our own for we are consecrated to the Blessed Virgin, for we are her children in a more particular way. Her protective concern for us, already so tangible today, will be even more so in the future, provided we show that we are worthy of such a Mother...”

Mary, image of the Church

The third event is like the crowning of the Congregation's place in the Church and of Mary's in the Congre-

gation. The Founder's participation in the proclamation of the dogma in 1854 was a spiritual experience in which the mystery of Mary is superimposed on that of the Church and on the role of the Roman Pontiff. Some years later, in 1860, in his pastoral letter on the Church, the Founder wrote:

"The new Eve, destined to crush the head of this abominable serpent, is both a perfect, sublime reality and a figure of the Church, Mother of all Christians, just as the Blessed Virgin is the Mother of Jesus Christ and, by adoption, also Mother of all Christians who form one united whole with him. Indeed, without the Blessed Virgin who came to give birth to the Saviour, and without the Church that was established to give life in her womb to a lost world, the Creator's goodness would not have allowed his human creature, separated as it was from its Father in heaven, to multiply here below with the demon as its father, a detestable tyrant who would have reigned as supreme master over the human race and its domain transformed into a hell." (13)

Mary is at the heart of the charism

These three spiritual experiences of the Founder manifest an awareness of Mary's presence within the Congregation, of her motherly role both in its life and in the life of each one of us.

Other events linked to Mary have been determining factors for the Congregation's life. Accepting the shrine of Notre-Dame du Laus in 1818, for example, was the occasion for the composition of the Rules and, consequently, for the religious expression of our life as missionaries. The increase of Oblate vocations is generally seen as linked to accepting missions abroad; I think, however, that it is equally due to the Congregation's Marian image.

Certain it is that in the Founder's life and in that of the Congregation, Mary has not been an incidental reality; rather,

she has been at the very centre of our spiritual experience and missionary apostolate. "She is at the heart of the Oblate charism, but in a discreet, tactful way, as someone who inspires and sustains, who encourages and accompanies." (14).

2. Consecrated to God under the patronage of Mary

"Oblate of Mary Immaculate, that is, consecrated to God under the patronage of Mary". That is how the Founder interpreted our new name and Mary's place in an Oblate's life. Our consecration is made to God, but through Mary, under her guidance, according to her example, and with her assistance. We give ourselves to Mary so that she may present us to God as persons who have in some way been fashioned and transformed into herself. This consecration is not only the act by which we give ourselves to God definitively by perpetual profession, but is rather a state of life which indicates the nature of our being and what we ought to be, that is to say, which indicates our perpetual commitment to strive for sanctity and to the apostolate. And all this under the patronage of Mary!

Father Deschatelets, in his circular letter no. 191 on *"Our Vocation and our Life of Intimate Union with Mary Immaculate,"* wrote in 1951: *"If we would understand our vocation aright, then it is not enough to have only an ordinary devotion to Mary Immaculate. It is a matter of identifying with Mary Immaculate, of giving ourselves to God through her and in the same manner that she did, a donation which goes to the very depths of our christian, religious, missionary and priestly life."* (p. 348)

Oblates who have best incarnated our charism have lived this relationship to Mary Immaculate. The imminent beatification of Father Joseph Gerard recalls to us his attitude to Mary. The frequent invocations we come across in his

diary reveal his confidence and love for Mary Immaculate. The people called Brother Anthony Kowalczyk, "Brother Ave Maria" because of his tender and simple devotion to Mary which he expressed by calling upon her constantly.

3. Mary as model and formator

Our Constitutions present Mary as the model of our faith (cf. C.10), as the model and guardian of our consecrated life (cf. C.13). They also remind us that *"the goal of the formation process is that each of us become an apostolic man, capable of living the Oblate charism. Inspired by the example of Mary, we live in creative and ongoing fidelity our personal commitment to Jesus Christ, while serving the Church and God's Kingdom."* (C. 46)

Blessed Eugene saw Mary as playing an important role in formation. This he did when he was director at Saint-Sulpice in Paris and thereafter with the young people in Aix-en-Provence. As Founder, he considered recourse to Mary an important factor in the increase and perseverance of vocations. He sent those in difficulty to a Marian shrine, convinced that Mary would help them in discerning and resolving their crisis.

"Let us pray to good effect that the Father of the family send us workers to cultivate the vineyard he has confided to us. This grace is one which is for our good Mother to obtain for us for the glory of her divine Son; let us ask for it from her with fervour and perseverance." (15)

"You will come first to N.-D. du Laus to place yourself until further orders under the mantle of our Good Mother. It is my last effort to save you. Go there with an upright heart, call fervently upon this powerful protector, ask her to enlighten the director I appoint for you in this holy place and to give you the simplicity and docility you need in this situation, decisive as it is for your life." (16)

Mary's place in initial formation is well spelled out in the novitiate directory which is considered to be the expression of the Founder's thought.

"After devotion to the Savior's sacred Person, the Society's novices ought to consecrate their entire love to his most holy Mother, the glorious and Immaculate Virgin Mary. Here it is a matter not merely of an ordinary devotion such as all Christians profess; nor only of a more special devotion that characterizes churchmen who are more faithful in striving for holiness; the devotion we ought to have for God's Mother is quite unique, one that only among us is verified to such a high degree.

We are not simply Mary's children as all Christians are and as the Church's ministers especially are: we are her children in a way that is more special yet. Jesus Christ it is who has given us his Mother through the intermediary of his Vicar on earth; we bear her name, we have left everything in order to belong to her, to have the happiness of calling ourselves her children.

What a grace and favor this is! How much we ought to value it! And what is any sacrifice worth in comparison to what we have received in return: we are Mary's children, we belong to her beloved family, we serve under her standard and under so great a title, the most glorious, namely, her Immaculate Conception. Will we ever sufficiently comprehend the grace God has given us when he called us to such a vocation? If it is true that no servant of Mary will ever perish and that those who live under her rule have nothing to fear, then what may those who can in all truth consider themselves as her sons of predilection not expect from such a Mother?

Novices of the most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary! If you could only grasp the greatness of the favor God has granted you by bringing you into the beloved family of his holy Mother! No matter how intense your tenderness, gratitude and devotion to Mary, it will never equal the greatness of her love for you. You will never adequately appreciate what she has

done for you and all that you owe her in consequence.” (17)

In the novitiate directory of Notre-Dame de l’Osier, drawn up in 1853, the paragraph which treats of Marian devotion opens with this question: *“Is it possible truly to love Jesus without loving his holy Mother?”* The paragraph continues: *“What a shame if we, her sons, her Oblates, do not love her with an ardent love, do not have a boundless devotion to her! (...) When one loves, one will find countless ways of manifesting one’s tenderness.” (18)*

Eugene’s personality cannot be explained without taking into account the place Mary had in his formation, from his childhood until the seminary and on into adulthood (19). Mary’s presence is for him so normal that he does not feel the need to emphasize that fact. His relationship to her surpasses devotional forms and is rather a spontaneous life comportment. Oblates manifested the same kind of behaviour, as the Founder himself often noted. (20)

4. The Superior General’s expectations

Perpetual oblation is the goal of initial formation. It is not the final stage; rather, it denotes the interiorization of the Oblate charism under all its aspects, the ability to proceed fully along this way, a mature commitment to offer one’s entire life to God in order to collaborate in his mission. Such a consecration is attained and constantly lived out under Mary’s patronage.

To achieve this, we ought to keep our eyes fixed on Mary and entrust ourselves to her in all simplicity. We must also get to know her.

I invite you to read books and articles on Mary’s place in the Oblate charism, in the life of the Founder and of the Congregation. Reading and meditating John Paul II’s encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* will help you not only to be in

step with the universal Church, but also to deepen your grasp of the Marian elements that are mentioned in our Constitutions (cf. CC. 10, 13). I invite you to learn of Mary through Holy Scripture, the tradition of the Fathers, and the theology of Vatican II. Solid Mariology must not be lacking in the theological formation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

The “doctrine of faith” is, however, not sufficient for our formation. We need “the life of faith and thus an authentic Marian spirituality” (21). Hence, we cannot content ourselves with an intellectual knowledge of the mystery of Mary. We need to establish a personal relationship with her that is deep and full of simplicity. We must let our hearts be caught up by “created nature’s amazement and admiration” (22), an element which fills the Founder’s writings. We need to live the reality expressed by the simple and profound words of Blessed Eugene: *“They will always look up to Mary as their Mother.”*

The Rosary

The Constitutions offer us a simple and traditional way of daily living such a relationship with Mary:

“With Mary Immaculate, the faithful handmaid of the Lord, and under the guidance of the Spirit, we enter into closer union with Jesus Christ. We will contemplate with her the mysteries of the Incarnate Word, especially in praying the rosary” (C. 36).

I learned to appreciate and live the Rosary in Laos where, during long journeys on foot, it was the only form of prayer possible. I appreciated it also when I came across forms of prayer akin to it among believers in other religions. As a matter of fact, our rosary not only has similarities of method with other religious traditions, but the beads derive

from a similar Hindu object which was transmitted to Buddhism and has been adopted by the Moslems. Thus the rosary can be seen as a symbol and a means of unity among all who are in search of God.

By means of repeating the prayers of the Our Father and the Hail Mary, we are invited to meditate the mysteries of Christ's life with Mary's heart and outlook. Such an exercise helps us to deepen our consecration to God through Mary's patronage. It can also be a prayer of contemplation and communion for us. By praying with Mary and by sharing her attitudes in regard to the mysteries of Christ, we easily open our hearts to the needs of the human race, the Church and the Congregation. In the course of my long trips visiting Oblates, I often say the rosary with the provincial or another Oblate who is guiding me. As I have often experienced, after such prayer my outlook on people and situations is more serene. The rosary is the prayer of the poor and it helps us to be simple and welcoming, just as Mary is.

Mary in the community

Mary also creates a family atmosphere. Her example and community devotion to her facilitate simplicity in our relationships, mutual trust, charity toward each other, as well as love for the poor and apostolic dynamism. My hope and wish for all the Congregation's formation communities is that, during this Marian Year, they bring, like John the Apostle did, Mary into their house and that she may transform them so that they become her own family. "*By growing in unity of heart and mind, we bear witness before the world that Jesus lives in our midst and unites us in order to send us out to proclaim God's reign*" (C.37).

In concluding, I want to tell you that I share the Founder's conviction which he expressed in writing to the Congregation:

“Under the patronage of our good and most holy Immaculate Virgin Mary, our Mother, the Congregation of the Oblates will continue to be a tree planted beside a stream of living waters. It has certainly produced an abundance of fruit already; it will produce yet more and will continue to prosper if it remains faithful, if it does not falter, and above all if it burns with a most ardent love for Christ, in the unity of the Spirit who “is the bond of perfection.” (24)

Nourished by this hope that springs from faith, I greet you with all my heart, in Christ and Mary Immaculate.

NOTES

(1) Leo Deschâtelets, “Our Vocation and our Life of Intimate Union with Mary Immaculate”, in *Circulaires Administratives*, no. 191, p. 347.

(2) Eugene de Mazenod, “Journal”, 5 December 1854, in *Missions* 1873, p. 39.

(3) Fernand Jetté, “The Oblate and the Virgin Mary”, in *The Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate*, Rome, 1985, p. 123.

(4) Cf. Eugene de Mazenod, *Notes de Retraite 1814*, Postulation Archives OMI, DM IV, 2.

(5) Cf. Henri Gratton, “La devotion salvatorienne du Fondateur”, in *Etudes Oblates* 1942, pp. 158-171.

(6) Eugene de Mazenod, Pastoral Letter of August 8, 1849.

(7) “Abrégé du Règlement de vie de MM. les Congreganistes de la Jeunesse Chrétienne”, in *Missions* 1899, p. 10.

(8) Eugene de Mazenod, Pastoral Letter of February 8, 1855. It is remarkable that the Founder gives each one of us Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate the same title in the famous text of the Rules of 1818. Cf. *Prima Pars*, cap. 1:3, N.B.

(9) Cf. Eugene de Mazenod, “Letter to his Mother”, May 1, 1810; Louis Boutin, *La spiritualité de Mgr de Mazenod*, Montreal, 1970, p. 66.

(10) Eugene de Mazenod, “Letter to Father Tempier”, August 15, 1822, *Letters to the Oblates of France 1814-1825*, p. 93.

(11) Cf. Kazimierz Lubowicki, *Maria nella vita del Beato Eugenio de Mazenod e della sua Congregazione*, pro manuscripto, Rome, 1987, pp. 120-148.

(12) Cf. Fernand Jetté, "Essai sur le caractère marial de notre spiritualité – I", in *Etudes Oblates*, 1948, p. 25. Two other studies follow this one: Roger Gauthier, "Essai sur le caractère marial de notre spiritualité – II", in *Etudes Oblates*, 1948, pp. 169-195, and Jacques Croteau, "Essai sur le caractère marial de notre spiritualité – III", in *Etudes Oblates*, 1948, pp. 237-262.

(13) Eugene de Mazenod, Pastoral Letter of February 16, 1860.

(14) Fernand Jetté, "The Oblate Charism", in *The Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate*, Rome, 1985, p. 70.

(15) Eugene de Mazenod, "Letter to Father Tempier" of April 13, 1826, Letters to the Oblates of France 1826-1830, p. 85.

(16) Eugene de Mazenod, "Letter to Scholastic Brother Saluzzo" of December 8, 1831, Letters to the Oblates of France 1831-1836, pp. 47-48.

(17) "Directoire des novices", published by *Etudes Oblates*, 1958, p. 5.

(18) "Directoire du Noviciat de Notre-Dame de l'Osier", 1853, pro manuscripto, General Archives OMI.

(19) Cf. Kazimierz Lubowicki, *Maria nella vita del Beato Eugenio de Mazenod e della Congregazione*, pro manuscripto, Rome, 1987, pp. 12-120.

(20) Roger Guindon, "Le caractère marial de la formation cléricale chez les Oblats de Marie Immaculée", in *Etudes Oblates*, 1955, pp. 133-147.

(21) Cf. John Paul II, encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 48.

(22) Hymn *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, (*natura mirante*); cf. also *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 103 (on the liturgy), Vatican II.

(23) Eugene de Mazenod, Letter Convoking the General Chapter, March 19, 1860.

III

THE OBLATE MISSION 1989

The OBLATE MISSION is a reality we have much at heart. It is an essential and predominant aspect of our identity. Oblate mission was the theme of the 1966 Chapter, and the latter stressed six areas or priorities in regard to carrying out this mission in today's world. As the objective of its Congregation-wide animation, the General Council has adopted the revitalization of the Oblate missionary identity.

As I go about visiting the Congregation, I am always struck by the dynamism and creativity I find in the Oblates' missionary involvements. The variety and originality of our missionary activity is impressive. It is difficult to make known the apostolic richness of Oblates at work in so many situations in some sixty countries over the different continents.

Some common traits and lived priorities emerge from this variety, however. Among these traits I note our closeness to the people, preference for the poor, concrete response to urgent needs. Since direct evangelization is a necessity in so many situations, it is not only receiving new interest, but is also given concrete expressions: through a new flourishing of parish missions, especially in some European countries; through retreat and renewal centres, especially in North America; through missionary action teams, especially in Canada; through regular visits and accompaniment of dispersed Christian communities, especially in Latin America and in Africa. Evangelization and the various forms of apostolate are more and more characterized by an integral

approach which takes into account all personal and social needs and the collaboration of the laity. Our missionary dynamism manifests itself more strongly and clearly in the new foundations that the Congregation has made in these latter years and which, as I hope, the Congregation will continue to take on in response to the greatest and most urgent needs of the Church, in accordance with the characteristics of our charism.

We were founded and have grown for the mission

We were born for the mission and we exist for the mission. The Founder was impelled to begin the community of Aix in order to evangelize the inhabitants of his area, especially the ordinary people. He requested Rome's approval in order to assure the Congregation's existence and its missionary activity.

Our growth, too, is due to the mission. With our going to Canada in 1841 and especially with our missionary commitments among the Indians, there quickly followed an explosion of vocations and enthusiasm, accompanied by a meaningful image that adhered to the Oblate work. Thus began a missionary epic in different parts of the world: from Sri Lanka to South Africa, from Oregon to Texas. The Founder's vision took on new depth: evangelization was conceived not only as proclaiming Jesus Christ in order to reawaken the faith, correct mores and renew religious practice, but also as introducing people to Christ and to the Church in the way the Apostles did at the beginning of the christian era. Oblates are *viri apostolici* not only inasmuch as they follow Christ and generously give themselves, but also inasmuch as they are doing the same things that the Apostles did, namely, going out into the whole world in order to evangelize people. The desire for universality that the

Founder had nourished as a young man and had expressed in the first Rules was now being realized.

The Oblate is the missionary of the poor, missionary to people. He is open to every human person in need, welcomes the latter's aspirations, accompanies him on his journey, reveals to him who Christ is. He is open to the whole world, listening to its appeals and anxieties, sustaining the Congregation's commitments, making himself everywhere available. The Congregation's future will depend on the quality of our life, on our courage and our availability to respond to the challenges and needs of the Church wherever the Spirit will invite us to witness to the Gospel.

Characteristics of the Oblate mission

The Founder's missionary ideal originated in his personal experience of Christ the Saviour and in his compassionate love for the poor, the abandoned and rejected. For the Founder mission means working together with Christ who remains the main agent in the saving of all men. To achieve this, the Oblate has to be in unison with his Master, has to be identified with him. The Oblate has to be an apostolic man, the companion of Christ, a co-worker with him. At the same time, however, the Oblate must identify himself with the people, understand their needs and aspirations to the point of taking upon himself their sins, just as the Founder did in the first missions, to everyone's amazement.

All of us in the Congregation are missionaries and that for our whole lifetime. We live in solidarity with the mission entrusted to the Congregation and carried out by her. The Oblate mission everywhere belongs to us. Each one of us affects it by mode of being even prior to any kind of activity.

We are brothers and priests in the missionary family.

The same mission carried out in a multiplicity of ways strives to give witness to Christ, to make him known and loved, to cooperate in the coming of his Kingdom. The principal place and priority of proclamation (cf. CC. 5, 7) derives from our clerical character which qualifies the activity of the entire Congregation and not only that of those who are called to share in the gift of the priesthood (cf. C 66). In fact "*we fulfill our mission in and through the community to which we belong* (C. 37). "*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*" (MTW, 109). The community, in fact, is a credible and comprehensible sign of what we are proclaiming: the risen Christ in our midst (cf. CC. 3, 37), the beginning of God's Kingdom and of the new mankind (C. 11).

Mission in our life

The mission is not something foreign to your life, or something you can expect only in the future and for which you are preparing. It is a part of each one of you. You will become aware of this once you are able to carry out and incarnate what you bear within your soul. Many of you heard the call or were confirmed in it thanks to a missionary experience or because of contact with a true missionary or through the discovery of the great missionary needs. I have seen so many young Oblates grow and mature in their vocation thanks to an apostolic involvement whereby they became sure that they were really called to this kind of life. That is why missionary experience is seen as part of the formation process (cf. MTW, 161; R. 54) and so, a prolonged pastoral activity even during first formation is becoming ever more frequent and fruitful.

You are preparing yourselves above all for this mission. The 1986 Chapter recalled Constitution 50: "*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” (MTW, 156). In this article on first formation, the Constitutions remind us of our charism in the following of Christ: taking their inspiration from the Preface, they underline our twofold commitment to become saints and to be missionaries. I would like to speak to you now about preparing for the Oblate mission.

Capable of carrying on the Oblate mission

It seems to me that first formation ought first of all to be a help in acquiring a missionary heart and mentality. In the first Rule, that of 1818, the Founder wrote: “... *Even though, because of their present small number and the more urgent needs of the people around them, they have to limit the scope of their zeal, for the time being, to the poor of our countryside, their ambition should, in its holy aspirations, embrace the vast expanse of the whole earth*” (CC & RR, p. 14). In short, a heart as large as the world. What is asked for is a missionary mentality that seeks to understand the poor and those who are far away, that is open to new ways of making Christ known.

I am always moved when I recall my last visit to Father Leo Deschâtelets. He was ill and, from his bed, he was watching a television program. In our conversation, after he had manifested his interest in my missionary work in Laos and my teaching of missiology in Ottawa, he began to speak of how one could evangelize the people he was seeing on television and how this could be done by using that very means. One could feel a missionary heart beating within him. In bidding me farewell, he assured me that he was offering up his whole life for the Oblate mission all over the world.

Then we need to acquire a missionary spirituality that is rooted in Christ, whom we experience in prayer, the Word of God and community life, but also recognize in persons and events (cf. CC. 33, 56; R. 65). The Chapter says: "*Our spirituality is founded upon the contemplation of Christ who was available to respond to the needs of those he met and who also spent many silent hours praying in the presence of his Father*" (MTW, 141).

A missionary heart, mentality and spirituality are furthered by the discovery of the missionary needs in the world, by interest in and knowledge of the Oblates' missionary commitments, as well as by your own missionary experiences, closeness to the poor, simple lifestyle, and the authenticity of the witness of what you are living. Rule 60 states: "From a personal and coherent faith vision, scholastics will be able to present Christ's Gospel in such a way that it reaches and touches the hearts of their contemporaries."

A person becomes capable of taking on the Oblate mission through the formation of one's personal character and apprenticeship in community. Rule 53 singles out some important aspects in the formation of character in view of the mission: a realistic assessment of oneself, a sense of responsibility, maturity in relationships, leadership qualities, a sense of daring and creativity, ability to face renunciation with love, peace and joy. This character formation goes hand in hand with initiation into community life, an element on which you are particularly keen and which the Constitutions and the last Chapter have greatly stressed. As you will have probably experienced, true community life is already mission and witness. We need especially to become accustomed to the apostolic dimension of community: this helps us to face our missionary activities realistically, to program and assess them (cf. MTW, 158, 161).

Finally, our studies are to be oriented to the mission that is focused on Christ (cf. C. 66; R. 59). A solid preparation is

more than ever necessary in our complex world and in the pioneering activities proper to missionaries. Besides “*a solid theological and philosophical formation*,” the Chapter recommends certain special sectors, such as the Church’s social doctrine, reflection upon a secularized society, initiation to the means of communications, the study of languages, analysis of the Church’s situation, the study of the theology of the laity, ecumenism, the great religions (MTW, 159).

So many things are being asked of you and perhaps you cannot do them all as you would like to. The important thing is to achieve a solid foundation, a taste and desire as well as a methodology to continue delving deeply into the different aspects of the mission that will be entrusted to you. Your formation, in fact, does not cease with your first obedience but ought to continue throughout your whole life. And so it is important to learn how to reflect, assess and study if you are to respond to the missionary challenges that await you. “*For this reason, during the years of initial formation, formators will show young Oblates how to learn from life experience and help them develop a positive attitude toward continuing their formation once they are engaged in the ministry*” (R. 68).

In the process of making the Oblate life your own, each one of you will be able gradually to discover the signs of a more specific call and thus form a personal missionary project which you will verify with your formators and submit to the Superior General when you ask for your first obedience. Being attentive to missionary needs, even those which go beyond the confines of our countries, and the availability to respond thereto are signs of authenticity.

According to the example of so many Oblates

In regard to the mission, models and witnesses abound in the Congregation. The beatification has led us to discover

Father Gerard about whom I spoke in two letters addressed to the Congregation and to which I refer you. Authentic missionaries are not lacking among the Oblates! Make it a point to get to know them, meet them, listen to them. You will learn a lot from them, now and throughout your whole life.

May Mary, about whom I spoke to you in last year's letter, obtain for you and the entire Congregation an abundance of the Holy Spirit's graces, so that he may transform us and give us the missionary dynamism of Pentecost. I wish you a good scholastic year and, above all, good formative and missionary progress. What counts is that we never call a halt in our life. For, as pilgrims, we are walking with Jesus in faith, hope and love. I too am walking with you, following Christ as Mary Immaculate did.

IV

THE OBLATE COMMUNITY 1990

According to the Constitutions it is the Superior General who receives the vows of every Oblate either directly or through a delegate; it is he in council who approves their admission to perpetual vows; it is he personally who gives them their first obedience. This is a sign of the fact that we are all members of the same Congregation, that there are special links with the person who is the *"living bond of unity"* in the Oblate family (C 112) and who has a special responsibility toward all those who are beginning their life and mission according to the charism of Blessed Eugene de Mazenod (C 49). We make up one Congregation, we share the same charism, we belong to the same community.

This characteristic unity overcomes ethnic and administrative differences among us. It gives us a common spirituality and imbues each of us with an apostolic dynamism similar to that of his brothers. It makes us available to meet the missionary challenges and urgent needs undertaken by the Congregation throughout the world. This unity causes us to breathe and react, as it were, on a Church and world dimension, whatever may be the concrete conditions of our work. Even this letter unites about 600 Oblates in first formation programs who come from at least 40 countries in all the continents. Together with the other 4,600 Oblates do we not constitute a large family?

Young Oblates are searching for community

You have the ideal of community very much at heart. I am aware of it in my meetings with you and when reading your life stories and the desires you express, especially in preparing for final vows. Moreover, in the 1985-86 survey made among young Oblates, 63% emphasized that community life was one of the major strengths of the Institute and included mutual charity, brotherhood, hospitality, unity, community work (1). Almost in counterpoint to this, 57% stated that the greatest weakness was the inadequacy of community life because of individualism, the lack of adequate community spirit and expression (2). Although 82% stated that the greatest challenge in the years ahead seemed to be the evangelizing of the poor and of young people, 68% held that the answer will come especially from the quality of our evangelical and religious life and, in particular, from the quality of our community life (3). I see that these community aspirations of yours are in tune with the present day renewal in the Church and with the initial intuition and charism of the Founder.

In the Catholic Church at the present time, the development of community life is a significant element of renewal. In Latin America the ecclesial base communities have been instrumental in promoting an evangelical renewal, the development of ministries and social commitment. In many African and Asian countries there is a similar phenomenon. In the churches of the West many Christian movements have arisen where the community aspect is strongly emphasized.

Throughout the Church's history, the growth of the community element is a sign of renewal in the christian reality. Jesus gathered the Apostles about him and thus formed a community, a sign of the new chosen people. When the Spirit had been poured out upon them the believers in

Christ formed a community of one heart and one mind (Acts 2, 42-47; 4, 32-35; 5, 11-15).

The different forms of christian renewal and the various experiments of religious life down through the centuries took their inspiration from the image of the early christian community. Blessed Eugene was to do likewise.

Oblates, missionaries in community

As if by a strong impulse from without (“forte secousse étrangère”), Eugene de Mazenod did not found a group or team but a community of missionaries. At the beginning there were three insights which obliged the Founder to necessarily make clear choices:

a) the evangelizing of the poor, especially people living in the countryside who had lost all sense of Christianity and of any connection with the life of the Church;

b) the quality of the missionaries who had to be apostolic men “*who would be willing and courageous enough to walk in the footsteps of the Apostles*” (4), determined to become “*really saints themselves*” (5);

c) the community as a place for growth, as a school of ongoing formation, as a way to holiness, through prayer and study, recollection and mutual fraternal help in an atmosphere of constant charity.

These three choices consciously made by Eugene de Mazenod constitute the supporting pillars of the Oblate charism even in its subsequent development. They are its cornerstones. They are three requirements that make it possible for us to answer challenges as they arise. They fostered the solidity and permanence of the foundation by enabling us to overcome obstacles which caused similar missionary groups to disappear. If we are to be authentic Oblates, men after the heart of the Founder, we must

therefore be missionaries, apostles and men of community.

The Founder was always attentive to the way in which his men lived community. He encouraged community spirit and suitable formulae and he reproached shortcomings and failures (6).

He showed his pleasure when he met with authentic communities. On the occasion of his canonical visit to Notre-Dame de Lumières, on the 10th of October 1840, he wrote: *"It seems opportune that we should express the supreme satisfaction we have experienced in visiting this community where peace, charity and the greatest regularity rule supreme. We spent five delightful days in the midst of this portion of our dear religious family. We are convinced that God is here served in the best of ways, that the members love one another as brothers and that their hearts are so united as not to allow of even the slightest discord, that each one lives happily in the most exact practice of the Holy Rules of the Institute, that they have learned how to coordinate the exercise of zeal in the missions and the ministry with mutual support and study in times of solitude which it is possible to have here more than elsewhere; in a word, they appreciate the full value of their vocation and give thanks to the Lord"* (7).

The Founder's reactions were not always so positive with regard to the way in which community life was lived. His letters often contain chastisement for failures and shortcomings in the community life of our members.

New awareness of community in the Congregation

The community situation in our Congregation is varied both in the way that various groups come together and in the way in which community life is realized. According to the survey made for the Chapter (8), 76.8% of Oblates live in established communities, 19.2% live and work alone but are

in regular contact with community, and 4% live without regular contact. The majority of Provinces acknowledged that between the two Chapters of 1980 and 1986 there had been progress in community life and that mutual acceptance, respect and trust had increased; communication had become easier and more fraternal; there was a greater awareness of belonging and collegiality, and community prayer had become more regular. At the same time there was a desire for progress in the quality of interpersonal relations, in participating in prayer and recreation, in coresponsibility and community planning. The new Constitutions and Rules were credited with being a driving force in this renewal.

In the years following the Chapter, the effort at community renewal has continued. District meetings are more frequent. A number of Provinces have evaluated their community life in Congresses and Provincial Councils; they have organized meetings and courses for animators; they have formulated directories and guidelines. The General Council has discussed especially District Communities (9). The Association for Oblate Studies and Research held its Congress in Ottawa during August 1989 on the theme of community. The forthcoming intercapitular meeting to be held in Rome during May of this year will discuss the same theme.

In the community renewal of the Congregation, it seems to me that certain trends are emerging which are signs of the times and through which the Lord is pointing out the direction we must take.

Community is being lived as a communion of persons rather than as a common dwelling place or a house where the members share a roof, meals and different activities. There is a preference for personal relationship and mutual help rather than for structures and pre-established norms. There is an effort at growing together and not merely at being together. It is the milieu in which the different aspects of our charism

and the different requirements of persons are discussed. It is not merely the expression of a few religious exercises but of the totality of life in the following of Jesus Christ as his disciples and as his missionaries. Rather than the place from which the missionary sets out for his mission, it is the reality in which the mission lives, grows and is renewed. The person of each member and the needs of the mission are the elements which determine these concrete forms of community and especially its structures.

Among these trends which I see emerging, there are some values that are special:

- the mission as a common task;
- brotherhood as attention to and openness to fellow Oblates;
- sharing and communion among members;
- coresponsibility in community duties and in promoting mutual growth;
- creativity and adaptability of structures according to the needs of persons and of the mission.

In a word, an effort is being made to integrate both anthropological and theological requirements. The community is not merely a group of friends or a working team. It is an apostolic family, an ecclesial community with Christ, his Apostles and the early christian community as its model.

Above and beyond concrete conditions linked with the time in which we live, I think there is a rediscovery of some of the characteristics of community as desired by the Founder: a family united by brotherly charity. An American Oblate who visited the General House wrote to me on May 18, 1989: *"There is a brotherhood among Oblates which is deeper than what words can express. There will always be Oblates as long as there is brotherhood among them like that which I experienced in my lifetime."*

Missionary and apostolic community

At the end of the sixties, new community experiments were tainted with an excessive quest for intimacy and were sometimes opposed to the missionary spirit. The 1966 Chapter, by asserting that *“community life for us, as Oblates is not alone necessary for mission but is itself mission”* (10), expressed a new awareness and confirmed a long standing tradition.

In 1972 the document prepared by the General Council pointed out why the community can be called mission. The authentic community is an expression of the substance of the Good News that unity among men is already realized, that the new commandment of love is being put into practice, that salvation is being experienced, that Jesus Christ is still bringing disciples together and sending out missionaries on the strength of his resurrection which has already taken place. “It is a sign so that the world may believe (Jn 17, 21)... it is the sign of the disciples” (Jn 13,15) (11). In concluding, the document stated: *“Every community renewal must be directed toward the mission... that is the principal starting point for a new departure... A true community is a living cell, capable in its turn of forming other communities, in ever increasing circles, both in the Church and in the world”* (12). Perhaps we are often unable to form christian and human communities through our ministry because we personally lack a genuine experience of Oblate community.

In relation to the mission, therefore, community life should not be seen as a merely functional element, as a preparation or support. It is missionary because of what it lives and reveals to the world. It is a sign and a sacrament of salvation because of Christ's presence within it (13).

In recent times there is more frequent mention of apostolic community. Its name indicates its purpose, its composition and its nature. The purpose of the Oblate

community is mission, it should realize the experience of the Apostles with Jesus who brings the community members together and sends them out. Thus the apostolic community reminds us of the three initial inspirations chosen by the Founder to which I referred above.

Formation community

There can be no human or christian formation without interpersonal relationships. Without these relationships formation is at a standstill. Furthermore, relationships must be according to the nature of one's own vocation. For this reason the religious needs his natural milieu which is the community if he is to live and grow (C 49). During the period of first formation the community element is of the greatest importance, as is pointed out in our Constitutions and in the formation directory.

What is the situation of our formation communities? I think that these communities are, for the most part, living and in good shape. They are noteworthy for brotherhood and creativity; they are rich in idealism. In my visit to the formation houses of Southern Africa, I saw in those communities the image of what society should be without racial discrimination. In a number of instances your houses have been a stimulus for community renewal in the Provinces. I expect your communities to become increasingly a stimulus toward the renewal of community life in the Provinces and Delegations and consequently throughout the Congregation.

I am aware of the difficulties you meet with for reasons that are either internal or external. The tensions in society, in the Church and in the Congregation are reflected in your communities. One inconvenience encountered in some cases is the lack of trust between those in formation and their

formators. Without mutual trust, formation runs the risk of leading nowhere. Another drawback which I have sometimes encountered is the insufficient experience of communion and exchange resulting from communities that are either too big or too small, although the real root of the trouble may be elsewhere.

In first formation you should have concrete experience of the different dimensions of community (human, christian, religious and missionary) as mentioned in the Constitutions. You should acquire sufficient personal self-confidence to overcome loneliness, to be able to live in different types of apostolic community and to be able to build community.

Whose duty is it to form these communities? It is certainly the responsibility of the Major Superiors to set up good formation communities and thereby fulfil the role which is theirs. It is also however the responsibility of all the members, both your formators and yourselves, to develop communities that are schools of communion, of formation and of human, religious and missionary growth. The community must become a permanent need in your lives, even though it will be incarnated in different ways. You must become men of communion who are capable of building and encouraging communities in our midst and in the milieu in which you live, because this is to bring the Good News to a divided and lacerated world. In this way you shall be better able to meet the complex challenges of today's mission.

Charity among yourselves

The last words of our Founder sum up the dynamics of our Oblate life: "Charity among yourselves and, abroad, zeal for souls." Charity is the soul of our being together. This charity comes from God and is the expression of the Trinitarian community. This charity has been handed down

to us by Christ and must be lived as he lived it, that is, to the extent of giving our lives for others. "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15,12). It is in this mutual love that Jesus becomes present (C 37), and becomes the teacher of the community and of each individual in the process of growth.

How is this ideal to be realized in concrete terms? What are the pedagogical instruments for growth in mutual charity? From my own experience as formator and community member, there are some pedagogical instruments which I consider to be important in maintaining mutual love, in fostering unity and consequently in making the Lord present so that the community may accomplish its duty of formation and lead its members toward maturity:

Sharing

Sharing of one's own experience, intuitions, difficulties, of one's life, is one way for growing in charity. We must understand one another and help one another because this is our human family and, even more so, because it is the milieu in which we must grow and become holy. The road to holiness and to the mission is, in fact, a road we must travel together because we are called by the same Master. When we accept a new member in the community and in the Congregation we undertake to help him grow and become holy, to be a genuine missionary in word, in action and in his life. We must have the courage to say this explicitly, sharing our gifts, overcoming various complexes and jealousies. Our Constitutions remind us of this and they point out some areas for this sharing (CC 28, 35, 37, 39, 40, 48, 75, 87; R 25).

Mutual pardoning

There can be no growth if there is not continuous conversion, made possible by God's grace and fraternal help.

We must learn to overlook the mistakes of others and therefore be ready to pardon as Jesus taught his first community to pardon, seventy times seven times. Love believes that the other person can renew himself; it is ready to see a brother in a new light, to give him a hand to climb the difficult path of holiness more easily. This must be done at a personal level, but the community must also find adequate expression for the process (C 33, 39, 40, 47).

Confrontation and discernment

Personal confrontation with one's own progress under the guidance of a spiritual director is a component of every spiritual journey. Personal spiritual direction is irreplaceable and must be developed in an atmosphere of charity. Religious tradition is also familiar with forms of community confrontation such as "fraternal correction," "the chapter of faults," review of life, personal reports to the Superior (C 39). Experience has taught me that community confrontation animated by charity, where the overall progress of the group or part thereof is evaluated, is most valuable. Community discernment is necessary to find ways of living together and promoting the mission (CC 26, 51, 53, 55, 66, 72, 81,105,111).

The daily incarnation of love

The community is built up through the humble exercise of charity by every member. It can be expressed in a thousand ways and it would be impossible to list them all or foresee what form they might take. A smile, a moment to listen to another, a word of encouragement, a break for rest in the company of a confrere, a helping hand, an exchange of spiritual inspiration, pointing out an article worth reading, etc. Man goes to Christ through his brother. Our brother

becomes the concrete and immediate “way” to reach God, besides being a point of comparison on the spiritual journey (cf. 1 Jn 4, 12.20; CC 3, 15, 37, 38,39,44, 102, 112).

Like Mary

Mary is present in many ways in the community because we are a family bearing her name. She creates the home atmosphere, a spirit of brotherhood, of simplicity. In order to create a community we must follow her attitude, an attitude of openness to receive, of listening, of silence, of contemplation. We must take her with us as John did, because Jesus gave her to us to be our Mother so that we should live in her presence. We must, like the Apostles, come together with Mary and ask the Spirit for the grace to be transformed by him so that we too may become courageous apostles.

NOTES

(1) General Chapter 1986, pre-capitular commission document: “Young Oblates Speak to Us,” pp. 5-6.

(2) *Ibid.*, pp. 8,15-16.

(3) *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

(4) “Letter to Fr. Tempier” – October 9, 1815, in *Oblate Writings VI*, p. 7.

(5) “Letter to Fr. Tempier” – December 13,1815, in *Oblate Writings VI*, pp. 12-13

(6) Beaudoin, Yvon, “Community and Mission according to Bishop de Mazenod,” in *OMI Documentation*, n. 167, September 1989.

(7) *Codex Historicus* of Notre-Dame de Lumières.

(8) General Chapter 1986, pre-capitular document: *A Look at the Congregation*, pp. 67-90.

(9) *OMI Communiqué*, No. 48/88; No. 49/89, March 1989.

(10) General Chapter 1986: *Document – Missionaries in Today’s World*, No.109)

(11) OMI General Council document: Community, 1972, Nos. 6-9.

(12) Ibid., n. 23.

(13) Cf. Constitutions 1, 3, 37. For a presentation of community life according to the Constitutions and Rules, cf. the article which I wrote in *Vie Oblate Life*, 1988, pp. 3-10.

THE OBLATE, AN APOSTOLIC MAN 1991

To the Founder's mind, Oblates should be "*men who want to follow in the footsteps of their divine Master Jesus Christ, to win back the many souls who have thrown off his yoke*". Relationship with Christ, as I recalled in my first letter, is the foundation, the source and center of all our personal life, of our missionary activity and of our community life. Indeed, there is not and cannot be either missionary, community or mission without a personal experience, continuously renewed, of Christ, and his redeeming love for us and for humankind.

"In a word, apostolic men"

The effectiveness of mission and the authenticity of community depend on the quality of missionaries. The interdependence of these three realities form the initial intuition of the Founder, an intuition that he deepened and developed during his whole life. Eugene de Mazenod made a synthesis of the qualities an Oblate should have by evoking the image of the apostolic man. In his very first letter to Father Tempier, he wrote: "*Read this letter at the foot of your crucifix with a mind to heed only God... We wish to choose men who have the will and the courage to walk in the footsteps of the Apostles... with no more reward on earth than much sorrow and all else that the Saviour announced to his true disciples*" (9th October 1815). When contending with the

humility of his future companion he wrote, two months later: *“Were it a question of going out to preach more or less well the word of God, mingled with much alloy of self, of going far and wide for the purpose, if you wish, of winning souls for God without taking much trouble to be men of interior life, truly apostolic men, I think it would not be difficult to replace you. But can you believe I want merchandise of that sort? We must be truly saints ourselves”* (13th December 1815) .

In the first Rule of 1818, the ideal of the apostolic man is outlined very forcefully and precisely in the Founder’s original texts. On several occasions he recalls the Apostles’ relationship with Christ: *“Their founder is Jesus Christ, the very Son of God; their first fathers are the Apostles.”* *“The missionaries ought, as far as the weakness of human nature allows, to imitate in everything the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, the chief founder of the Society, and that of his Apostles, our first fathers.”*

The theme is still further developed in the famous Nota Bene of the 1818 Rule; it became the Preface of the 1825 Rule approved by Pope Leo XII on 17th February 1826. In this Preface the expression “apostolic men” synthesizes the qualities of a missionary: *“They are convinced that if priests could be formed, afire with zeal for men’s salvation, priests not given to their own interests, solidly grounded in virtue – in a word, apostolic men deeply conscious of the need to reform themselves, who would labour with all the resources at their command to convert others then there would be ample reason to believe that in a short while people who had gone astray might be brought back to their long-unrecognized responsibilities.”*

For the Founder, to be “apostolic men” was not just an ethical and operational ideal – it was an evangelical ideal, that is to say, inspired by the Gospel and following the same dynamic of Christ in whom the Good News was identifiable with the person. *“How, indeed, did our Lord Jesus Christ*

proceed when he undertook to convert the world?... And how should men who want to follow in the footsteps of their divine Master conduct themselves if they, in turn, are to win back the many souls who have thrown off his yoke?" He answered these two questions by indicating the qualities required of such missionaries. The Preface, therefore, always considered to be the Magna Carta of our Oblate identity, tells us clearly what kind of missionary we are called to become.

In the course of his life Blessed Eugene constantly returned to this image that was dear to him and which summarizes in his mind the Oblate ideal. For the Founder, being apostolic men always means not only what an Oblate does but above all what he is; it underscores both the missionary and religious dimensions; in a word it describes the unity of life of a person who is to follow Christ in order to be a co-worker in his mission. On the level of activity the expression sustained variations of meaning, not however on the level of being. If "being apostolic men and following in the footsteps of the Apostles" in the realm of activity, during the first twenty-five years, meant to proclaim Christ to those who had forgotten him and, from 1840 on, meant especially to proclaim him for the first time to non-Christians, in the realm of being, the expression always indicated the effort to attain holiness, the practice of the counsels, the loving commitment of following Christ to the point of identifying with him. Thus "being an apostle" is the condition for "acting like the Apostles," to bear fruit, to be authentic cooperators of Christ. For this reason, also, whoever finds himself incapacitated for activity can still be totally a missionary. The apostolic man, as presented to us, therefore includes holiness and mission conceived in the same dynamism of life and as expressions of the same vocation.

On this subject many are the Founder's statements in his correspondence. A quote from what he wrote in his memoirs around the year 1845 will suffice: *"I have said that my*

intention in dedicating myself to the ministry of the missions, to work especially for the instruction and conversion of the most abandoned souls, was to follow the example of the Apostles in their life of devotedness and self-denial. I became convinced that, in order to obtain the same results from our preaching, we had to walk in their footsteps and, as far as we could, practice the same virtues."

Qualities of the apostolic man

The Founder did not write a treatise on the qualities and virtues of an Oblate, even if the first Rules and his occasional letters insist on a few of them. The Preface already quoted indicates a significant trinomen characterizing the apostolic man and can be thus summed up: "zealous priests, disinterested, solidly grounded in virtue, in a word, apostolic men."

Zealous

This term indicates that the missionary is totally given to mission, full of dynamism and creativity, courageous in his apostolate and especially in proclaiming the Gospel, burning with fire and divine love for humankind.

In the Preface are found passages which describe such a zeal: "*Men... who would labour with all the resources at their command to convert others.*"- "*He sent them forth... to conquer the world.*" – "*They are ready to enter the combat, to fight even unto death.*" – "*It is urgently imperative that we lead the multitude of lost sheep back to the fold, that we teach these degenerate Christians who Jesus Christ is, that we rescue them from Satan's power and show them the way to eternal life. We must spare no effort to extend the Saviour's empire and to destroy the dominion of hell. We must check the manifold evils*

of sin and establish the honoured observance of every virtue. We must lead men to act like human beings, first of all, and then like Christians, and, finally, we must help them to become saints."

These expressions of zeal contain a notion of conquest, of broad horizons and objectives; they seem to stop at nothing, they express the will to transform the world. Even if, with a certain realism because of their small number, he wrote in this same Rule of 1818: *"Their ambition should, in its holy aspirations, embrace the vast expanse of the whole earth."* Such a zeal springs from divine charity and must express itself in a limitless charity, as he affirmed when writing on the ministry of reconciliation: *"Let the missionaries always welcome sinners with an inexhaustible charity, give them courage... by showing them an understanding heart; in a word, treat them as they themselves would wish to be treated if they were in their unfortunate condition."*

In 1826 he wrote to Father Tempier who, at the time, was working with other Oblates in a difficult mission: *"Recommend that they conduct themselves like saints, like real apostles. joining to their preaching an exterior modesty and a great charity for sinners. Let people be able to perceive from their manner that they are not ordinary preachers, that they are truly animated by a zeal which is proper to their holy vocation. Let them not forget themselves if they wish to be truly useful to others"* (30th March 1826).

"Zeal toward others," together with *"charity amongst yourselves"* is part of the Founder's last will and testament; it is the synthesis of his life and teaching. This zeal is born of and feeds on the charity of Christ the Saviour and on love for others. *"Our apostolic zeal is sustained by the unreserved gift we make of ourselves in our oblation, an offering constantly renewed by the challenges of our mission"* (C 2). It is renewed in the Eucharist (cf C 33), sustained by fraternal charity (cf C 37), and confirmed by the Spirit (cf C 45).

Disinterested

This term indicates another aspect of the apostolic man, called to outdo himself by putting Christ at the center of his own life which he consecrates to mission.

Many expressions in the Preface develop the significance of this requirement for the apostolic man: *“Deeply conscious of the need to reform themselves...”* they should *“wholly renounce themselves... living in a state of habitual self-denial and seeking at all times to reach the very summit of perfection. They must work unremittingly to become humble, meek, obedient, lovers of poverty and penance, mortified, free from inordinate attachment to the world or to family, men filled with zeal, 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.”* The surpassing of oneself is oriented and made real through a triple finality and motivation: the glory of God or the love of Jesus Christ; service, the good or love of the Church; the salvation or sanctification of souls.

We have here a vast program of self-control and asceticism, to live no longer for oneself but for Christ by collaborating in his mission. It is a life that comprises sacrifice and penance, as the Founder never tried to hide from his disciples. He wrote in 1852 to two missionaries in Oregon: *“You earnestly requested to be sent to the foreign missions. Surely you did not expect to lead a delicate and easy life. It is known that this sort of mission crucifies human nature, and that there is much to suffer in them. So it should not have astonished you to find many difficulties there; that is precisely what arouses the zeal and the fervor of all those who ask to be preferred for such appointments”* (To Brothers Surel and Janin, 11th March 1852). He often expressed his admiration and compassion for his Oblates immersed in mission difficulties.

These virtues describe the way followed by Christ and the Apostles to carry out the salvation of the world. *“Since the*

ministers of the Gospel will never reap abundant fruit from their labours unless they hold in highest esteem, and, so to speak, constantly bear about in their own body the sufferings and death of Jesus, the members of our Society will earnestly strive to keep their passions in check and to deny their self-will in everything; like the Apostle, they will glory in their weaknesses, in insults, persecutions and distress endured for the sake of Christ” (Rule of 1826).

Solidly grounded in virtue

This is the third characteristic of the apostolic man indicated by the Founder; we can see here the constant effort toward holiness to become other Christs.

Even if this cannot be separated from what has been said about surpassing oneself, we can see in this expression the positive way to holiness. This is mentioned in the Preface with phrases like: *“They must strive to be saints. They must walk courageously along the same paths trodden by so many before them: apostolic labourers for the Gospel who, while carrying out the same ministry to which they themselves now feel called, handed on such splendid examples of virtue.”* and *“They must constantly renew themselves in the spirit of their vocation.”* In the first Rule the Founder indicated the commitment of imitating in all things the examples of Our Lord Jesus Christ, principal founder of our Society, and of the Apostles, our first fathers; he concluded by saying: *“However, their chief concern will be, as much when out on missions as when in the house, to make progress in the paths of ecclesiastical and religious perfection... in a word, they will strive to become other Christs, radiating everywhere the fragrance of his lovable virtues” (Rule of 1818).*

The practice of the evangelical counsels opened up to him the master way toward holiness. To a priest of the diocese of Digne who wanted to become an Oblate, Father

de Mazenod wrote *"The missionary, being specifically called to apostolic ministry, should aim at perfection. The Lord destines him to show forth anew, amongst those of his own time, the marvellous things that were done of old by the first preachers of the Gospel. He ought then to walk in their footsteps while being firmly persuaded that the miracles he must do are not the effect of his eloquence but of the grace of the Almighty who will communicate himself through him with all the more abundance if he is more virtuous, more humble, or, to say it all in one word, more holy. So he ought to do everything to arrive at this desirable holiness which is to produce such great effects. What we have found most apt to help us to attain thereto is to come as close as we can to the evangelical counsels, faithfully observed by all those who have been employed by Jesus Christ in the great work of the redemption of souls"* (1)

Program of ascesis and mysticism

For his Oblates the Founder drew up a concise program that called for ascesis and mysticism. He surely insisted on ascesis, that is to say, on the work that each person must do to make himself available to God's grace by the surpassing of oneself, by becoming "disinterested" and developing the virtues opposed to weaknesses. Romano Guardini wrote that we must *"convince ourselves that nothing great is accomplished without ascesis"* (in *Il Potere*, 1963, p. 151). Without the mastery of self, without daily efforts, without self-discipline, man does not reach maturity and does not accomplish anything worthwhile and great. This is true especially in the spiritual realm and in missionary activity. To become and to be apostolic men, we are in need of a personal discipline, a program that is regularly updated and evaluated. The Constitutions and Rules give us enough indications to organize our lives properly. To avoid deceiving ourselves and lose needed

tensions, we must meet regularly with the superior, the community and particularly with the spiritual director, and in apostolic work with our collaborators, lay persons included.

The final objective and source of the apostolic man, however, is of a mystical, an “experiential” nature. One gives his own life for love of Jesus Christ, in response to him who loved us first. As the Founder wrote in the last edition of the Rules: *“Whoever wishes to become one of us must have an ardent desire for his own perfection, and be inflamed with love for our Lord Jesus Christ and his Church and a burning zeal for the salvation of souls”* (Rule of 1853).

Blessed Eugene experienced the mystical aspect from Good Friday on, but going by his own personal experience he insisted more on the ascetical demands. Daily efforts and triumphing over trials allowed him to grow in love for Christ and to witness that love. This itinerary is the same one he proposed to his men.

A catalytic project

An ideal holds inasmuch as it is capable of being translated into reality. A rule is valid insofar as it effectively forms authentic men who draw inspiration from it. It is therefore normal to ask ourselves if the ideal of the apostolic man as delineated by the Founder has become a reality in the Congregation. I am convinced that the positive response to this demand is neither rhetorical nor apologetic. The Congregation has given the Church a good number of apostolic men according to the Founder’s heart, even if failures were not lacking and still exist.

If we take a look at our history, we realize that many missionary undertakings would not have been possible without apostolic men full of zeal, disinterested, solidly virtuous. The missions of Canada’s Northland, of South

Africa, Texas, Laos, etc., required unlimited zeal, a boundless capacity to accept immense sacrifices, solid virtues. Among so many missionaries a few exemplary apostolic men stand out. One has only to think of Father Joseph Gérard whose recent beatification helped us to know him better.

Faithfulness and heroism have marked the whole lives of Oblates, even if they did not always end in martyrdom. Nor have Oblates faithful to the shedding of their blood been lacking. Limiting ourselves to the last fifty years I can recall the thirty or more Polish Oblates who were assassinated, among them Father Louis Wrodarczyk in the Ukraine on 8 December 1943; he was crowned with thorns, then crucified. In Spain twenty-four Oblates were shot dead during the Civil War. I personally knew the seven Oblates who shed their blood in Laos. Each one knew the possible dangers threatening him but every single one remained faithfully at his post. Standing out among them is Father Mario Borzaga, the first to be killed in 1960 with his Hmong catechist, in the northern part of Laos. These past few years I was able to observe the same fidelity in Sri Lanka where Father Michael Rodrigo was massacred in 1987. The death of Father Maurice Lefebvre in Bolivia in 1971 testifies to the same faithfulness. There are assuredly many examples of apostolic men in the Congregation.

Difficult missions are not over. I think of Madagascar where, for the major part of the year, Polish Oblates have to walk through an extremely difficult mountainous country to reach the villages opening up to the Gospel. Elsewhere, as in Peru, South Africa and Sri Lanka, difficulties stem from the guerrillas who endanger lives. In many other countries, political instability and the people's misery render missionary presence among the poor difficult and heroic. It is understandable, then, that the visits I make arouse my admiration; they are a stimulus for me to make a still greater gift to the Lord and the Congregation.

Heroism, however, does not come solely from mastering objective social situations. Overcoming personal trials, remaining faithful to religious and christian commitments, giving of oneself constantly in everyday life, accepting failure and suffering, often mold and reveal authentic apostolic men.

I am aware of course that we are at times far from the ideal desired by the Founder. There are instances where zeal is lacking; one Oblate or other appears to me rather like a functionary of the sacred with a much easier life than that of the people he serves. Mediocrity, born of a loss of idealism and a weakening of commitment to grow in the Lord, is a real temptation for us all. So, even today as in the days of the Founder, the major challenge is to fully live the Oblate charism, particularly to commit ourselves without fail to becoming apostolic men, zealous, disinterested, solidly grounded in virtue – in a word to be saints.

Apostolic man's formation

The Founder was always preoccupied with forming authentic apostolic men. That is why he visited houses of formation and kept constantly in touch with formators. The selection he made of Father Tempier for this work and his many letters to formators testify to his concern. Candidates should have the will and courage to walk in the Apostles' footsteps.

The new Constitutions present formation in a Mazenodian perspective and in line with recent documents of the Holy See. The first five articles (CC 45-49) give the major lines of formation, restating the same symbols and values of the Founder: like Jesus with the Apostles, the apostolic man, apostolic formation community, constant efforts, mutual responsibility. The apostolic man to be formed remains the perspective of this whole second part of the Constitutions.

To be missionaries in today's world, the demands made of apostolic men as indicated by Blessed Eugene always remain valid and basic. Formation must consequently give pride of place to Christ, to unity of life, zeal, indifference to worldly concerns, ability to sacrifice, and the will to become saints.

But to be apostolic men in a modern world marked by rapid changes and secularization, other qualities appear to be necessary. I mention but a few:

- Integration of the different aspects of the apostolic man, such as the human dimension including psychological stability, the christian, religious and missionary dimension. Human formation is extremely important for personal stability, for community life and apostolic activity. Human qualities are essential conditions for the apostolic man. We cannot pretend to find harmonious and well-balanced growth unless it be in the identity of one's own vocation – understood that the model of this growth is always Christ, the Incarnate Word, dead and glorified.

- Ability to distinguish between the essential and the accidental, assuming the essential and building on it, preserving adaptability and flexibility for what is secondary. Thus can one achieve inculturation – a universal apostolic requirement.

- Ability to discern and dialogue. Discernment is the fruit of cultural, human, spiritual maturity, a maturity normally found only in men who are interiorly free, open to their times and firmly rooted in Christ and his Church. Dialogue supposes a positive attitude not only toward history and persons but also to the active presence of the Spirit in them. It is born and grows in an authentic love for humankind and its need of salvation.

- Transparency of authentic witnessing at personal and communitarian levels. It is made all the more necessary by the frequent fall of institutional and formal barriers – the re-

ligious habit, clerical class — and also due to people's indifference.

- Ability to be in communion with one's brothers in community, with religious and lay collaborators in the mission, with diverse ecclesial charisms — particularly with bishops.

- Missionary creativity to go to those who are distant, to find ways and structures of approach without waiting for them to come to us.

- Universal solidarity and commitment to justice — credible expressions of human sharing and evangelical requisites.

- Perseverance in the gift of self in a changing world that invites to change. It calls for the ability of being equally faithful in suffering, in martyrdom if need be, as the Founder affirmed in the Preface. The greatest challenge for the Oblate in the modern world is to be strong in suffering and constant in difficulties.

“Like pilgrims we walk with Jesus”

The Founder often used a verb that I think is significant for our spirituality. It is the verb walk. In the Preface he speaks of *“walking in the steps of the divine Master Jesus Christ.”* In his letters he often repeats that one must *“walk in the footsteps of the Apostles”* (2) or *“walk in the footsteps of Christ and his Apostles”* (to Courtes, 4th November 1831).

The new Constitutions make frequent use of this verb-symbol. They speak of following in the footsteps of Christ (cf CC 19, 31) or walking in the footsteps of the Apostles (cf C 45), of following Jesus and his example (cf CC 1, 2, 12, 19, 20, 52). Other similar verbs are accompany (cf CC 51, 55), help to grow (cf CC 46, 47, 50, 56, 59).

The verb walk calls to mind at least six aspects of our spirituality.

1. It indicates above all our rapport with Christ, the fact that we are constantly in his company. A relationship of this kind with Christ is not static but dynamic. Christ precedes us continuously, he opens the way and never lets us rest. He has faith in us while entreating us. We think of the affirmation in the letter to the Hebrews: "Let us not lose sight of Jesus who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection" (Heb 12, 2).

2. It links us to the primitive community of Christ with his Apostles, and with the first Christians who were one in heart and soul. They personified the christian ideal that we want to achieve by sharing the same mission and the same life, by becoming other Christs.

3. It summons up rapport with the Church whose pillars and first fathers were the Apostles. They are the ones who introduce us into the universal and apostolic Church, into a living Church always on the march and in which we must walk and grow (Redemptoris missio, #11).

4. It recalls our communitarian dimension. Together we follow Jesus and together we are sent by him. "*The community of the Apostles with Jesus is the model of our life*" (C 3). We cannot be apostolic men all by ourselves, like lone rangers, in a solitary way. The Apostles always formed a group, a college, even when scattered in missions. Reciprocal aid and co-responsibility to always become apostolic men (cf CC 29, 39, 48, 49) are earmarks of our life.

5. It indicates that our life must be a constant growth, an ongoing formation, an effort to holiness. No stage whatever (first formation, perpetual oblation, priesthood, retirement age) should make of us people who have arrived, have achieved their ends, are settled and stationary, immobile, incapable of changing place or mentality. The Oblate is a man always en route, available to new calls.

6. It expresses rapport with mission – always a sending off by the Lord and the Church; a mission is always a departure to meet with the alienated, the 'outsiders', the

poor. It is interesting to note also that the verb send recurs often in the Founder's letters. "Walking with Christ in the Apostles' footsteps" indicates the duty and strong desire to join up with other villages, other persons (cf Lk 4, 43), with other cultures, other situations, because "the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." There also follows the tension between internal mission and external mission, between evangelizing the alienated and the non-Christians, who constantly increased in number during the Founder's lifetime and in the Congregation's history.

Mary, Apostles' companion and formator

The New Testament presents Mary to us in a special relationship with the Apostles at decisive instances of their formation. One has only to think of the wedding at Cana (Jo 2, 1 – 11), of Calvary (Jo 19, 25-27), of the Cenacle (Acts 1, 12-15). "*The goal of the formation process,*" Constitution 46 states, "*is that each of us become an apostolic man, capable of living the Oblate charism. Inspired by the example of Mary, we live in creative and ongoing fidelity our personal commitment to Jesus Christ, while serving the Church and God's Kingdom.*"

In the early days of the Congregation, the Founder wrote to Father Tempier who was in charge of the scholastics living in our house of Aix: "*All their actions ought to be done with the dispositions in which the Apostles were when they were in the Cenacle waiting for the Holy Spirit to come and inflame them with his love and give them the signal to go forth swiftly and conquer the world*" (4th November 1817). And at the Cenacle with the Apostles, Mary was there. On the highways and byways of the world the apostolic man will always find in Mary a companion, model and mother, to whom I entrust each one of you and the whole Congregation.

NOTES

(1) Letter to Viguier, 6th January 1819; cf. "Memoirs of the Founder" in Selected Texts, §16, pp. 39-40.

(2) cf to Tempier, 9th October 1815; to Vincens, 12th November 1840; to Semeria, 25th January 1848; to Dorey, 15th October 1848; to Viguier, 6th January 1819; to Mouchette, 5th August 1860

VI

THE PRIESTLY CHARACTER OF THE CONGREGATION 1992

This letter of communion comes to you at an important moment in the Congregation's journey. For it is presently preparing for the General Chapter. Every Chapter leaves its mark on the Congregation's life. If we are properly prepared and open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, a Chapter is a moment of grace, unity, and religious apostolic renewal for the worldwide Oblate community.

A number of reasons have influenced me to choose the topic of this letter. The 1990 Synod of Bishops on the formation of priests for today's Church and world and the post-synodal Exhortation of John Paul II are the general ecclesial context. It is the Oblate charism, however, and the manner of living it that suggest and prompt this reflection on an aspect that is important for every Oblate's life.

Some sectors of the Congregation know only the Oblate priest, so much so that our community is referred to in an erroneous way. In other sectors we find a tendency to deny our priestly character, and this in the name of our evangelizing mission or because all our members are equal. In other instances we have lost the sense of evangelization as the proclaiming of Jesus Christ and the forming of Christian communities and that precisely because this aspect of our vocation has remained obscure.

In point of fact, the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate founded by Eugene de Mazenod includes priests and Brothers and is by its very nature priestly and clerical.

The Preface to the Constitutions and Rules recalls the fact that the apostolic men called to respond together with Eugene de Mazenod to the missionary challenges facing the Church were priests. *“The sight of these evils has so touched the heart of certain priests, zealous for the glory of God, men with an ardent love for the Church, that they are willing to give their lives, if need be, for the salvation of souls. They are convinced that if priests could be formed, afire with zeal for men’s salvation, priests not given to their own interests, solidly grounded in virtue, in a word, apostolic men..., then there would be ample reason to believe that in a short while people who had gone astray might be brought back to their long-unrecognized responsibilities.”*

In the new Constitutions, the Holy See wanted the priestly character of the Congregation to be mentioned in the very first article, even though this was expressed in equivalent terms in Constitution 7.

This dimension of our charism is not something that is secondary, something linked to the founding of the Institute and to the passing needs of that time: it is something that is of the essence and therefore a permanent aspect of our vocation. This dimension affects all our members, be they priests or Brothers; it qualifies the purpose and missionary priority of the Institute; and it has its repercussions on the latter’s structures and even more on its spirituality.

Our charism is modelled on Eugene de Mazenod’s experience

The Oblate charism is a gift that the Spirit has transmitted through a concrete person, Eugene de Mazenod. The Lord prepared this gift through the Founder’s personal experience, one that was marked by his vocation to the priesthood. (1)

After hearing in his childhood the call to the priesthood, Eugene in his youth followed other ideals, a refusal that he

thereafter looked upon as a state of sin.(2) His conversion experience of Good Friday in 1807 bore its full fruit in his choosing the priesthood at a time when the Church was being persecuted and abandoned. While a seminarian in Paris, he wrote to his mother on June 29, 1808: "*What the Lord wants me to do is that I renounce the world... that I most especially dedicate myself to his service in order to strive to reawaken the faith that is dying out among the poor; in a word, that I am disposed to carry out all the orders he may wish to give me for his glory and the salvation of souls whom he has redeemed with his precious blood.*" (3) The formation he received at Saint Sulpice deeply marked Eugene's life and spirituality (4), and that in continuity with the Good Friday experience wherein he had discovered the crucified Christ as his Saviour and the Saviour of all mankind.

The first years of his ministry were dedicated to young people for whom he founded an Association, to workers in the city and to prisoners: preaching and Christian formation in their regard was his primary concern. The evangelization needs of the rural population, the limits of individual pastoral activity, and the search for a holy, exemplary priestly life impelled him to found a community of priests who were true missionaries and committed to their own sanctification.

The Rules drawn up in 1818 as well as those approved by Leo XII in 1826 and revised in 1853, reflect the priestly ideal and apostolic experience of Eugene and his companions. The Preface and some of the more significant texts are quoted in the new Constitutions. They speak of zealous priests who are sent out to conquer the world, who are ready to sacrifice everything "*for the love of Jesus Christ, the service of the Church, and the sanctification of their brethren ...*"; priests who are committed "*to all the works of zeal which priestly charity can inspire, above all to the work of the missions*"; "holy priests who, filled with the Holy Spirit and striving to walk in the footsteps of the divine Shepherd,

feed with watchful and constant care the sheep that have been led back to him.” (5)

This ideal, put into practice by the Founder and by so many Oblates, has called forth apostolic initiatives and commitment to holiness. Side by side with Oblates known throughout the Congregation for their zeal, such as Fathers Gerard and Albini for example, each one of us knows other fellow Oblates who are truly animated by priestly charity in evangelizing and serving the poorest of the poor. I think one could comment on the Constitutions and Rules not only by means of selected texts from the Founder, but by means of the life lived by so many Oblates in every part of the world.

The evangelizing purpose that flows from our priestly character

Evangelizing the poor (C 1), proclaiming the Good News to those who have not yet heard it or to those who are beyond the reach of ecclesial structures (C 5), the evangelizing creativity of awakening or reawakening the faith, making known who Christ is especially through proclaiming God’s Word which finds its fullness in the celebration of the sacraments and in serving one’s neighbour (C 7), are equivalent descriptions of the priestly purpose that is part and parcel of the Oblate charism.

The Church’s mission is carried on in many manners and ways, as the missionary encyclical of John Paul II reminds us. (6) All Christians are co-responsible for the mission and make their contribution according to each one’s state and charism. (7) The missionary priority assigned to our Congregation is priestly, precisely because it is oriented to proclaiming the Good News and to establishing Christian communities. As Oblates our particular and primary – though not exclusive – contribution to the Church’s mission is “*principally the evangelization of the poor.*”

Since the 1966 Chapter, the Constitutions and Rules

distinguish ministries from purpose. The purpose of evangelizing the poor can be achieved through different ministries according to places and needs. The evangelizing purpose is no longer identified with the ministry of parish missions, as it was in the first Rule, even though a significant historical value is attached to it (cf. R 2). Thus there is unity in the purpose of the various forms of the apostolic activity that we carry on in areas of a Christian tradition or in mission territories (cf. C 5).

The priority given by our Oblate tradition and our present Constitutions to proclamation is in line with the missionary mandate reaffirmed in the encyclical *Redemptoris missio* and constitutes the great ecclesial challenge in a pluralistic world, often indifferent and to a great part non-Christian.

“Proclamation is the permanent priority of mission. The Church cannot elude Christ’s explicit mandate, nor deprive men and women of the “Good News” about their being loved and saved by God. Evangelization will always contain – as the foundation, centre and at the same time the summit of its dynamism – a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ ... salvation is offered to all men, as a gift of God’s grace and mercy. All forms of missionary activity are directed to this proclamation, which reveals and gives access to the mystery hidden for ages and made known in Christ (cf. Eph. 3:3-9; Col. 1:25-29), the mystery which lies at the heart of the Church’s mission and life, as the hinge on which all evangelization turns.

In the complex reality of mission, initial proclamation has a central and irreplaceable role, since it introduces man into the mystery of the love of God, who invites him to enter into a personal relationship with himself in Christ and opens the way to conversion. Faith is born of preaching, and every ecclesial community draws its origin and life from the personal response of each believer to that preaching. Just as the whole economy of

salvation has its centre in Christ, so too all missionary activity is directed to the proclamation of his mystery” (8).

There is a deep syntonic resonance between our Constitutions and Rules and the missionary encyclical in regard to the priority of proclamation or evangelization. (9) For us the priority of proclamation is a consequence that flows from the priestly character of the Congregation, according to the manner and example of the Apostles whom the original Rule presents as our first fathers. Through the activity of the Spirit and its acceptance in faith, the Word constitutes Christian communities and attains its fullness in the celebration of the Eucharist. Establishing and caring for Christian communities are not opposed to evangelization but are a consequence thereof. As missionaries, however, we must make these communities missionaries in turn in regard to the persons and culture of the environment in which they live. (10).

The very organizational structure of the Congregation is influenced by its clerical character but those in charge are to be priests. This is obligatory for major superiors whereas on the local level someone who is not ordained may be a superior with the permission of the Holy See.

A charism with a priestly spirituality

The priestly character of the Congregation also affects our Oblate spirituality. Christ is perceived as Saviour, as he who out of love has redeemed us and the whole of mankind by his blood. He is not only the object of our ministry but also the model of its execution.

The Eucharist is the very centre of our personal and community existence. In Christ present in the Eucharist, Oblates find the source of their unity and communion, even when circumstances of their missionary commitment keep them at a distance from each other. Constitution 33 well

expresses the centrality of the Eucharist as the source and summit of the Church's life: *"We will live such lives as to be able worthily to celebrate it every day. As we participate in its celebration with all our being, we offer ourselves with Jesus the Saviour; we are renewed in the mystery of our cooperation with him, drawing the bonds of our apostolic community ever closer and opening the horizons of our zeal to all the world."*

What the Founder lived during his entire lifetime is what he wrote on the occasion of his ordination in 1812: *"Please God that my whole life be dedicated to this sublime ministry. I will convert a greater number of souls through my diligence at the altar than with all the preaching that I might do."*

For many Oblates the Eucharist is not only the source of their life but also their only form of ministry. In the Sahara and in other places where there is no Christian community, they find in the celebration of the Eucharist the ultimate motive for their presence and the strength of a gratuitous witness. We can ask ourselves the same questions as did Brother Gabriel Tessier, forty years a missionary in Cameroon, (he died on April 23, 1991) who wrote in his notes: *"Does the Mass make me a sower of joy, a bridge between God and my brothers? Does my life at every moment reflect faith, hope and trust in God? May the Mass make me a builder of hope amid those around me, may my life as a Christian and a religious make me a living Gospel, a bearer of the Good News."*

All of our prayer is marked by our missionary being; that is why *"we come before him bearing with us the daily pressures of our anxiety for those to whom he sends us"* (C 32). Because of this apostolic spirituality, our prayer contemplates the Lord not only in himself but also in his mystery of love and of salvation for persons, cultures, and religions, whereby it adapts itself to different spiritual traditions and makes them into an Areopagus of evangelization. (11) The very

events of our lives and ministry itself are avenues of encounter with the Lord (cf. CC 3 1 ,33,56).

Praying the divine Office is not only a duty that the Church lays upon her ministers and a way of continuing the tradition of the monastic Orders, but also a way of carrying out our Oblate mission. (12)

Ministry in regard to priests

The Founder's ideal and the goal of our founding was to provide the Church with priests who evangelize and who are holy; this is rather strongly expressed in the Preface, the result of a Gospel reading of the situation and the response to be given thereto. Oblates are called to be these evangelizing and holy priests. If we are not, that would mean that we are unfaithful to the charism of our vocation in the Church.

The Founder quickly became aware that the Congregation had to try and transmit such a priestly ideal to those outside her ranks by means of giving example, promoting welcome and animation and taking on seminary formation. Thus formation of the clergy became one of the Congregation's ends. This too remains for us a challenge and a criterion for evaluating our "performance". Are we an example, an attractive and constructive force for a clergy that evangelizes and is holy? An answer requires more finesse than simply counting the number of seminarians whom we animate and the number of Oblates involved in the clergy formation. Such self-examination is ever more necessary today in a crisis situation that affects us at least as much as it does other priests.

Ministry promoting the formation of the clergy does not start with a special obedience or once we are involved in ministry. Eugene de Mazenod wanted scholastics to be an example to the seminarians with whom they were studying or

were in contact. Today such opportunities of contact are even more frequent, for most of you are taking your studies together with other seminarians. We do not need to adopt the attitude of being others' teachers; nevertheless our authentic witness can affect others. Furthermore, such a duty begins within our Oblate communities in regard to our fellow brothers, for whom we are responsible by virtue of our religious commitment and a specific vow (cf. C 29).

Witness

Father Deschatelets, Superior General from 1947 to 1972, underlined in his Circular Letter no. 191 of 1951 the characteristic traits of the Oblate vocation and its originality. He wrote:

"First and foremost, we are priests... Priests among so many other priests, but priests with a special inspiration which gives a particular outline to the priesthood of an Oblate. We are made priests so that we may restore to the priesthood all its glory, all its prestige, and, by the example of our lives, carry along with us all those who, like ourselves, are signed with the sacred character of Holy Orders. In laying the foundations of his Institute, our Founder did indeed plan to work for the conversion of the masses, but he also had in mind the reform and sanctification of the clergy. It was for this reason that, from the very beginning, he demanded that his disciples follow so high, so perfect a standard of priestly life..."

We know that emphatic insistence upon the necessity of sanctity in the priest is no new thing within the Church. On this, as on many other points, Father de Mazenod is in perfect accord with all the great apostles of the priesthood... Let us try, dear Oblates, to grasp the full import of our Founder's message. Let us be the priests in the very front rank of the Church's priests. Let us not be mere mediocrities, priests whom our Founder described as 'common goods of little value'; he did not

want such men as his associates. That we may attain the standard he desired, let our spiritual life be firmly based upon the richest elements of a priestly life which draws forth from the sacrament of Orders a most intense vitality..."

...Priestly charity should saturate our lives, it should be the motive of all our actions, it should be the very air we breathe... Even our religious mentality itself is conditioned by priestly charity to such an extent that the Oblate who would subordinate sacerdotal grace to the grace of his religious vocation would falsify the basic orientation of his Oblate life. The Oblate is, and ought to remain both priest and religious. Neither status can be separated from the other if he wishes to remain a true Oblate of Mary Immaculate.'...

The Oblate may not be as other priests, he must be the model priest. The grace of his special vocation sweeps him upwards to the very heights, it calls on him to set the standard and to assist in the formation of a worthy priesthood.... The Preface is indeed a synthesis of the Rule. Moreover, it reminds us in terms which admit no ambiguity of our obligation to priestly holiness – *verbo et exemplo* – so that whenever the priesthood falls into a feeble state, we may be able to restore it." (13).

A charism shared by priests and Brothers

Our priestly purpose and spirituality have never excluded the presence of Brothers in the Congregation and the full sharing of the same charism; I would even say that the Brothers help the Congregation better to live this dimension also of its vocation.

The modality of relationships between priests and Brothers and the forms of ministry carried out by the latter have varied according to times and places. The name was changed from Lay Brother to Coadjutor Brother. The Brother's activity was often seen as a support to that of the priest; rather, it is complementary.

It would certainly be impossible to grasp the organization and development of our missions *ad gentes* without the presence and work of the Brothers. The Oblate presence among the Amerindians of Canada, among the Africans of Lesotho and of Namibia would have been substantially different if they had not been there. The ecclesial and even the civil structures of various countries are the result of the Brothers' activity. Their influence, however, has been more radical than the fruit of their labours. They have wielded an influence through their being and example and not only through their work. They have transmitted important Gospel values, such as the meaning of work in societies that despised the same, the worship of God in the ordinary things of life, the gratuitousness of religious life, the sense of prayer, simplicity and closeness to the people.

What is even more impressive to me is the fact that the Brothers have been very much aware of the priestly character of the Oblate charism. I have met Brothers who have deeply affected my Oblate life and that of others in formation houses or in our apostolic communities. Some Brothers who are more known in the Congregation are noteworthy for their contribution to the vocation and perseverance of priests, their sense of the priesthood, their spirituality.

Brother Anthony Kowalczyk, whose cause for beatification is introduced in Rome, has always been referred to as a pillar in the apostolic school of Edmonton and in the Provinces of Western Canada. Many attribute the growth and fidelity in their priestly vocation to the influence of this Servant of God, to his prayer, word and example. Several have testified that they overcame trials and temptations thanks to his word and prayer, not only during the period of their first formation but also when they were already engaged in ministry.

In regard to Brother Ernest Gauthier, the doorkeeper at the University Seminary in Ottawa, a number of people have

stated that they had recourse to him in their difficulties and that his influence was more decisive for them than that of the professors and formators they had been assigned. These and other Brothers did not claim for themselves roles that pertain to others; rather they fully lived out their own specific Oblate vocation.

The presence of Brothers in a clerical Congregation reminds us that our specific mission is entrusted to the community before it is to persons. To carry out its mission a community needs different and complementary contributions. Their presence reminds us that the mission depends on our being first of all, more than on what we do. The quality of our life wields its influence not only through example but also by means of our collaboration in the saving work of Christ.

Complementarity in the same charism

“We come together in apostolic communities of priests and Brothers, united to God by the vows of religion” (C 1). Not only the religious life but all the elements of our charism are shared by the Brothers and priests who incarnate two vocations within one and the same charism. In this full sharing of the charism by two distinct vocations, there are complementary ways of living it. I will treat of only two values more pertinent to our topic, namely, our priestly and our marian character.

The double manner of participating in the one and only priesthood of Christ makes the presence of priests and Brothers complementary. The ministerial priesthood reminds us that the Church is a gift of God, that the sacraments are not realities that the community gives to itself but which it receives from Christ’s mercy. The common priesthood allows us to receive the sacraments and makes the whole of one’s life a worship of God, a witness to people. Basically speaking, the

common priesthood reminds us and brings it about that all our ordinary life is transformed by God and becomes a cult addressed to him and a witness and service to our neighbor.

Hence, there is complementarity between the two forms of sharing Christ's one and only priesthood even within a clerical Congregation. The priests consecrate the Eucharist and administer the sacraments; the Brothers are a reminder that the whole of life ought to be a worship acceptable to God, the eucharist of all that is created and of our whole existence. While the ministerial priesthood underlines God's gift, the common priesthood requires response and acceptance of this gift on our part. And all of us come together in the one and only eucharistic sacrifice so that our whole life may be acceptable to God and of benefit to his Church.

The role of Mary illustrates in another way the place of the Brother within the Congregation. All of us ought to have a tender devotion towards our Mother and to find in her the model of our consecrated life. The Brother in the community, however, represents Mary in a special way. Mary is not a ministerial priest. And yet she gave birth to Jesus the priest, educated Jesus for his mission, and accompanied him especially in the supreme act of salvation by means of the cross: *stabat*, John says. And she accompanied the Apostles, from Cana where they began to recognize Christ's divinity to the Cenacle where she was present while they were waiting for the Holy Spirit and at the outset of the mission.

In a clerical Congregation the Brother takes Mary's place: he is a presence of Mary, a discreet role and presence, important and necessary. Concretely this often takes on the form of simple services, such as Mary provided at Nazareth; on other occasions it means taking part in community and apostolic activities; always it is a following of Christ and a cooperating in his mission by means of one's being even unto the cross and apparent defeat like on Calvary; more often it means taking part in prayer as in the Cenacle.

The Brother is a great gift to the Congregation, a marian presence in view of achieving the same common mission of evangelizing the poor. Can we conceive the mission of Jesus without Mary? Can we think of the Oblate mission without the Brothers?

I believe Blessed Eugene would agree with these reflections of mine: he sensed the beauty of the religious vocation thanks to a Brother with whom he lived during his first years as a priest. This contact with a Brother was not irrelevant to our founding.

Living the priesthood within the charism

If all Oblates are called to live the priestly character of the Congregation, this is true for the person who has the specific vocation and the ministerial priesthood. Every Oblate must exercise and live his priesthood within the Oblate charism. The Oblate priest is not a diocesan priest. He is to live out his missionary quality in whatever ministry assigned to him: he is to give priority to evangelizing the poor, those who are far away, those who are beyond the reach of Church structures or who have never been Christian (C 5). He is to develop apostolic creativity and courage (C 8) and effect an integral evangelization that promotes all the aspects of the person and of society (C 9). He is to be engaged in establishing Christian communities that are missionary in their own milieu and open to the world at large. For this too he is to be a man of community and communion with the Congregation which lives out the mission in so many contexts.

In the graced moment in which the Church and the world live today, missionary challenges are not lacking. Today we need to commit ourselves to evangelizing Christian communities that are to live and radiate their own faith in a new context. Above all we need to commit ourselves to a

new evangelization of those who are no longer Christian and to be available and active in evangelizing those who have never been Christian. This triple commitment addressed to the entire Church (14) is a renewing challenge to our Congregation whose end is the evangelization of the poor.

If every priest today is invited to discover the missionary dimension of his vocation, this is all the more true for us Oblates. The Congregation does not prepare an Oblate to carry out a personal mission and to be loaned to a local Church. He carries out his apostolate as an Oblate who integrates the various aspects of our charism. "Oblates are committed to missionary work as members of the Congregation and of their respective Provinces" (R I). Our charism ought to imbue the Congregation's priests with a particular style and dynamism.

Common and differentiated formation

The Constitutions and Rules have a section that is rather elaborate on formation after the novitiate: it is divided into three parts, one that is general, one for those going on to the priesthood and another for those oriented to the life of a Brother (cf. CC 65-67). The period in temporary vows is to be seen as a time of initial formation for all. Practices and places of formation vary according to Provinces and countries. In an ever growing number of cases formation is in common even though programs may be distinct. This can be beneficial for the future life in common and for an adapted insertion into the Church of today when theological formation is being given to more and more laity. However, there must also be a specific formation both for those who are preparing to be priests and for those who are preparing themselves as Brothers. Besides being a means of making it a reality, commitment to an adequate formation is a sign of the authenticity of one's vocation.

In both vocations an eventual change of choice is foreseen: a person who had intended the priesthood may discern a call to the brotherhood, and someone who wanted to consecrate himself as a brother may discern a call to the priesthood. This openness to making a change prior to perpetual vows reflects the present situation which foresees a common novitiate for the two states of life, during which the common aspects of the charism and the dimensions of religious life are stressed. This is also due to the fact that today a choice is made more gradually and a greater discernment is required. Perpetual oblation ought to mark the conclusion of one's choice, an option that should never be made lightly.

A prayer as a wish and a greeting

In the "Oblate Prayer" book we find, after the midday examen, two or three prayers (depending on the language editions): one focuses on our ministerial priesthood and the other on fraternal charity. May these prayers be lived realities for each one of us. The one which speaks of the priestly character is also my wish for you:

*O Lord, our High Priest and Victim,
You refresh with your own Body and Blood
those who are consecrated to you and your service.
Grant that we who share in your priesthood
may walk worthy of the vocation to which we are called,
and may ever nourish your people
both by word and by example.*

NOTES

(1) Tourigny, I.: "Le charisme sacerdotal du Bx Eugene de Mazenod", in *Vie Oblate Life*, 36 (1977), pp. 151-172.

(2) Beaudoin, Y.: Introduction to Bx Eugene de Mazenod. *Ecrits spirituels* 4, 1794-1 X 11. Rome, 1991, pp. XVI-XXVI.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 63.

(4) Morabito, J.: "Je serai prêtre". Eugène de Mazenod de Venise à Saint-Sulpice (1794-1811) Ottawa, 1954.

(5) Preface of the Constitutions and text on p. 74.

(6) Cf. *Redemptoris missio*, 41-60.

(7) *Ibid.* 61-86.

(8) *Ibid.*, 44.

(9) *Ibid.*, 2, 20, 23, 31, 34, 44, 58.

(10) *Ibid.*, 20, 26, 27, 48, 29, 51, 53.

(11) *Ibid.*, 38.

(12) Cf. C 53; *Redemptoris missio*, 20; Schaff, N.: "La Psalmodie de l'Office divin en commun" in *Etudes Oblates*, 1950, pp. 115-128.

(13) Deschâtlets, L.: "Our vocation and our life of intimate union with Mary Immaculate". Administrative circular 191: English translation published as separate booklet: for the texts quoted here cf. pp. 8-9, 19, 19-20, 14, 15

(14) Cf. *Redemptoris missio*, 32-34.

VII

JESUS CHRIST SOURCE OF OUR OBLATE BEING 1993

The response to my letters addressed to the Oblates in first formation prompts me to continue a tradition begun six years ago. The last General Chapter's main theme leads me to elaborate on some aspects of its message, a message that is focused on our being as witnesses in apostolic community.

As a matter of fact, the General Chapter plays an important role in the Congregation's journey. It is the supreme authority and has a special grace to discern needs and challenges. After it had examined with discernment the needs of the world and the Congregation, it concluded that, at the present time, the greatest challenge of renewal in our vocation and in being missionaries in today's world consists in our witnessing as apostolic communities. The Chapter directives express not merely a human plan formulated by a group of serious and representative persons, but a call from God. Through the implementation of these directives a particular grace is given to the entire Congregation so that it may renew itself in the charism, effectively carry out its mission, and receive the vocations and perseverance it needs.

A slogan and a program

The Chapter's message is clear and goes to the very essence of things. It would have been enough to launch the three key words that form a slogan – even a program.

Witness denotes a person who is a clear and challenging example because of his lived experience and the authentic

quality of his life. The Christian witness lives and reveals Christ and his Gospel. The encyclical on the missions states that the first irreplaceable form of evangelization is witness (Redemptoris Missio 42-43) and that is why it dedicates an entire section to spirituality and holiness (cf. RM 87-92).

Community is the expression of the Gospel being lived together. Throughout the whole history of religious life, community has been a memorial of being together in Christ's company and of the first christian community that was characterized by oneness of heart and soul. It is also a prophecy of the communion existing within the Trinity, a communion to which we are destined and which we are already living in an initial way.

The qualificative apostolic reminds us of the community of Apostles together around Jesus. It also indicates that community is a form and way of apostolate. Since it is the Gospel being lived out, community is good news for humanity; not only is it an aid to the apostolate but it is a source of apostolate, for wherever two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus, there he himself is in their midst (cf. Matthew 18:20).

These three words are already by themselves a program for the Congregation, a call for the Congregation to focus its attention and commitment so that we might become witnesses in apostolic community. This three-fold orientation expresses a program relevant inside the community, that is to say, we are to be witnesses to one another within the community itself; and it expresses a program relevant to the outside: together as a community we are to be witnesses, because people today are inclined to believe more readily a testimony that is collective.

Now the Chapter developed this theme by indicating important elements that help us to grasp the essential core and that deepen the requirements of what it means to be witnesses in an apostolic community.

The whole Congregation at its various levels is called upon to put into effect the Chapter directives. That is a duty laid upon every Oblate, every community, every Province or Delegation administration. The General Council will not fail to indicate practical ways of proceeding and to supply appropriate instruments. With this letter and those that will follow I am adopting this line of action. I begin this year by underlining the source of our being witnesses in apostolic community, namely, Jesus Christ. Thereafter I will be able to deepen other aspects of being witnesses in apostolic community, such as our fraternal life, our consecration through vows, the missionary character of the community, coresponsibility and authority, communion and pluralism, the forms and requirements of community witness, etc. You yourselves may suggest specific topics to me.

Christ is still calling us and does so constantly

A careful analysis of the Chapter document Witnessing as Apostolic Community reveals that the central place of Christ is particularly stressed. Christ's role is stated in some fifteen of the numbered paragraphs (WAC 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 15, 17, 25, 26, 27, 28, 32, 33, 45). Without Christ there is no community; only with him can there be apostolate; apart from him there is no witness.

Christ is first of all the one who calls and summons us, who calls us together, who takes the initiative. This is so because he it is who continues to carry out God's mission, he it is who saves and draws everyone to the Father through his Spirit. *"Christ is still calling us today to follow him and to bear witness to his life and mission. Hence we feel compelled to emphasize the present reality of his call, his invitation to follow him, and the urgent need of being credible in the service of his mission"* (ib. 27). This renewed calling of Christ is at the root of our commitment to formation at all its stages (cf. ib. 26,

32, 37) as well as to our duty and hope in striving for vocations. *"The vocations ministry is not optional: 'Jesus never ceases to call people to follow him and to proclaim the Kingdom' (C52). 'While we share with every Christian the same baptismal vocation, we are also convinced that God calls us to the specific vocation that is ours as sons of Eugene de Mazenod'" (ib. 28).* There is continuity between our fidelity to respond to our specific call and the discovery of new vocations.

The call of Jesus reaches us through a preferential channel: Christ *"calls us through people's need for salvation – especially through that of the poor"* (ib. 1). This first paragraph of Witnessing as Apostolic Community is an echo of the first article of the Constitutions and even more so of the experience that founded the Congregation, expressed in Blessed Eugene's Preface wherein this experience is paralleled to that of Christ's. As the gospel reading in the Mass of the Founder recalls, Jesus, "seeing the multitudes, felt compassion for them because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36). This Gospel passage, along with the one describing the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy *"He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor"* that was preached at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21), is at the centre of the biblical understanding of our charism. From this perspective we can understand the conclusion of the first part of Witnessing as Apostolic Community which is dedicated to today's need for salvation: *"In the cry of today's poor we perceive the groans of birth rather than the moans of death. Christ is being born anew in a flawed world. Are we capable of serving this promise of hope?"* (ib. 5)

Responding to Christ's call

Our response is first of all a sharing of Jesus' compassion. As the spectacle of the evils in their time deeply

moved our first Fathers who were at the origins of our Congregation (Preface), so also today Jesus *“calls us through people’s need for salvation – especially through that of the poor”* (ib. 1). Sharing Christ’s compassion brings us together in community, creates between us a solidarity of compassion, leads us to live a deep communion with each other that is oriented to the salvation of humanity. *“Like our Founder before us, we seek to gather around the person of Jesus Christ so as to achieve solidarity of compassion, to become a single heart that can be food for the life of the world”* (ib. 6). *“Because we are missionaries, we need to listen to these cries and to respond by our prayer and our availability, to re-echo this cry wherever we hear it.”* These words from the Superior General’s Report have deeply resonated” at the Chapter (ib. 24). *“We can be effective evangelizers only to the extent that our compassion is collective”* (ib. 7). There is a close link between perceiving humanity’s needs for salvation, the call of Christ, sharing his saving compassion, coming together in authentic communities, witnessing and evangelization.

Sharing Jesus’ compassion is already a response. The response is not only to humanity, however, but also above all to Jesus himself. “By becoming disciples who follow Jesus, they can by that fact better share in his mission as apostles” (ib. 15; cf. 27). “A disciple is a person who is called to follow Jesus and to be schooled by him” (ib. 32). Even though there are key moments and stages in choosing and deepening such a relationship with Christ, our entire life ought to be characterized by a special and unequivocal relationship with him. The recent General Chapter has emphasized that preparation for perpetual vows ought to become for every Oblate *“a privileged occasion to deepen his personal experience of Jesus Christ and of Christ’s life, mission and message”* (ib. 33).

At the same time, however, Witnessing as Apostolic Community reminds us that it is a matter of constant

commitment, an ongoing conversion. *“Lifelong conversion renewed daily is indispensable if our witness is to be credible, free from inconsistency, contradiction or falsehood”* (ib. 18; cf. 37). Speaking of formation with a view to witnessing in apostolic community, it stresses: *“Encounter with Christ and interiorization of values are at the heart of this lifelong process. The image that summarily expresses what we wish to say is that of Jesus the Formator who calls and gathers his disciples around himself, who builds bonds of unity and love between them, empowers them with his Spirit, and sends them out to be his witnesses”* (ib. 25-26).

Following Jesus and being schooled by him entail deep personal relationships with him, such as will characterize and transform one’s whole life. *“On the faith level, we are reminded that ‘we achieve unity in our life only in and through Jesus Christ’* (ib. 31). *We are therefore called to a deepening of our relationship with him, both as individuals and as communities”* (ib. 12). An experience of Christ is required. *“Christian witness is most truly manifest in the lives of those who experience Jesus Christ both personally and communally. Such persons have discovered the pearl of great price and have found a true centre for their lives”*(ib. 15). The perfect example of such a relationship with Christ is Mary who *“constantly invites us to deepen our personal intimacy with Jesus”* (ib. 45).

Such a relationship with Christ is neither exclusively private nor transitory: it transforms the whole person. Numbers 15-18 state that witness based on experience of Christ involves our whole human, christian, religious being; it requires *“lifelong conversion daily renewed”* (ib. 18) and calls for ongoing formation (cf. ib. 37-38).

From such a relationship flow a life-style and a manner of acting similar to that of Jesus who serves and does not dominate, who is chaste and poor and has redeemed the world through obedience (cf. ib. 3, 8, 9).

We cannot achieve an appropriate response through our own powers alone. We can do so only “*under the Spirit’s guidance*”(ib. 1). Christ, who calls us, also “*empowers us with his Spirit*”(ib. 26). “*Thus animated by the Spirit we can issue an invitation to communion, a sign of the new world born of the Resurrection*” (ib. 9).

Christ, centre of community

The experience of Christ is not only personal but communitarian. The community is not a juxtaposition of persons who love Christ but keep such a relationship within the secret of their own conscience. Faith is lived and transmitted in the fraternal relationships that obtain within the community. Furthermore, community grows only in Christ and around him, for he is its centre. “*We can build such apostolic communities only if we again choose as our centre the person of Jesus Christ*” (WAC 9). “*We seek to gather around the person of Jesus Christ*” (ib. 6). “*The community we create together around Jesus Christ. . .*” (ib. 8). It is he “*who calls and gathers his disciples around himself*” (ib. 26).

This central position of Christ ought to be expressed in the way that community is lived, that community activities are organized, even in the way the religious house is designed.

From Christ flows our interdependence and our communion. It is “*Jesus the Formator who calls and gathers his disciples around himself, who builds bonds of unity between them, empowers them with his Spirit, and sends them out to be his witnesses*” (ib. 26). Our experience of Christ ought to be communitarian because of our religious and missionary vocation (cf. ib. 9). The communitarian model is a reality of faith; it is not a merely social or functional fact. It springs from our relationship with Christ who continues to call and form his disciples and apostles. “*The community of*

the Apostles with Jesus is the model of our life. The person of Christ unites us in charity and obedience; this enables us to live again the communion of life and the common mission in his Spirit that the Twelve Apostles shared with him (C 3). From this perspective, it is clear that the objective of community is much more than merely gathering a group that functions well together, its aim is to establish interdependence and profound communion between its members” (ib. 10).

Consequently, deepening our relationship with Christ is not only a personal responsibility that is put into effect in the intimacy of one’s conscience; it is achieved on the personal and communitarian levels. *“We achieve unity in our life only in and through Jesus Christ. We are therefore called to a deepening of our relationship with him, both as individuals and as communities” (ib. 12). “Christian witness is most truly manifest in the lives of those who experience Jesus Christ personally and communally” (ib. 15).*

A rhythm of life that includes sharing in faith, praise of God and prayer is a consequence of this commitment (cf. ib. 12, 17, 23b). Fraternal communion and compassion for others flow from this common relationship with Christ and reinforce it (cf. ib. 6, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 17, 23b).

Christ, source of our witnessing

Personal and community relationships to Christ are at the root origin of our missionary dynamism (cf. RM 87-91). Christ and his message are the object of Christian witnessing. To achieve it, a personal and communitarian experience of Christ is needed: John reminds us of this in his first letter: *“This is what we proclaim to you: what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have touched – we speak of the word of life. This life became visible; we have seen and bear witness to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal*

life that was present to the Father and became visible to us. What we have seen and heard we proclaim in turn to you so that you may share life with us” (1 John 1:1-3).

It seems to me that this text is the basis and background of so many things stated in Witnessing as Apostolic Community. Before all else, it underlines the necessary and intrinsic link between experience of Christ and of God and witnessing. “The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission. Christian witness is most truly manifest in the lives of those who experience Jesus Christ both personally and communally” (ib. 14-15). Oblates “*truthfully live out their Christian vocation by witnessing their personal experience of God’s love for them and their conversion to Jesus Christ... They are men who live in God’s presence, are united to him in prayer...*” (ib. 17)

We are also reminded of the subsequent link between experience of God, fraternal living in communitarian communion and the universal communion proposed to everyone. “*The community we create together around Jesus Christ is the banquet table to which we invite mankind*” (ib. 8). In Christ we create a “*solidarity of compassion, to become a single heart that can be food for the life of the world*” (ib. 6). The presence of the Lord who unites us “*enables us to live again the communion of life and the common mission in his Spirit*” (ib. 10).

Jesus the Formator himself “*calls and gathers his disciples around himself... and empowers them with his Spirit and sends them out to be his witnesses*” (ib. 26). “*Mary constantly invites us to deepen our personal intimacy with Jesus*”, “*she challenges us to care for each other as brothers and to love the people to whom we are sent to proclaim the Good News*” (ib. 45).

Witnessing as Apostolic Community and our Constitutions

The Chapter’s message on the central role of Christ with a view to witnessing in apostolic communities harmonizes

perfectly with our Constitutions and Rules. That is readily understandable because of the Christological character of our code of life and of our charism's Christ-centredness (cf. First Letter to the Oblates in Formation, 25.1.1987). Many are the references to and quotations from the Constitutions (cf. TCA 9, 10, 11, 12, 20, 23, 24, 26, 28, 32, 35, 37).

In fact, we find normal complements to the Chapter document in the Constitutions. For example, as we meditate the Chapter document, we will be moved to ask ourselves how it is possible to experience Christ and what the ways are to deepening our relationship with him.

Now that is indicated in the Constitutions. Articles 56 and 33 are fundamental in precise formulations of the ways we grow in friendship with Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. C 56 indicates as many as nine ways:

- prayer
- liturgy
- listening to the Lord in Scripture – meeting the Lord in the Eucharist
- recognizing the Lord in people
- recognizing him in events
- contemplating God's action in the life and mission of the Founder
- as well as in the history and traditions of the Congregation
- apostolic work.

To these nine ways we must add fraternal living in community which results in the fact that "*Jesus lives in our midst and unites us*" (C 37; cf. C 3).

Constitution 33 elaborates on some of these resources, in particular on the Eucharist, the Word of God, the liturgy of the hours, the daily silent and prolonged prayer, examination of conscience and the sacrament of reconciliation. These are the classical forms of formal prayer also referred to as spiritual exercises and pious practices.

The other ways indicated above are also important for transforming our life in Christ and achieving our unity in him. Recognizing God's presence in people and events, for example, is of the greatest importance for an outlook of faith and an authentic apostolate. As *Redemptoris missio* often states, God is indeed at work in persons and within history through the Spirit. We normally live the paschal mystery and all its imperatives of life and death in the context of social and especially personal events. Contemplating God's action in the Founder's life and mission as well as in the Congregation's history and tradition helps us to situate the Oblate charism in the proper perspective of faith and in its existential dynamism. Apostolate too is an ordinary way of establishing a relationship with the Lord. This is readily understood in the sacramental ministry. But also every encounter with persons is a way to live Christ's charity. Every activity carried out in the name of obedience bears grace. Besides being a contribution to ecclesial communion, exercising charity and fraternal living in community are ways of living the Lord's presence and of experiencing him.

The two clusters of ways and means for growing in experience of Christ are complementary to each other. We need the prayer exercises to develop a personal relationship with Christ and we need the other attitudes of faith to live our whole life in the Lord's presence. In this way we gradually accomplish unity between doing and being, and our life becomes identification with Christ (cf. Galatians 2:20). In this way, what is proposed in C 2 becomes reality: *"The desire to cooperate with him draws us to know him more deeply, to identify with him, to let him live in us."*

In concluding, I express the wish and hope that this experience with Christ become an ever greater existential reality for each one of you and for every community in which you are living. I know from experience that authentic and dynamic formation communities can be a leaven of renewal

in their milieu and in an entire Province. That is what I wish for all the communities in which you are living. That is indeed possible if you personally and all together experience Jesus Christ. May Mary help and guide you thereto.

VIII

FRATERNAL CHARITY

1994

We are witnesses in apostolic community through our fraternal charity. If personal relationship with Christ is the source of our life and apostolate, fraternal charity is the fruit and sign of the new life that comes with it. "May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me" (Jo 17, 21).

Fraternal charity is what makes us community, makes witnesses of us and makes us Oblates. It is at the core of our charism, it is an essential part of our family spirit, it is a characteristic of our identity. Fraternal charity has a Special importance in our world as well as in the life of the Congregation in these historic times.

We are indeed always becoming more of an international and intercultural Congregation. Only through charity can our multi-ethnic communities become authentic and give witness in our world. During my first visit to South Africa in April 1987, at a time when apartheid was rife, I was impressed by our formation communities. I saw in them the image of what South-African society should have been. Why? Because in them Indians, Whites, Blacks, Coloured of various cultures and ethnic groups were living in harmony. I noticed this again a few months ago. International communities are becoming more and more frequent in formation houses in Latin America, in Africa and even in North America and Europe, because modern societies are always becoming more pluralist and multi-ethnic. This situation obviously entails special

challenges for an effective life in common that knows how to overcome not only clashes but the shallowness of relationships as well. It urges our communities to build themselves up on the Gospel. Our living together does not find its origin and growth in bonds of flesh or blood or culture, but in the call of Jesus Christ (cf. C 1) and in Gospel charity (cf. C 3), which make missionaries of us (cf. C 37).

Communion and interdependence, expressions of charity

The capitular document of 1992 placed side by side two words that gave rise to varied reactions during the Chapter and subsequently. To indicate communitarian relationships on the local level and that of the Institute, it spoke of communion and interdependence (1).

Communion is a theological term frequently used nowadays. Vatican II ecclesiology is centered on the theology of communion. In the wake of the Council, communitarian life is perceived as a communion of persons more than as a group of structures. The communion aspect refers to trinitarian life in which Christian life takes its origin and on which it models itself. God is communion, he is charity in himself and in relation to us. He asks us to live communion with him and with each other. He calls us to live in charity.

Interdependence indicates mutual relationships. Social experience always makes mutual bonds more evident. There is dependence between cultures, economies, groups. No one is an island. In the best of cases there is interdependence, reciprocal influence, mutual support. In a religious community, interdependence indicates the incarnation of relationships, reciprocal responsibility, mutual influence.

The bringing together of the two terms was not the result of a compromise between two mentalities present at the Chapter, but rather the bringing together of two complementary sensitivities, one illustrating especially the

theological dimension and the other underlining the social needs of our life in common. The capitular text spells out the consequences of this communion interdependence.

“On the human level, we are called to the accountability of mature adults. This accountability... commits us to live in a spirit of cooperation and initiative and calls us to genuine dialogue within community; it requires, moreover, that we mutually support each other, share with one another, and care for each other” (WAC 11). *“They truthfully witness to their humanity by practicing certain human qualities such as respect for others, generosity, and empathy. They are able to accept others in both their freedom and their uniqueness”* (WAC 16).

Such ways of relating must be concretized and structured to become a charity that is lived in community. *“Living community in terms of communion-interdependence requires a regular rhythm of meetings and retreats to ‘praise and thank the Lord, to assess the community’s life, to renew its spirit and to strengthen its unity’* (C 38). *For an active missionary group, this presupposes community planning... Financial sharing constitutes an essential dimension of our life in communion and interdependence... We are asked to be open and ready to be accountable to the community for our use of money and goods, so that together we may grow in freedom and detachment... The community plays a role in bringing about healing and reconciliation... Let communities be attentive to anniversaries and feasts, share the joys and pain of each member... Every community is called upon to develop a common missionary project”* (WAC 23 passim). Speaking of first formation and quoting Constitution 39, the capitular document affirms: *“A man of community learns to share what he is and what he has and places his friendship and God-given talents at the service of all”* (WAC 32).

The capitular document reminds us that charity is not simply a human quality. It stems from our life in Christ (cf. WAC 9, 17). It is *“Jesus the Formator who calls and gathers*

his disciples around himself, who builds bonds of unity and love between them, empowers them with his Spirit, and sends them out to be his witnesses” (WAC 10). “The person of Christ unites us in charity and obedience; this enables us to live again the communion of life and the common mission in his Spirit that the Twelve Apostles shared with him. From this perspective, it is clear that the objective of community is much more than merely gathering a group that functions well together; its aim is to establish interdependence and profound communion between its members” (WAC 10). Starting from this life in Christ, charity finds the depth and perseverance required by our consecration and common mission. “On the faith level, we are reminded that ‘we achieve unity in our life only in and through Jesus Christ’ (C 31). We are therefore called to a deepening of our relationship with him, both as individuals and as communities. As we mature in our responsibility for each other, we become more transparent to each other, and thus we learn to share in depth our personal histories, missionary ideals, and lives of faith” (WAC 12).

Only in this union of human and divine love, of communion and interdependence, do we become “*one heart and soul our communities become more and more apostolic; by the quality of the witness they give, they bear fruit that lasts*” (WAC 13).

In the Constitutions’ wake

The capitular document of 1992 stands in continuity with our book of life. The Founder’s Rule made already more than 40 allusions to fraternal charity. From the very beginnings it emphasized that we are in community “as brothers” while the last articles speak of the charity with which we must treat those who have left the Congregation. The Founder wrote in the second part: “*Closely united in the bonds of fraternal charity, all will be exact in the practice of holy obedience*” (2).

The new Constitutions emphasize still more the requirements of charity. They present us with an ideal of life that is evangelical prior to being functional and structural, therefore animated by charity. The word charism is used to refer to the fraternal relationships that are animated by faith, while the word love refers preferably to relationships with God (3), with the Church. In continuity with the Founder, the word charism is associated with that of obedience (4) to indicate a complementarity that gives meaning. The term brother or fraternal is used to refer to all Oblates (5) and their type of relationships (6).

Constitution 37 points out the essential rapport between charity, community, witness and mission. *“By growing in unity of heart and mind, we bear witness before the world that Jesus lives in our midst and unites us in order to send us out to proclaim God’s reign”* (C 37). Charity and witness are linked in particular to the vow of chastity (7).

The new Constitutions mention two texts of the old ones bearing on fraternal charity. The one inserted in the section on Apostolic Community dates from 1825. It underscores reciprocal support, joyous charity, mutual respect (cf. p. 46). The other, from 1850, is placed at the end, somewhat like a synthesis of the Constitutions. It is an invitation to renewal in the spirit of one’s vocation and apostolic daring. It concludes: *“Mindful of these words which marvelously sum up our entire Rule, ‘all united in the bonds of the most intimate charity under the direction of the superiors,’ may they form but one heart and one soul”* (cf. p. 141).

No one has loved you more than I

Eugene de Mazenod was a man of great desires for the Congregation and the diocesan Church, a man of great love for his Oblates. We know well his parting words before dying: *“Among yourselves charity, and outside zeal for the*

salvation of souls." Less known and yet as significant is what he charged Bishop Guibert to say in his name to all Oblates at the moment of bringing him holy viaticum: "*Two things: that he had always loved us and would always love us, and that he wanted us in turn to love one another as brothers; that this mutual affection would make us happy, saintly and strong to do good*" (8). He really took to heart charity between Oblates. He saw in it the common spirit that invigorates the Congregation.

The Founder set the example by loving his Oblates intensely. Some who read him in a hurry have even been scandalized by the affectionate tone of his letters to a few among them. On the contrary, Blessed Eugene saw in this love for Oblates — but not only for them — a gift of God, an attitude similar to Christ's, a means of true sanctity. He wrote to Father Baret: "*You are aware, my very dear son, that my big failing is to love with a real passion the children God in his goodness has given me. No mother's love comes close to it*" (9). And to Father Mouchette: "*I love my sons immeasurably more than any human person could love them. That is a gift I have received from God, for which I do not cease to thank him, because it flows from one of his most beautiful attributes*" (10). Two years later, he wrote to the same Oblate: "*Often I have told the good Lord that, since he has given me a mother's heart and sons who merit my love under so many titles, he must allow me to love them immeasurably. This I do in good conscience. It seems to me, dearly loved son, that the more I love someone like yourself, the more I love God who is the source and bond of our mutual affection*" (11).

In his Diary, he gave the reason for such strong feelings: "*I declare that I do not know how those who do not love human persons who deserve to be loved can love God... Let him who may be tempted to find fault with me know that I little fear his judgment and that I could forcefully prove to him that I have every reason to thank God for having given me a*

heart that is able better to understand that of Jesus Christ our Master, who has made, animates and inspires mine better than those cold egoistic logicians who apparently put their heart into their brain, and have no love for anyone because, in the final analysis, they love only themselves... There is no half measure, 'So this is the commandment that he has given us, that anyone who loves God must also love his brother (1 Jo 4, 21). Let us study Saint John, fathom the heart of Saint Peter and his love for his divine Master, and especially let us deeply probe all that flows from the loving heart of Jesus Christ not only for all men, but especially for the Apostles and Disciples, and then let them dare to come and preach to us a love that is speculative, without feelings or affection" (12).

Because of his incarnate love, the Founder demanded that his Oblates regularly correspond with him; he reacted in marked tones of affection or of reproach, he conversed with them in prayer, he rejoiced in their visits, he suffered from faults against fraternal charity for which he had very harsh judgments (13). His theoretical teachings on charity are only occasional but very rich (14).

Charity, distinctive character of our family

Father Jetté introduced his commentary on the part concerning community with an extract of the Founder's letter to Father Mouchette, moderator of scholastics (15). Blessed Eugene recalled here the intimate relations existing between himself and the Oblates: "*A relationship springing from the heart and which forms true family ties between us... this, I have not come across anywhere else... I am saying that it is this sentiment, which I know comes from Him who is the source of all charity, which has evoked in the hearts of my children this reciprocity of love which forms the distinctive character of our beloved family.*" Previously in the same letter, he asserted by way of introduction, "*I would want all the scholastic brothers*

to be imbued with the family spirit which ought to exist among us" (16). With good reason Father Jetté presents this text as the key to understanding and living our community life as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

The Founder had this vision of wisdom not only at the end of his life; in fact, this is what at the very outset he took as the basis of formation and animation for his Institute. In 1830 he had visited the community of Notre-Dame du Laus; the lack of regularity which he noted there had pained him. In the letter he later wrote from Fribourg, he returned to the subject and, recalling the observance of the Rule, he indicated the unifying principle of all our life: "*so must there be a common spirit which vivifies this particular body. The spirit of a Bernardine is not that of a Jesuit. Ours also is our own. Those who have not grasped this, through not having made a good novitiate, are among us like dislocated members. They make the whole body suffer and are not themselves at ease. It is indispensable that they put themselves back in their place.*" To illustrate this spirit he speaks of charity in its triple expression: toward God, toward confreres and toward others. "*Charity is the pivot on which our whole existence turns. That which we ought to have for God makes us renounce the world and has vowed us to his glory by all manner of sacrifice, were it even to be our lives... Charity for our neighbor is again an essential part of our spirit. We practice it first amongst us by loving each other as brothers, by considering our Society only as the most united family which exists on earth, by rejoicing over the virtues, the talents and other qualities that our brothers possess just as much as if we possessed them ourselves, in bearing with mildness the little faults that some have not yet overcome, covering them over with the mantle of the most sincere charity, etc.; and as for the rest of mankind, in considering ourselves only as the servants of the Father of the family commanded to succour, to aid, to bring back his children by working to the utmost...*" (17).

The Superiors General have returned constantly to this theme of fraternal charity (18). Father Fabre, successor to Blessed Eugene, wrote: *"The true Oblates of Mary Immaculate should be recognized by the affection we have for one another. It is the sign that will make us recognizable among ourselves and that should make us be recognized outside. So we must love one another, respect one another"* (19). *"Outside let us be zealous and devoted missionaries, in our communities let us be fervent Oblates, full of charity for each other. Let us be lenient in our judgments, loving one another with all our hearts, and in all our mutual relationships let us be real brothers. By this sign may we always and everywhere be recognized"* (20).

For houses of formation Father Louis Soullier pointed out this virtue: *"May the spirit of love and charity, which must be the distinctive character of the Oblate of Mary Immaculate, always reign more and more, not only in this dear scholasticate of Rome where we have the opportunity of contemplating it in its most beautiful expansion, but as well in all houses of formation, so that from here it may spread throughout the whole Congregation to the farthest extremities. This is a point to which we give much importance at a time when, by a particular disposition of Providence, the Congregation opens its arms and its heart to children coming from all countries"* (21).

Charity, Oblate way to sanctity

Charity is not an Oblate exclusivity. It is the new commandment given by Jesus to his disciples. Religious life itself was defined by Vatican II in relation to charity. Charity is the ultimate rule in the very exercise of mission, as John Paul II recalled in his missionary encyclical (22).

So what is new in Oblate charity? The Founder wanted us, above all, to be authentic Christians, true religious, zealous missionaries. He wanted our communities to be in

the image of the primitive christian community as described in the Acts of the Apostles. The expression “one heart and soul” refers us to this ideal, linked to witness and apostolic fruitfulness. He wanted that we be the continuation of the spirit and works of the suppressed religious orders. In other words, he wanted that we live the soul of consecrated life. *“For thanks to God’s love poured into hearts by the Holy Spirit, a religious community is a true family gathered together in the Lord’s name and rejoicing in His presence”* (23). He wanted us to be zealous missionaries, that is to say, filled with active and creative love for souls loved and redeemed by Christ.

Yet, the Founder demanded something still more special in our way of living charity. This specificity is noticed by others. Those who are familiar with the Chapters and congresses of various Institutes and who come to our houses have told us that – in fact – they noticed something different in our way of living fraternity, of behaving toward each other, in a cordiality that is always simple and open, in family life. This fraternal coloring has its effect on our way of living community life. Even if we cannot say precisely what distinguishes us from other religious on a particular point, the important thing is to be ourselves and to fully live that to which we are called.

Father Maurice Gilbert, founder of the review *Vie Oblate* Life and a man with a profound knowledge of the Founder, concluded his article on Blessed Eugene’s last words: *“Thomas Merton... simply notes this reflection: ‘The Franciscan ideal of poverty seems to have the same role in spiritual life as do silence and solitude in purely contemplative orders.’ Indeed, the two ways come together at the terminal point: the purification of the soul and its union to God. We can also ask ourselves what – for an Oblate – is the road to sanctity, his way of communing with the paschal mystery of Christ. Certainly not in the silence and solitude of the*

contemplative nor even in the poverty of a Franciscan. Could it not be precisely his ideal of fraternal and apostolic charity? ... Taking up again Thomas Merton's phrase, we think we can say: the Oblate ideal of charity seems to have the same role in spiritual life as that of silence and solitude in purely contemplative orders. The "testament of the Founder's heart" expresses well "the soul of our soul" (24). The Oblate ideal of charity and zeal is a characteristic of our charism, it is the privileged way of our interior purification and of our union to God, it is our road to holiness, it is our way of communicating and transmitting the paschal mystery.

Educating oneself to an incarnate and consecrated charity

Charity is not something automatic, spontaneous. It is not like the kind of human love that is often blind. It is the fruit of a conquest, of an ascesis. It is participation in the paschal mystery that is death and also resurrection. It is a gift of the Spirit.

When speaking of charity we can use several different terms like friendship, fraternity, empathy, intimacy, etc. Words and expressions can have different meanings, at times ambiguous and even opposite according to cultures, persons and times. Even here we can become victim of false interpretation and illusion. So a process of initiation, of discernment is needed, made in the proper context and verified with men of God. I would like to underline two characteristics of this virtue, like the two sides of a medal. Oblate charity should be incarnated and should be consecrated, that is to say, it should answer the demands of persons consecrated to God and dedicated to mission.

When I say that charity should be incarnated, I mean concrete and complete. It comprises intelligence and spirit, heart and feelings, internal and external. It should be affective and effective, sensitive and viable, attentive and

inventive. It calls for reciprocal respect and appreciation, mutual help in personal growth and fidelity to vocation, the sharing of one's life, the interior as well. It becomes communion and interdependence unlimited by particular sectors, but basically open to all dimensions of our life, especially the most important like mission and consecration, the life of faith and prayer, personal development and human requirements. *"I do not say to you: love each other well, this recommendation would be ridiculous. But I do say to you: take care of each other and let each look after the health of all"* (25). Paul, in the famous chapter XIII of his first letter to the Corinthians, praises charity but does not fail to speak in practical terms: *"Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish: it does not take offense and is not resentful... It is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes"* (1 Cor 13:4-7).

Then, our fraternal love should be consecrated, that is to say, its modalities should express our special consecration to God. It has requirements and expressions other than those of married people or of those who live alone in the world. To love as consecrated persons calls for letting oneself be fashioned by the Word of God that lights up and shows the way. Not only the texts on charity (26) but the whole Word of God helps us enter into Christ's attitudes. Measuring ourselves with it and cultivating a sincere friendship with Christ *"will enable us to love others as Jesus loves them"* (R 12). This is a progressive identification with Christ that teaches us to see *"through the eyes of our crucified Saviour the world which he redeemed with his blood"* (C 4), and following his example to love all men, beginning with our brothers. Oblates then become *"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"* (Preface). The Founder let himself be fashioned in his love by the Word

of God, read daily and meditated, and by his experience of Christ renewed in constant prayer. In his first commentary of the Rule he wrote: *“Closely united with Jesus Christ, their Head, his children will be one among themselves, very closely united by the bonds of the most ardent charity, living under the most perfect obedience, in order to acquire humility which is so necessary for them, “arctissimis charitatis vinculis connexi” . Hence they must not sulk at one another, not sadden one another through expressions of indifference or coldness. “Arctissimis charitatis vinculis connexi omnes sanctae obedientiae sub superiorum regimine exacte subiiciuntur”*. This does not apply only to the Superior General. What shall I say about murmuring? What about bias?” (27).

Pardon and reconciliation, demands of charity

As far as charity is concerned, its most difficult aspects in practice are mutual forgiveness when there is offense and fraternal correction. There existed traditionally among us a community exercise called *la coulpe*. It may have fallen out of use because its profound meaning was lost. The last Chapter dwelt upon this aspect with realism and with an inspiring vision.

The document *Witnessing as Apostolic Community* indeed contained expressions which impressed many an Oblate: *“Hurts springing from our life or ministry are unavoidable and that is why the community plays a role in bringing about healing and reconciliation. When this service is not provided, the accumulation of misunderstandings destroys trust and renders community relationships superficial and formal”* (WAC 23, par.4).

After meditating this extract of WAC, a group was formed at the scholasticate in Germany whose task consists in determining what hurts a community, what creates tensions and misunderstandings and obstructs rapport. The

group has also to propose paths of reconciliation and ways of strengthening unity and communion in the scholasticate.

In fact, the ideal community does not exist, nor does perfect charity, not even between consecrated persons in daily communion with the Lord. Because of differing experiences and characters, lack of attention or impolite actions, as a result of events or lived incidents, of diverging opinions and ways of doing things, of diverse culture or education, there can arise within us and our confreres attitudes and reactions of incomprehension, antipathy, even enmity and rupture.

When considering the difficulties and misunderstandings that surface in a community and between confreres, the solution does not consist in ignoring the situations and closing in on oneself; nor is it to pack up and leave. In this life we all remain pilgrims and sinners. What is important is not to close in on ourselves, disillusioned with ourselves, with others and with religious life. Only one solution exists: forgive one another and set out once again with the disciples of Jesus. The evangelical way is found in reconciliation, in beginning over again to love one another as brothers. In such circumstances, what Jesus said applies to us also: "If you love those who love you, what right have you to claim any credit?... You must therefore be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (cf. Mt 5:43-48). Then shall we enjoy still more the idyllic experiences of early times: "How good, how delightful it is for all to live together like brothers!" (Ps. 133:1).

After all, to bear the other's burden (cf. Ga 6:2), to give one's life (cf. Jo 15:13), to forgive mutually (cf. Ep 4:32), to help one another to grow and to overcome our shortcomings is an essential part of fraternal charity. The community is genuine when there is mutual help and fraternal correction. The Founder wrote to a seminary director at Ajaccio: "*Let us devote ourselves to prayer and humility, and may the charity of*

Jesus Christ inspire us, without it we run the risk of becoming mere pharisees, well able to see the speck of dust in our brothers' eyes but unable to see the beam which afflicts our own" (28).

Charity and unity of the Congregation

In the Founder's mind charity did not limit itself just to a local community, making of it an intimate and dynamic home for mission. Charity should encompass the whole Congregation, all its members and all its communities. It should become a unity that helps overcome difficulties and makes the whole Congregation missionary (29). In Blessed Eugene's writings there is a surprising event which reveals his sense of the prophetic. At a time when the Oblates were nearly all French and knew each other, he linked charity and unity. Today, such unity takes on a great importance, given our geographical extension and cultural diversity.

Eugene de Mazenod wanted his Congregation to be a united family, one body, one edifice, one tree. Toward the end of his life he wrote to the Oblates in Canada: *"However far away you are from the center of the Congregation, remember that you must live the life of the family of which you are a part. It is a consolation at the ends of the earth, where you are, to think that you are living the same life as and in intimate communion with your brothers scattered over the entire surface of the globe"* (30). Also, *"Let us rejoice then mutually over all the good done by our brethren in the four quarters of the world. With us, it is wholly a question of solidarity. Each works for all and all for each. Oh! how beautiful, how touching is the communion of Saints!"* (31).

There exist many ways to further this unity, such as news bulletins, Chapters, visits of the Provincial and members of the General Government, various congresses and sessions at the provincial, regional and general levels,

courses, personnel exchanges and especially obediences. I am happy to see that several Provinces provide for pastoral experiences outside one's country. Various Regions organize meetings of scholastics.

The Founder saw particularly in the Eucharist the meeting and unifying point of all Oblates. Among his numerous testimonies I choose one from his later years: *"It is a great consolation to have a common center where we meet every day. What a delicious rendezvous is that altar on which the holy victim is offered, and that tabernacle to which one comes every day to adore Jesus Christ and speak with him of everything that concerns us. I speak to him from the effusiveness of my heart; I speak to him of all the other children his goodness has given me: I pray to him to preserve you in holy humility among the wonders of zeal, of mortification, of charity that your ministry, arduous as it is, so often gives you an opportunity of performing. I pray to him also to preserve your health so that you may be able to continue for a long time responding to your sublime vocation in gaining glory for God and salvation for souls so abandoned, which can only be saved by you, devoted servants who have no other aim in this world"* (32). The Oblate family's unity, like that of personal and communal life, finds its realization in Christ and by him (33).

Charity, witness for today's world

The community that lives in charity is an answer to our divided world, turned in on itself, dominated by egoism and injustices (cf. WAC 3 and 4). *"In a prophetic way it challenges the individualism found in today's society and the arbitrary use of power that is responsible for the plight of so many poor people. At the same time our community life offers grounds for hope to this world which is struggling to overcome its disintegration and fragmentation. Like Christ's gentle*

invitation to his banquet, our community life speaks with the meekness of an authority that invites but never imposes or coerces” (WAC 8).

A community where charity reigns is a sign of the new life brought by Christ. Such a witness is true because it is lived by normal persons, united not by flesh and blood, psychological or ideological affinities, but by faith and love of Christ. It is the sign of the world instituted by Christ in an egoistical and divided world – a still greater sign when lived with perseverance in changing circumstances and not just from the inspiration of passing generosity.

Communal life becomes the motive of credibility in our ministry; it is an invitation to reconciliation, to the overcoming of egoism, to solidarity and justice. It normally gives rise to conversions and vocations because it allows the Lord to be active in us and around us. I conclude as did the Founder in his first circular letter of August 2, 1853, when he summarized all his recommendations and wishes in these words of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians (2 Cor 13:11-13): *“In the meantime, brothers, we wish you happiness; try to grow perfect; help one another. Be united; live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with the holy kiss. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”*

NOTES

- (1) Cf. Witnessing in Apostolic Community, 10, 22, 23, 37, 51.
- (2) Part II, Chapter I, 4th paragraph, in Selected Texts, #334.
- (3) Cf. CC 2, 12, 33, 34, 59, 63, 73.
- (4) Cf. CC 3, 38, 81.
- (5) Cf. CC 42, 71, 80, 81, 84.
- (6) Cf. CC 18, 35, 53, 89, 113.
- (7) Cf. CC 15, 16.

- (8) Tempier, Circ. #2, 29 January 1861, p. 2
- (9) Letter to Fr Baret, 17 January 1851, in Letters, Vol. 11, p. 30.
- (10) Letter to Fr Mouchette, 24 April 1855, in Letters, Vol. 11 p. 266.
- (11) Letter to Fr Mouchette, 22 March 1857, in Letters, Vol. 12, p. 49.
- (12) Diary, 4 September 1857, in Selected Texts, #327.
- (13) Cf. Selected Texts, #324-326, 329-332, 341, 343-344, 349.
- (14) Cf. C. Lubowicki, *Mystère et dynamisme de l'Amour dans la vie du Bx Eugene de Mazenod*, Teresianum, Rome, 1990.
- (15) F. Jetté, O.M.I. – *The Apostolic Man. Commentary on the Oblate Constitutions and Rules of 1982*. Rome 1992, pp. 221-22.
- (16) Letter to Fr Mouchette, 2 December 1854, in Selected Texts, #229
- (17) Letter to Fr Guibert, 29 July 1830, in Letters, Vol. 7, 201.
- (18) Cf. Maurice Gilbert, *La charité fraternelle chez les Oblats d'après les Circulaires administratives des Supérieurs généraux*, dans *Etudes Oblates*, 1969, pp. 60-79.
- (19) Circulaire #11, 21 March 1862, p. 8.
- (20) Circulaire #40, 8 December 1886, p. 3.
- (21) Circulaire #55, 1 January 1894, p. 6.
- (22) Cf. *Redemptoris missio*, 60.
- (23) Cf. *Perfectae caritatis*, I; cf. 15.
- (24) Maurice Gilbert, *Les "Novissima verba" du Fondateur*, in *Etudes Oblates*, 28 (1969), pp. 58-59.
- (25) Letter to Fr Mye, 19 June 1825, in Selected Texts, #377.
- (26) Cf. Mt 5:43-48; Jo 13:17; Rom 12:9-16; 1 Cor 13; Gal 5:13-24; 1 Jo. 3: 11-18.
- (27) Retreat notes, 8 October 1831, in Selected Texts, #338.
- (28) Letter to Fr Telmon, 14 October 1836, in Letters, Vol. 8, p. 257.
- (29) Domenico Arena, *Unità e missione nelle lettere del Beato Eugenio de Mazenod*, Gregoriana, 1991.
- (30) Letter to Frs Maisonneuve and Tissot, 24 November 1858, in Selected Texts, #350.
- (31) Letter to Fr Baudrand, 11 January 1850, in Selected Texts, #346.
- (32) Letter to Fr Vegreville, 25 March 1857, in Selected Texts, #268.
- (33) Cf. CC 1, 3, 12, 26, 31, 33, 37, 71, 75, 81.

IX

RENEWING OURSELVES IN THE CHARISM OF EUGENE DE MAZENOD 1995

1995, the year of our Founder Eugene de Mazenod's canonization, is an epochal year in the history of our Congregation. It marks our lives, personal and collective. This was the reason for proclaiming a De Mazenod Year for the whole Congregation from May 21, 1995 to May 21, 1996 – the Founder's liturgical feast day.

The present letter, normally written to Oblates in first formation, this year is addressed to all members of the Congregation. I hope it will stimulate not only Oblates but all as well who wish to share Blessed Eugene's charism. I don't want to offer you just a text to be personally read, meditated and prayed over; its purpose is also to be an instrument of sharing, evaluation and discernment at the disposal of communities.

The Founder is a part of our lives

Each Oblate draws from the Founder the spirit which animates him, finds in him a life model. To this end, each of us has his own experience of the Founder, a personal view of him, finds in him a sympathetic consonance with his own vocation and aspirations. For the Founder is part of our lives and experience. To us he is not just a more or less well-known historical personage.

An objective knowledge of the Founder, of his spirituality and understanding of charism is surely important. His canonization should be the occasion for our knowing him better by benefitting from the many studies and

publications of recent years. Eugene de Mazenod still remains a living person with whom we have a personal relationship. Since he lived between 1782 and 1861 a life rich in events and responsibilities, he owes his importance not simply to his achievements and intuitions, to the Institute he founded and the movement he created in the Church. To this day he continues to relate to us and we to him through the communion of saints. So, remembering him is not enough. We must develop a personal rapport, always more intimate, with him. That is the reason why I invite you together to focus your attention on the Founder. In his footsteps and guided by him, we will be able to renew ourselves in the charism transmitted by the Spirit to the Church through him.

1. A saint to imitate

Eugene de Mazenod is being canonized, not because he was a founder or bishop or because he did great things, but because he was a saint. That is to say, he lived in a model way the life of a disciple of Christ in his vocation as Christian, priest, religious, founder, superior general and bishop. It is precisely because he lived the christian virtues in a heroic way that he is presented to the whole Church as a model to be imitated.

He wasn't born a saint – he progressively became one from being influenced by the divine graces to which he responded. He became one with his very typical human character that attracted some and repelled others. He became a saint due to events that circumscribed his life and in spite of them. The secret of his saintliness rests in his relationship to the Christ with whom he increasingly lived in agreement, in his genuine love for God and neighbor, in his practice of christian virtues and in his apostolic zeal. Driven by the Spirit, he conformed his life to that of Christ Savior and Evangelizer, and he put himself unconditionally at the service of the

Church. He thus became gradually a marvel of God's action and a human success – thanks to his personal zeal.

I have asked myself what would be the characteristics of his saintliness that can challenge and attract us Christians at the end of this millennium. I have indicated a few that I find most inspiring.

Passionately committed to Jesus Christ

What inspires me above all is his relationship with Christ, one that was fresh and direct, personal and concrete. Not a stereotyped relationship that exhausted itself in formal, lifeless exercises. Jesus was a real person he met in multiple ways, above all in the Eucharist and in his ministry as missionary priest. He encountered him in persons such as his Oblates, his priests, the poor. A few experiences of a mystical nature left deep marks in him. But just as true and enlivening was his ordinary relationship with Christ through prayer and ministry. His belief that the purpose of mission was to teach who Christ is came from the fact that Jesus was for him a living person whom he had met and who was at the center of his existence. The Christ he knew was not just a simple truth to have others accept – he was a person to know, to love and in whom to entrust one's life, with whom to take decisions, in whose presence it was good to be. That is why liturgy was central, meditation and especially evening oraison constituted needs. After a long day's work, when he was a bishop, he loved to spend an hour of adoration in the presence of the Eucharistic Christ – wherever he was solemnly exposed in a church of his rapidly expanding diocese.

He sought to follow the will of God

Our Founder sought the will of the Father and let himself be guided by the Spirit in and through Christ. The

Trinity, whom he honored and adored in morning and evening prayers, was the horizon toward which he organized his life. He did so with a practical sense by adapting himself to situations. That is how he accepted to become a priest, to start a missionary community, to be vicar general and then bishop. He was a man of grand desires but more so a man who took courageous decisions after prudent discernment, matured in prayer and in faith. He sought the glory of the living and true God by accepting trials and sufferings – plentiful in his life. For him also, accepting the will of God, especially in certain circumstances, was neither automatic nor easy. It was the road leading to his christian development, often accompanied by unforeseeable turns as, for instance, after his episcopal ordination when he was persecuted by French authorities and felt himself abandoned by Rome.

He was attentive to people's need for salvation

He was a man attentive to others, sensitive to their needs, ready to intervene to help them. His missionary vocation was born and developed from the challenges he met coming from the people's need for salvation – he perceived them to be calls from the Savior. That is how the presence of prisoners of war in Aix urged him to place himself at their service, the Church's state of abandonment decided him to enter the seminary, the rural populations' need of re-evangelization impelled him to start a missionary community, urgent missionary necessities made him accept foundations in various continents.

For the same reason, when still a young priest, he preached to the domestics of Aix; then as bishop he chatted with the little people on the docks of Marseilles, visited the poor and sick of his city, stayed in regular contact with his missionaries. All this was made possible by his straightforward character and the experience acquired from his con-

tacts with refugees and immigrants in Italy, with the peasants on his mother's property after his return to France, with the poor of his city. He did not consider this to be philanthropy on his part. His love for others, above all for the very least of the poor, stemmed from the worth of the human person redeemed and loved by Christ. The salvation of souls became increasingly the motivating factor of his apostolic activity and guided his missionary sense.

Unconditionally committed to the Church

De Mazenod's response to the Savior's call, as he perceived it through people's need of salvation, was first of all personal; but it very soon developed more and more into an ecclesial response, due to his forming with others a community capable of answering needs by promoting collaboration with other apostolic forces, by intensifying communion with the Church throughout the world.

Impassioned for Christ, Eugene was an unconditional servant of the Church. Not just an institution, the Church was also and above all *"that glorious inheritance purchased by Christ at the cost of his own blood... the beloved spouse of God's only-begotten Son... the mother who appeals for help."* As he made clear in the Preface, his personal motivations and those of his Institute were intimately linked: *"the glory of God, an ardent love for the Church and the salvation of souls."* The glory of God and the ardent love for the salvation of souls went hand in hand and expressed *"the good and service of the Church."* Surely he was able to recognize the ills of the Church of his time and even the limitations and errors of her ministers, while at the same time recognize her divine dimension. For this Church he worked with devotion and suffered with dignity. He also made her known and loved by his Oblates and his diocesan people – one cannot love Christ without loving the Church.

To respond to the urgent calls for the salvation of souls and the service of the Church, Eugene accepted – against his own inclinations – always heavier burdens: superior general, vicar general, auxiliary bishop, Bishop of Marseilles. He progressively understood that the Master of the vineyard was calling him to serve him through these ministries. In doing so he practised virtues always in a more heroic way. His administrative functions became his training ground to give himself to God and the concrete way leading him to holiness.

A heart open to the whole world

Eugene saw far, his horizons were limitless and his love for humankind embraced everyone. The exile of his first years, his contacts with persons and peoples in cosmopolitan cities like Venice, Naples and Palermo, his reading on missions while still an adolescent, his contacts made in the seminary with the imprisoned Roman Curia, his presence in Marseilles now a port opening on other continents, the sending of his missionaries to other countries, all these factors constantly broadened his horizons and opened his heart. As a bishop also, he passed on to his faithful an interest in the world's problems and the Church's needs. He was a universal man and a pastor in the broad ecclesial sense. He did not limit himself to writing pastoral letters on liturgy, catechesis and preaching, or on the pope's imprisonment and the rights of the Church; he wrote as well on famine in Ireland, the Anglican Oxford Movement, on opening up to Africa.

A strong and upright character

His personality makes him sympathetic to us. He was an upright and straightforward man. He knew how to take

a stand. It was clear what side he was on. Still he was not stubborn. He knew how to modify his stance, even if it cost him. Thus he accepted various forms of government, freeing himself of his monarchist legitimist positions. He accepted as well certain Roman decisions with which he did not agree. He did so with faith, after having expressed his viewpoint. Thanks to his efforts over a period of years, he found a growing unity in his life between his contemplative needs and his apostolate, between his mystical requirements and his active character, between his duties as superior general and those of a bishop.

The sources of his spirituality

When formulating his spirituality, he was influenced by the French School, especially during his seminary days in Paris – giving him high regard for the priesthood and its demands of holiness. He was influenced also by Ignatian spirituality and that of Alphonsus Liguori. Other sources marked him deeply and always in a more decisive way: Scripture, liturgy and life. Thanks to his faithful daily reading of Scripture, the Word of God shaped his faith vision, his prayer and understanding of evangelization. True also of liturgy. Down-to-earth life with all its human and ecclesial challenges was for him – a positive realistic man – a constant school and source of christian and missionary growth. He had a few spiritual experiences that left deep marks upon him – particularly his Good Friday experience of 1807; we can consider it as a second conversion, the foundation of all his spirituality and the focal point of his faith experience. A thorough study of these sources could show us an abundance of wealth.

His way to Christ

Canonization is recognition of the saint. His sanctity however is not separated from the call to be founder and father of a larger family. The Spirit prepared and led him to be a model to those who share his charism – it had a prototype in him and not solely an initiator and master. As a model of holiness Eugene refers us to Christ, above all in his mystery as Savior and in his ministry as Evangelizer. Just like Mary he leads us to Christ; this is where the marian character of Eugene and of the Oblate charism is rooted.

2. A founder to follow

A founder is not simply the initiator of a human undertaking. His person and work can be fully understood only within the divine salvific economy, led by the Holy Spirit – first actor of the Church's life and mission (1). The Spirit is the one who raises up founders and through them enriches the Church with religious families. Thus by means of Eugene de Mazenod he gave rise to a religious Congregation dedicated to evangelizing the poor. By him he transmitted to the Church a missionary charism, he fashioned an apostolic corps and launched it on the world's highways.

In harmony with the Founder

To understand the charism of one's own institute, it is necessary to understand the founder and enter into harmony with him, his inspiration and project. Thus we perceive the gift that was made through him to the Church. By means of Eugene de Mazenod, divine intervention made its way through the reading of the Church's ills and particularly

through an awareness of the faith loss in large segments of society. The enormity of these needs touched him. Moved by the Spirit, he gathered companions to join him in giving a gospel answer – the re-evangelization of the poor, especially in rural areas.

Following Christ Saviour and evangelizer

To accomplish this work of re-evangelizing, the model, source and center is Jesus Christ Savior and Evangelizer, who gathered disciples around him to form and send them. “Christe salvator. That is the aspect under which we ought to contemplate our divine Master,” he wrote to Father Tempier in July 1816. This intuition, rooted in his Good Friday experience, took shape along his spiritual apostolic way, particularly in his search for an answer to give assistance to the abandoned Church. Starting from the perspective of Christ Savior and Evangelizer, he wanted to give their true weight to various realities: humanity, particularly the poor, the Church and the community. All the spirituality he lived and transmitted is marked by the vision of Christ Savior calling all Oblates, so that they cooperate with him in saving the world by proclaiming the Good News.

The three pillars of the Oblate edifice

Starting from this gospel reading, Eugene formed his Congregation by establishing it on three main values constituting the base and pillars of the whole structure: mission to evangelize the poor, community life, commitment to the sanctifying of the members themselves.

The priority of evangelizing by proclaiming in his native country found expression in the preaching of parish missions – intended to awaken faith and reanimate christian

communities made lukewarm by recent cultural and political events. In mission countries this proclamation was directed to transmitting the faith and building new christian communities. This evangelizing was a priority born of needs perceived, whose purpose was to make men of the hearers, then Christians and finally saints.

Community was considered essential from the very start, based on the experience and model of the Apostles. Indeed, community was at the origin of the Institute's growth. Some forty foundations that came into being in France at the same time have disappeared, due to the weakness of community life, the lack of care in selecting candidates and their inadequate formation.

Commitment to holiness resulted from missionary necessities: proclaiming the Gospel demands preachers who are witnesses above all. The choosing of religious life with its practice of vows and ascetic requirements was a logical consequence of this demand.

Other aspects of the charism

Our Oblate charism should evidently not be reduced to these characteristics, even if they form the pillars of the foundation and subsequent growth of the Institute. Other dimensions distinguish it, such as the choice of the poor and the abandoned, the priestly character, devotion to Mary, love for the Church, attention given to urgent pastoral needs, commitment to universal mission, closeness to people, apostolic courage, radicalness of oblation, fraternal charity, apostolic zeal, etc. This charismatic outlook was lucidly proposed again by the new Constitutions that had been prepared by consulting the whole Congregation; they received the unanimous vote of the 1980 Chapter and were approved by the Holy See in 1982.

Spreading the charism

The charism of Eugene de Mazenod was transmitted to the Congregation of Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, but it has reflected far and wide. In various ways it influenced the birth of Religions Congregations, Secular Institutes and groups of lay associates. Each group has developed certain aspects and made its own synthesis. We could in truth speak of a constellation of Mazenod charism, bearer of a rich fruitfulness in its far-flung influence.

3. A teacher to heed

The Council and subsequently the Magisterium invite us to renew ourselves in the spirit of the Founders. The first criterion is certainly that of self-renewal in Christ – to whom each founder refers and of whom he reveals an aspect. For Eugene, Christ is the real Founder of the Institute, the model. In his first Rule he wrote: *“What more sublime purpose than that of their Institute? Their founder is Jesus Christ, the very Son of God; their first fathers are the Apostles. They are called to be the Saviour’s co-workers, the co-redeemers of mankind.”*

On the other hand he was conscious of his own role, not only for getting the Institute on the way but also for transmitting and interpreting its spirit, its missionary aims, the details of life in common. Writing to Father Honorat, he disapproved of certain independent ways of doing: Blaming this fault *“came to my mind quite naturally when I thought of men to whom I have given birth into the religious life and who allow whole years to pass without giving me a sign that they are alive and without thinking of learning from me the spirit which they must also show, if they acknowledge my fatherhood and the authority that the Church gives me over them”* (2).

Inspirational texts

Eugene has left us no treatises on spirituality. Practical man that he was, he let himself be guided by the Spirit according to circumstances. So it is important to grasp his way of making choices, of responding to challenges, of translating into practice his intuitions. Nevertheless, he did not omit giving indications on the spirit of the Institute, starting often from real life situations – so many precious pearls, often enough, fruitful intuitions, seeds transmitting life to the charism. Beyond collections already published, it seems to me that some texts have a particular importance. I have chosen five that I offer for your meditation as means of entering into the intuitions of Eugene de Mazenod and for our charismatic renewal.

The Preface is our Magna Carta

The most significant text is the Preface to our Constitutions and Rules. Written as a *Nota Bene* in the original Rule of 1818, it has been slightly modified and introduced in 1825 as Preface in the first Rules approved by the Holy See. In the radical re-formulation of the Constitutions made by the 1966 Chapter, it was retained in full and presented as the *Magna Carta* inspiring our Oblate charism. In fact, not only does it recall the historical genesis of our charism but also the methodology for its fulfilment.

It begins with a lucid look inspired by faith at the needs of the Church. These needs of salvation constitute an appeal that touches Eugene and a few priests and impels them to respond generously for love of the Church. They find a way to respond by contemplating Jesus as Savior and by imitating him as Evangelizer. Just as Christ formed a few disciples in his school and way of life to send them later to evangelize the world, so does this group of priests want to be schooled by

Jesus in order to be able to evangelize the abandoned populations of the region. They thus follow the ideal of the Apostles called by Jesus to be with him and sent by him (cf. Mc 3,14).

We find in this text:

a) the genesis of the Oblate charism which is born of the emotion felt when faced with the people's need for salvation and the ills of the Church;

b) the christological perspective that contemplates the mystery of Christ Savior and chooses the ministry of Christ Evangelizer, by following his pedagogy of formation;

c) the love of the Church contemplated as mystery but seen as abandoned due to the unfaithfulness of Christians and the lukewarmness of her ministers. By putting themselves at her service, Oblates adopt a form of extraordinary ministry;

d) the community with Jesus as a school of holiness and of apostolic zeal;

e) the purposes and stages of evangelization itself: start by making men more reasonable, then christian, and finally help them become saints;

f) its content: teach who Christ is, pull them from the devil's legacy and show them the way to heaven;

g) the call to holiness for missionaries and Christians themselves: working seriously to become saints with the requirements of the Kenosis;

h) the need for rules of life that gather all members in a uniform practice and a common spirit (3).

Conditions of our vocation

The radicalness of the Oblate vocation is well described in a text of the 1853 Rule: *"Whoever wishes to become one of us must have an ardent desire for his own perfection, and be inflamed with love for our Lord Jesus Christ and his Church and a burning zeal for the salvation of souls. He must free his*

heart from every disorderly affection for things on earth, and from excessive attachment to parents and native land; he must have no desire for money, but will rather look upon riches as so much rubbish so as to seek no gain other than Jesus Christ; his desire must be to commit himself to the exclusive service of God and of the Church, whether in the missions or in the other ministries of the Congregation. Finally, he must have the will to persevere unto death in fidelity and obedience to the Rules of the Institute” (4).

Charity as the pivot of our lives

Charity among ourselves and apostolic zeal have always been emphasized by Eugene, witness the text he wrote in answer to a particular situation. In 1830 he had visited the community of Notre-Dame du Laus. He remained saddened by the lack of regularity that was evident there. In the letter that followed, written in Fribourg, he returns to this theme and, recalling the observance of the Rules, he indicates the unifying principle of all our life. *“There must be a common spirit which vivifies this particular body. The spirit of the Bernardine (Cistercian) is not that of the Jesuit. Ours also is our own. Those who have not grasped this, through not having made a good novitiate, are among us like dislocated members. They make the whole body suffer and are not themselves at ease. It is indispensable that they put themselves back in their place.”*

To illustrate this spirit he speaks of charity in its triple expression – toward God, toward confreres and toward others. *“Charity is the pivot on which our whole existence turns. That which we ought to have for God makes us renounce the world and has vowed us to his glory by all manner of sacrifice, were it even to be our lives. (...) Charity for our neighbour is again an essential part of our spirit. We practice it first amongst us by loving each other as brothers, by*

considering our Society only as the most united family which exists on the earth, by rejoicing over the virtues, the talents and other qualities that our brothers possess just as much as if we possessed them ourselves, in bearing with mildness the little faults that some have not yet overcome, covering them over with the mantle of the most sincere charity, etc.; as for the rest of mankind, in considering ourselves only as the servants of the Father of the family commanded to succour, to aid, to bring back his children by working to the utmost..." (5)

Spirit of oblation

Our spirit of oblation is well indicated among others in a letter of 1817 written in Paris to his community: *"We are put on earth, particularly in our house, to sanctify ourselves while helping each other by our example, our words and our prayers. Our Lord Jesus Christ has left to us the task of continuing the great work of the redemption of mankind. It is towards this unique end that all our efforts must tend; as long as we will not have spent our whole life and given all our blood to achieve this, we have nothing to say; especially when as yet we have given only a few drops of sweat and a few spells of fatigue. This spirit of being wholly devoted to the glory of God, the service of the Church and the salvation of souls, is the spirit that is proper to our Congregation, a small one, to be sure, but which will always be powerful as long as she is holy. Our novices must steep themselves in these thoughts, which must sink deep in them and be often meditated. Each Society in the Church has a spirit which is its own; which is inspired by God according to the circumstances and needs of the times wherein it pleases God to raise these supporting bodies or rather it would be better to say these elite bodies which precede the main army on the march, which excel it in bravery and which thus obtain the more brilliant victories."*(6)

Mary's approval

The last text that I present you is dated August 15, 1822, written at a trying time. It relates the marian devotion and apostolate of the Founder and the Congregation with the fecundity of our family. *"The ceremony has just finished, very dear and most good brother, silence reigns in the house.. It is broken only by the sound of a distant bell which announces the great procession. Satiated with the sincere tributes that we have just rendered to our good mother, at the feet of the beautiful statue that we have installed as a souvenir of her in our church, I am letting the others take care of honouring her with the external pomp of a parade which would add nothing further to my perhaps over-demanding piety. Let this interlude be used to converse with you, dear friend, in sweet outpouring of the heart. Would that I could share with you all that I experienced in the way of consolation on this beautiful day devoted to Mary our Queen!*

"I had not felt for a long time as much joy in speaking of her grandeur and in encouraging our Christians to put all their confidence in her, as during my instruction this morning to the Congregation (Youth Sodality of Aix) (...) I believe I owe to her also a special experience that I felt today, I will not go so far as to say more than ever, but certainly more than usual. I cannot describe it too well because it comprised several things but all related, however, to a single object, our dear Society. It seemed to me that what I saw, what I could put my finger on, was that within her lies hidden the germ of her very great virtues, and that she can achieve infinite good; I found her worthy, everything pleased me about her, I cherished her rules, her statutes, her ministry seemed sublime to me, as it is indeed. I found in her bosom sure means of salvation, even infallible, such is how they looked to me. Only one reason for regret came to diminish and almost entirely efface the joy by which I would fain have let myself be carried away: it was myself." (7)

The significance of our Constitutions and Rules

Besides these texts, I draw your attention again to the Constitutions and Rules that reflect very well the charism of Blessed Eugene in language adapted to our day. The canonization of the Founder will be an occasion for rediscovering them, for meditating them anew and for praying them. On this score I repeat what the Founder wrote to his Oblates after the final revision and papal approval, August 2, 1853: *“I would like to sum up my advice by this single recommendation: read and meditate your holy Rules. There you will find the secret of your perfection; they include everything that is to lead you to God. (...) Read, meditate and observe your Rules, and you will become true saints, you will build up the Church, you will honor your vocation, and you will attract graces of conversion on the souls you will evangelize as well as every kind of blessings on the Congregation, your mother, and on its members who are your brothers. Read, meditate, faithfully observe your Rules, and you will die in the peace of the Lord, assured of the recompense promised by God to him who perseveres to the end in the performance of his duties.”* (8)

4. A father to love

Normally founders consider themselves fathers or mothers of the Institute founded by them. This feeling was very pronounced in Eugene de Mazenod, to the point of becoming an “emblematic example” (9). This attitude ties in with a characteristic of the Oblate charism – fraternal charity (10).

Eugene was quickly conscious of this factor. In his retreat notes of 1824, he wrote, *“I can well say of these dear children like the mother of the Maccabees that I don’t know*

how they were formed in my womb" (11). A few years later, he wrote, "I am your father, and how much a father!" (12). In his correspondence during the 1850s, this affirmation was often repeated like a refrain.

Reciprocal love

It was a paternity that he received from his charism of Founder, "God predestined me to be the father of a large family in his Church..." (13). It entailed a deep love for his Oblates: "I love my sons immeasurably more than any human person could love them... That is no doubt because of the position that he has deigned to give me in his Church" (14). This is a special gift for which he thanks God: "This expansive love which is my own gift and which pours itself out on each one of them without taking anything from the others, just like, I make bold to say, God's love for men" (15). He is convinced that this love relationship between him and the Oblates is not found in other religious families. "I have seen many religious orders. I am in very intimate relations with those that are most regular. Well, apart from their virtues I also give them credit for a great esprit de corps; however, this more than paternal love that the head has for the members of the family, this cordial affinity of the members for their head which establishes between them a relationship springing from the heart and which forms true family ties between us – father to son, son to father – this, I have not come across anywhere else. I have always thanked God for it as a particular gift which he has deigned to grant me... I am saying that it is this sentiment, which I know comes from him who is the source of all charity, which has evoked in the hearts of my children this reciprocity of love which forms the distinctive character of our beloved family" (16).

In communion with the Founder

Death does not put an end to this relationship of paternity. Canonization confirms that Eugene shares the glory of saints, so his communion is with us as well. In 1828 after the recent death of a few Oblates, he wrote to Father Courtès: *"We are attached to them by the bonds of a particular charity, they are still our brothers, and we are theirs; they dwell in our motherhouse, our headquarters; their prayers, the love which they keep for us, will draw us one day to them so as to dwell with them in the place of our rest"* (17). The Founder is present to us because he is close to God. He continues to love us and expects not only a fraternal love among us but also a filial love for him. This is the love that will make us understand his initial inspiration, share his attitudes to live his charism in today's Church and that will put us in harmony with his spirit.

5. An intercessor to invoke

Since the time when the Lord called him to his reward, May 21, 1861, Blessed Eugene has not transmitted new orders to us, he no longer reacts in words to new situations and to our choices. But in his paternal love and as a qualified saint he can intercede for us with the Lord. Graces and miracles granted by his intercession are examples of his availability. I believe that he must be particularly available for the renewal of his Oblates, for the greater incisive missionary quality of his Congregation, for the grace of new and authentic vocations, for the adequate formation of apostles full of zeal – all intentions that were dear to his heart.

Sharing his prayer

In heaven he intercedes for his own as he did before the Blessed Sacrament. He wrote to Father Lacombe: *"You could not believe how much I think in the presence of God of our dear Red River missionaries. I have only one way of drawing near to them, and that is in front of the Blessed Sacrament, where I seem to see you and to touch you. And you for your part must often be in His presence. It is thus that we meet each other in that living centre which serves as our means of communication. And your sufferings and work, arduous as they are, can you believe that they are not frequently the subject of my conversation and my admiration?"* (18). As in his earthly life, his intercession calls for a reciprocal presence and communion in the Lord.

We can pray with him and not only turn ourselves to him as to our intercessor. Blessed Eugene has left us prayers that he had composed and used. I offer two of them to you: the first, written before his ordination, in which he asks to be able to love Christ, and the other in which he asks for perseverance in his Oblate vocation. We can use them to enable us to be renewed in his spirit and to pray with him with the same formulas.

Prayer to grow in love for Christ:

O Lord, my God, double, triple, increase my strength a hundredfold, that I may love you not only to the utmost of my ability – which is a mere nothing – but that I may love you as fully as did the Saints, as fully as your Holy Mother did and still does. And yet, my Lord, this is not enough. Why should I not wish to love you to the extent you love yourself? It is an impossibility, I know, but I can certainly wish it, and do so sincerely from the depths of my heart, with all my soul. Yes, my Lord, I wish to love you as much as you love yourself. (19)

Prayer to persevere in the Oblate vocation:

Almighty, eternal God, you have called me, your unworthy servant, through no merit of my own but solely out of your great mercy, to serve your divine Son in the Congregation of the Immaculate Virgin Mary.

Humbly I pray, through the merits of the precious blood of our divine Savior, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary conceived without sin, and of my patron saints: grant me the grace to be faithful to this holy vocation.

Grant that I may not weaken in this holy resolve through any effort of the enemy of my soul, nor be deterred by impulses of the flesh, dissuaded by love of parents or counsel of relatives, restrained by fear of difficulties, distracted by the vanity of this world, overcome by bad company; that my passions may not impede me, work not break me, nor the suggestions of Satan pervert me.

You have given me your gift to begin, give me now the power to persevere according to your holy Will.

O God of Love, especially give me the talents I need to reach my goal, as well as confidence in those who are my spiritual fathers. Grant that I may labor unceasingly for my own and my neighbor's salvation, and, above all, to promote your glory. Amen. (20)

6. Renewing ourselves in the charism

In recent years theological reflexion and even the magisterium make use of the word charism to indicate consecrated life in general and still more its various forms. It was employed as a privileged category by the Congress of the Union of Superiors General, held at Rome in November 1993. Thus we speak of the founder's charism, transmitted to his Institute.

Characteristics of a charism

The word charism, when applied to a particular form of consecrated life, points to four aspects in particular:

a) a trinitarian aspect underlining the initial and constant rapport with the Spirit from whom come all gifts; configuration with Christ, experienced and expressed according to one of his mysteries and/or a ministry; a rapport with the Father whose love for humankind is perceived and lived;

b) an ecclesiological aspect, that is to say, a privileged rapport with the Church, for whose edification every gift is made;

c) an intrinsic aspect unifying the various dimensions of the charism itself, that are independent and comprise the essential values, the meaning and choices of the mission, the spirit of togetherness, the pathways of formation, etc;

d) a rapport of continuity with the founder. "The charism of founders reveals itself as an experience of the Spirit, transmitted to their disciples to be lived by them, kept, deepened, constantly developed in harmony with the Body of Christ in perpetual growth." (21)

The charism is not a notion built up with the play of concepts and wild imaginings. Nor is it an object or an immobile good transmitted automatically or by acquired right. It is a gift of the Spirit and a living experience of Christ, something existential and vital. It can be deformed, weakened and even lost for various motives, above all by the loss of contact with the very source that is the Spirit of God and with the weakening of the Christ experience.

Conditions for our renewal in the charism

I have asked myself what would be the conditions needed for the charism to be lived, preserved, deepened and

constantly developed. Here are the ones that seem to me to be the most important.

...availability to the Spirit

The first condition is availability to the Spirit, not only through the prayer of supplication but as well through interior attitudes allowing the Spirit to manifest himself and through ways of doing which allow him to act, such as discernment.

...relating to Christ

Constantly deepening our personal and communitarian relationship with Christ, through an always more complete knowledge of him, an always greater identification so as to let him live in us and act through us (cf C 2). Active faithfulness to our vows is its privileged and inescapable path. It will lead us to a progressive and transforming experience of Christ, contemplated in his mystery as Savior and imitated in his ministry as evangelizer.

...in harmony with the Founder

Love, knowledge and devotion to the Founder create a syntony with him, in such a way as to help us understand and follow his spiritual and apostolic way, by making us capable and available to the action of the Spirit. For the Spirit has acted in him by giving rise not only to intuitions and initial initiatives but as well by making his undertaking evolve in answer to new challenges. This pedagogy of the early days can teach us to confront new turns to be taken. We must particularly apply ourselves to live the dimensions of the Mazenod charism – they remain clear and current. We must especially live with zeal and creativity the mission to re-evangelize the “degenerate Christians” and carry the Good News to “non-Christians”, following the trajectory in depth traced by the Founder himself and well expressed by the Constitutions (22). I believe that on the occasion of the canonization every Oblate unit should develop forms of extraordinary evangelization somewhat like popular missions. This

type of ministry is shown to be effective wherever there are people with the courage to make themselves available and to adapt their enterprise to real needs.

...in the Church

There has to be a profound syntony with the Church, mystical body of Christ in the growing process. This means communion with the People of God and with their pastors. It implies assuming in a specific mission new sensitivities and pastoral orientations like the place of the laity, of inter-religious dialogue, ecumenism, justice and human promotion – all things for which there was little sensitivity in the Founder's time. It also means applying oneself with new ardor and creativity to the new challenges proposed by the magisterium, such as the new evangelization and mission ad gentes – part of the Founder's intuitions and priorities. Our response to this double challenge will be oxygen for the life of the charism.

...in community

The community is the site where the charism is understood and lived. Indeed, that is where it is entrusted at its different levels. To this end the Oblates should develop a community life that is truly christian and truly Oblate, in faith and charity. The directives of the Constitutions and of recent Chapters are very clear, but they have to be translated into practice.

...challenged by the needs for salvation

Attention to the needs of salvation of one's own milieu and of the world awakens in us Christ's call and energizes the charism (cf.C1). We have to be attentive to the signs of the times to be able to read their Gospel appeals according to the nature of our charism, and thus be capable of responding to urgent needs. When reading these signs and needs, we should let ourselves be touched like the first Oblates and find the daring to respond effectively.

...like Mary

To live the Oblate charism in all its richness, there remains the need to develop a marian touch, marked by humility and gratitude. Boasting will get us off track. Let us always remain a small Congregation (*parva Congregatio*). That is what allows us to be our natural selves at the side of the poor and the little people (cf.C8). Like Mary, when witnessing the marvels found in the Congregation we must recognize that they are the fruit of God's goodness. This is the confidence in the Lord that will make us daring enough to answer new challenges and to tread new pathways (cf.C9). Above all we should, like Mary, constantly welcome Christ in all the events of our lives in order to transmit him in an authentic way to today's world to which we are being sent (cf.C10).

Conclusion

The charism remains a gift to be welcomed and made to bear fruit. It is a grace to be asked. *"Like the Apostles after Christ's Ascension, the Church must gather in the Upper Room 'together with Mary the Mother of Jesus' in order to pray for the Spirit and to gain strength and courage to carry out the missionary mandate. We too, like the Apostles, need to be transformed and guided by the Spirit"* (23). In this prayer of invocation to the Spirit are united to us the Oblates in heaven and especially Eugene de Mazenod, whom with the whole Church we venerate as saint and our intercessor.

NOTES

(1) Cf Foreword of the Constitutions and Rules, 1982.

(2) September 2, 1851, Oblate Writings, 2, p.24.

- (3) Constitutions and Rules, Preface .
- (4) Constitutions and Rules 1853, Chapter 3, XIX.
- (5) Letter to Fr Guibert, July 29, 1830, Oblate Writings, 7, pp.201-202.
- (6) Letter to Fr Tempier, August 22, 1817, Oblate Writings, 6, p.34.
- (7) Letter to Fr Tempier, August 15, 1822, Oblate Writings, 6, pp.92-93.
- (8) Circular Letter, August 2, 1853, Oblate Writings, 12, pp.205-206.
- (9) Ciardi, F: I Fondatori, uomini dello Spirito, Città nuova 1982, p. 346.
- (10) Zago, M: "Letter to Oblates in First Formation", published in OMI Documentation #197, April 1994.
- (11) Notes de retraite 1824, Écrits oblats, 15, p.205 (not yet translated).
- (12) Letter to Fr Mille, January 25, 1831, Oblate Writings, 8, p.12.
- (13) Letter to Fr C. Baret, January 4, 1856, Oblate Writings, 12, p.1.
- (14) Letter to Fr Mouchette, April 24, 1855, Oblate Writings, 11, p.266.
- (15) Letter to Fr Mouchette, December 2, 1854, Oblate Writings, 11, p.252.
- (16) Letter to Fr Mouchette, December 2, 1854, Oblate Writings, 11, p.253-54.
- (17) Letter to Fr Courtès, July 22, 1828, Oblate Writings, 7, p.167.
- (18) Letter to Fr Lacombe, March 6, 1857, Oblate Writings, 2, p.140.
- (19) Oblate Prayer manual, p.124.
- (20) Oblate Prayer manual, p.80.
- (21) Mutuae relationes, #11.
- (22) Cf. CC 5 and 7.
- (23) Redemptoris missio #92

X

OUR RELIGIOUS CONSECRATION 1997

This is the tenth in the series of my letters to Oblates in first formation and it is devoted to a document which concerns all of us in a special way. That document is the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, issued by His Holiness John Paul II after the recent Synod of Bishops. It is addressed to the whole Church but especially to consecrated persons. It bears the date of March 25, 1996.

The document is the result of discussion and reflection within the Church context on the occasion of the Bishops' Synod on consecrated life held in October 1994. Having been special secretary to the Synod assembly, I recognize the fidelity of this document to the final *Propositiones* and also to the linguistic group discussions and the more important interventions in the Synod itself. It also reflects the preparatory discussions which in some instances culminated in a national congress on the subject. The document also complements the preceding post-synodal exhortations: *Christifideles Laici* on the vocation and mission of the lay people in the Church and in the world of today (1988) and *Pastores dabo vobis* on the present condition of formation for priests and seminarians (1992). Together, these three documents specify the identity of the various states of life, their mission and their specific vocation in the Church (cf. VC 4, 16, 31, 32).

This letter is an invitation to you to study the exhortation in order to acquire a better understanding of our apostolic life (cf. VC 9), which is one of the forms of consecrated life (cf. VC 4-12, 32). So as to facilitate this

personal and community meditation, I shall point out five general aspects, and then underline some elements of the document which are common to Oblate tradition.

Part I: GENERAL OUTLINES OF THE EXHORTATION

The apostolic exhortation is a treatise on consecrated life. Therefore, we should not be surprised that it is lengthy. It begins with a description of the different forms or categories of consecrated life. Then the first chapter reminds us of the Trinitarian and Christological sources of consecrated life and develops the theme. The second chapter deals with consecrated life as a sign of communion in the Church especially as fraternal life. The third chapter develops the missionary theme. The plan of the document follows an outline which has become classical. It describes the Christian identity as mystery, communion and mission. The plan is also that followed in *Christifideles laici*.

The Trinitarian aspect

A radical following of Christ constitutes the core of consecrated life. Theology has always pointed out this fact. What is original in this document is the development of the Trinitarian aspect which states that the consecrated life becomes *Confessio Trinitatis* which is the title of the first chapter. Vatican Council II had stated that trinitarian life was the foundation of the life of the Church (cf. LG 1-9) and the source of mission (cf. AG 1-5). This post-synodal exhortation now places consecrated life in the context of the same Trinity, thus completing the theological reflection of the Council and applying it to a particular status of Christian life. We are reminded of the trinitarian image and communion not only in relation to consecrated life in general (cf. VC 17-21), but also

in relation to each particular charism (cf. VC 36). The evangelical counsels are a gift of the Trinity and a reflection of trinitarian life in keeping with the experience of Jesus Christ (cf. VC 20.21). *“The consecrated life, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, constitutes a closer imitation and an abiding re-enactment in the Church of the way of life which Jesus, the supreme consecrated one and missionary of the Father for the sake of his kingdom, embraced and proposed to his disciples. . . The consecrated life truly constitutes a living memorial of Jesus’ way of living and acting as the Incarnate Word in relation to the Father and in relation to the brethren”* (VC 22). Consequently the trinitarian perspective emphasizes communion in charity as the soul and basis of mutual relations (cf. VC 41-42, 47, 49-51) and of mission in the world (cf. VC 24, 72, 75).

In the heart of the Church

Consecrated life in the Church is not something isolated and marginal. *“It is at the very heart of the Church . . . it is an intimate part of her life, her holiness and her mission”* (VC 3). Referring to the Council Constitution (cf. LG 44), it emphasizes that *“the profession of the evangelical counsels belongs indisputably to the life and holiness of the Church”* (VC 29). This means that *“consecrated life, present in the Church from the beginning, can never fail to be one of her essential and characteristic elements, for it expresses her very nature. This is clearly seen from the fact that the profession of the evangelical counsels is intimately connected with the mystery of Christ, and has the duty of making somehow present the way of life which Jesus himself chose and indicates as an absolute eschatological value . . . The idea of a Church made up only of sacred ministers and lay people does not therefore conform to the intentions of her divine Founder, as revealed to us by the Gospels and the other writings of the*

New Testament" (VC 29; cf. 63, 105). This means that consecrated life is one of the Church's essential structures.

Consecrated life is one of the three states in the Church. "Although these different categories are a manifestation of the one mystery of Christ, the lay faithful have as their specific but not exclusive characteristic, activity in the world, the clergy, ministry, consecrated men and women, special conformity to Christ, chaste, poor and obedient" (VC 31; cf. 16). "*In recent years there has been felt the need to clarify the identity of the various states of life, their vocation and their particular mission in the Church . . . These will be all the more helpful to the Church and her mission, the more their specific identity is respected*" (VC 4). Communion with others is realized both in sharing what they have in common and in identifying what distinguishes them (cf. VC 30-33, 50-51, 54-56, 74).

Consecrated life is a gift of God to the Church (cf. VC 3, 105). "*It continues to reassure the Christian people*" (VC 3). "*The Church and society itself need people capable of devoting themselves totally to others for the love of God. The Church can in no way renounce the consecrated life, for it eloquently expresses her inmost nature as "Bride". In the consecrated life the proclamation of the Gospel to the whole world finds fresh enthusiasm and power*" (VC 105). It is for this reason that the Church wishes to involve everybody in supporting it (cf. VC 3, 13, 69, 106-108). However, the principal agents in its renewal, in its propagation, in its numerical increase and in its extension are the consecrated persons themselves (cf. VC 13, 109-110). The Church is confident that their response will be generous (cf. VC 3, 29, 40, 63) and she trusts in the Spirit whose strength continues to be the inspiration and support of consecrated life in the Church (cf. VC 5, 19).

A pilgrim in history

Consecrated life makes its journey through history,

taking its form according to the changes and needs of the time. It is affected by the changes in the human condition. Its progress through history also explains in part the multiplicity of forms of consecrated life and numerous Institutes. *“How can we not recall with gratitude to the Spirit the many different forms of consecrated life which he has raised up throughout history and which still exist in the Church today?”* (VC 5). *“In this perspective common to all consecrated life, there are many different but complementary paths”* (VC 32), which manifest different aspects of the mystery and the ministry of Christ. *“While individual Institutes have no claim to permanence, the consecrated life itself will continue to sustain among the faithful the response of love towards God and neighbour. Thus it is necessary to distinguish the historical destiny of a specific Institute or form of consecrated life from the ecclesial mission of consecrated life as such. The former is affected by changing circumstances; the latter is destined to endure”* (VC 63).

“The present difficulties which a number of Institutes are encountering in some parts of the world must not lead to questioning of the fact that the profession of the evangelical counsels is an integral part of the Church’s life and a much needed incentive towards greater fidelity to the Gospel. The consecrated life may experience further changes in its historical forms, but there will be no change in the substance of a choice which finds expression in a radical gift of self for love of the Lord Jesus and, in him, of every member of the human family” (VC 3). Among other present day problems mentioned by the exhortation, there is the problem of the decrease in vocations in some countries and an increase in others where there is often a lack of structures and means (cf. VC 2, 3, 64), the probable disappearance of Institutes which have in the past contributed to the life of the Church (cf. VC 63), the considerable number of older members in some areas (cf. VC 44), the need for the reorganization of works and the making of choices to answer the needs of today’s world (cf. VC 63,

73, 81, 87). All these phenomena should not be a cause of discouragement but an incentive to greater creativity and renewal.

Creative fidelity to the founding charism

In recent years the theological category *charism* is used to point out the peculiarities and identity of the different forms of consecrated life (cf. VC 32, 36, 37, 48). The term specifies the sum of the aspects which distinguish a particular “family of consecrated persons”, such as their spirituality, their fraternal life, their missionary contribution, etc. Sometimes reference is made to the identity of an Institute (cf. VC 48, 52), its particular nature (VC 45), its special spirit (cf. VC 48). It can be shared with the laity (cf. VC 54-56).

The members of an Institute must be faithful to their own charism which is a gift transmitted for the good of the Church. *“In the first place there is need for fidelity to the founding charism and subsequent spiritual heritage of each Institute. It is precisely in this fidelity to the inspiration of the founders and foundresses, an inspiration which is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit, that the essential elements of the consecrated life can be more readily discerned and more fervently put into practice”* (VC 36). *“Institutes of consecrated life are thus invited courageously to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the times emerging in today’s world. This invitation is first of all a call to perseverance on the path of holiness in the midst of the material and spiritual difficulties of daily life. But it is also a call to pursue competence in personal work and to develop a dynamic fidelity to their mission, adapting forms, if need be, to new situations and different needs, in complete openness to God’s inspiration and to the Church’s discernment. But all must be fully convinced that the quest for ever greater*

conformity to the Lord is the guarantee of any renewal which seeks to remain faithful to an Institute's original inspiration" (VC 37).

This creative fidelity must be preserved by the Institute, but it must also be promoted by the individual members in the various phases of their lives (cf. VC 70), thus ensuring the growth of the different dimensions of their existence, including the charismatic dimension. *"Finally, all these elements are united in the dimension of the charism of the Institute, as it were in a synthesis which calls for a constant deepening of one's own special consecration in all its aspects, not only apostolic but also ascetical and mystical. This means that each member should study diligently the spirit, history and mission of the Institute to which he or she belongs, in order to advance the personal and communal assimilation of its charism" (VC 71).*

Part II: CONVERGENCE OF OBLATE TRADITION

A reading of the Apostolic Exhortation brings to mind many of the basic values of our Oblate charism. The post-synodal document confirms them and gives a more in-depth presentation of them. I shall point out some of them, beginning with the experience of the Founder, then some passages from the document and references to the *Constitutions and Rules* so as to promote a deeper study of the various themes.

The following of Christ (sequela Christi)

The experience of Christ, Saviour and Evangelizer, was the light and moving force in the life of Eugene de Mazenod. His spirituality and missiology are, above all else, Christ

centered. Becoming other Jesus Christs, cooperators with the Saviour, teaching who Christ is: these are the convictions and commands transmitted by him to the Oblates. The different aspects of the de Mazenod charism can only be understood and lived in the context of an impassioned personal love for Christ.

The exhortation develops a number of these aspects and is therefore an inspiration for us. In a trinitarian perspective, the following of Christ becomes even more obvious. The image of the transfigured Jesus illumines the nature and requirements of consecrated life (cf. VC 14-16, 23-28, 29, 35, 40). Christ is the model and foundation of consecrated life (cf. VC 9, 22, 25, 77; CC 12, 19, 24), because he was the first to live this sort of life, and he entrusted it to those whom he has chosen (cf. VC 111), so that they would ensure that it would be perennially visible (cf. VC 109). *“His way of living in chastity, poverty and obedience appears as the most radical way of living the Gospel on this earth, a way which may be called divine, because it was embraced by him, God and man, as the expression of his relationship as the only begotten Son with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. This is why Christian tradition has always spoken of the objective superiority of the consecrated life”* (VC 18). The principal scope of the evangelical counsels is to make the person more like Christ. *“By allowing ourselves to be guided by the Spirit on an endless journey of purification, they become day by day, conformed to Christ, the prolongation in history of a special presence of the Risen Lord”* (VC 19).

Following Christ entails total involvement *“living at his side and following him wherever he goes... becoming one with him, taking on his mind and his way of life”* (VC 18; cf. CC 2, 4, 31). It entails *“loving with the heart of Christ”* (VC 75; cf. R. 12). In following Christ and in his mission we are cooperators with him (cf. 25, 36, 72; cf. CC 1, 2 33, 63). We must, therefore, be formed in Christ (cf. VC 93, 95; cf. CC 2,

4) and reflect his image (cf. VC 9), so that we will be a sign of Christ to the world, a living reminder of his way of existing and acting (cf. VC 22, 25; CC 15, 37). “*You can and must say that you not only belong to Christ but that you have become Christ*” (VC 109). This seems to echo what the Founder wrote in the first Rule, that the first aim of our life is to become other Jesus Christs.

Evangelization

The proclamation of the Good News is at the very core of our missionary activity, both in the form of re-evangelizing Christians who have been abandoned and in first evangelization. The Oblates were founded for the re-evangelization of Christian communities in southern France; their rapid expansion and the development of their charisma was occasioned by their opening up to the mission *ad gentes*. According to Saint Eugene, faith was transmitted by proclamation, and the community is built up through evangelization.

The document *Vita Consecrata* invites everyone in the consecrated life to work for first evangelization, that is, for the proclamation of Christ to the people in every corner of the earth (cf. VC 77-78; C 5) and for the new evangelization of those who already know Christ (cf. VC 81), emphasizing that “*the proclamation of Christ has permanent priority in the mission of the Church*” (VC 79; cf. 7). This requires daring and creative fidelity (cf. VC 73, 81; C 8). The document also points out the new requirements of inculturation (cf. VC 88, 98; CC 7, 104), ecumenism and dialogue (cf. VC 100-104; C 6) and the new *areopaghi* to be evangelized (cf. VC 73, 81, 87-92).

Our missionary influence, however, is not to be reduced to apostolic action, however urgent and necessary, which must be continually evaluated and reanimated. “*Men and*

women religious will be all the more committed to the apostolate the more personal their dedication to the Lord Jesus is, the more fraternal their community life and the more ardent their involvement in the Institute's specific mission."

The poor are being evangelized

Predilection for the poor was characteristic of the zeal and the missionary activity of Saint Eugene. While his apostolate was not confined to one social class and his priority was always for the proclamation of the word, the poor were his priority and they were the most abandoned souls. He was ready to receive them, to listen to them, to seek them out and to serve them as their pastor.

The exhortation emphasizes the choice of the poor which should be typical of those in the consecrated life. *"The option for the poor is inherent in the very structure of love lived in Christ"* (cf. VC 82; CC. 5, 8-9). Evangelical poverty *"will be accompanied by a preferential love for the poor and will be shown especially by sharing the conditions of life of the most neglected"* (VC 90; CC. 20-21). The promotion of justice is a consequence of this evangelical love. *"Among the possible works of charity, certainly the one which in a special way shows the world this love 'to the end' is the fervent proclamation of Jesus Christ to those who do not yet know him, to those who have forgotten him, and to the poor in a preferential way"* (VC 75; C5).

Community life

Living together as brothers, as an effective and credible means of accomplishing their mission of evangelization, was one of the orientations firmly chosen by Saint Eugene from the first beginnings of the foundation and throughout his life

as Superior General. Community life means mutual support in the practice of holiness and living as brothers in a family. It is a preparation for the apostolate and witness to living the Gospel. Regularity and, even more so, charity are characteristic of this life. It is modeled on the life of Jesus with the Apostles and on that of the first Christian community.

We find these models and ideals of community life in the post-synodal exhortation (cf. VC 41-42; 45; C 3). The document also adds the trinitarian and ecclesial dimension. *“So too, among his disciples, there can be no true unity without that unconditional mutual love which demands a readiness to serve others generously, a willingness to welcome them as they are, without judging them, and an ability to forgive up to seventy times seven. Consecrated persons who become of one heart and one soul, through the love poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit, experience an interior call to share everything in common: material goods and spiritual experiences, talents and inspirations, apostolic ideals and charitable service”* (VC 42; cf. CC 3, 3, 39, 40).

Witness and joy should be characteristic of communities (VC 45; C 41), which are apostolic for themselves and not only because of the mission they accomplish (cf. VC 72; C 37). *“Fraternal life, understood as a life shared in love, is an eloquent sign of ecclesial communion”* (VC 42), *“a place in which to experience the hidden presence of the Risen Lord”* (ib; cf. C 3). *“Placed as they are within the world’s different societies — societies frequently marked by conflicting passions and interests, seeking unity but uncertain about the ways to attain it — communities of consecrated life, where persons of different languages, ages and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, are signs that dialogue is always possible and that communion can bring differences into harmony”* (VC 51; cf. WAC 5-7).

The call to holiness

The Good Friday conversion was, for Eugene, a firm resolve to become a saint, rather than a moral change in his life. Commitment to sanctity was characteristic of his whole life and was the invitation he issued to his companions. "Be holy" was a constant exhortation he addressed to his Oblates. He saw the religious vows as a commitment and a help in the pursuit of this end, a means of identifying with Christ.

The exhortation *Vita Consecrata* frequently repeats and emphasizes this duty-call. Holiness is the great challenge of our day for those leading the consecrated life; it is the major prophetic witness of our time (cf. VC 84-95). "The Church has always seen in the profession of the evangelical counsels a special path to holiness" (VC 35). The profession and practice of the evangelical counsels are a concrete path to holiness (cf. VC 20-22, 35, 87-93; CC 11-29). They are also the source of evangelical witness and prophetism (cf. VC 25, 76, 84-94; CC 15, 16, 21, 25). Fidelity to our charism and to our Founder "*is a call to perseverance on the path of holiness in the midst of the material and spiritual difficulties of daily life*" (VC 37) The path to holiness requires total dedication even to the point of martyrdom (cf. VC 24, 38, 86; Preface CC & RR).

Christian holiness is a gradual conforming to Christ (cf. VC 22, 35-38, 72, 76, 77; CC 2, 4). "*To tend towards holiness, this is in summary the programme of every consecrated life, particularly in the perspective of its renewal on the threshold of the Third Millennium. The starting point of such a programme lies in leaving everything behind for the sake of Christ, preferring him above all things, in order to share fully his Paschal mystery (...) Apostolic fruitfulness, generosity in love of the poor, and the ability to attract vocations among the younger generation depend on this priority and its growth in personal and communal commitment. It is precisely the spiritual quality of the consecrated life which can inspire the men and women*

of our day who themselves are thirsting for absolute values. In this way the consecrated life will become an attractive witness” (VC 93).

Consecrated people must not only commit themselves to becoming holy; they must promote holiness among all Christians. This is part of their role in the Church. *“Today a renewed commitment to holiness by consecrated persons is more necessary than ever, also as a means for promoting and supporting every Christian’s desire for perfection (...) Consecrated persons, at the deepest level of their being are caught up in the dynamism of the Church’s life, which is thirsty for the divine Absolute and called to holiness. It is to this holiness that they bear witness. The fact that all are called to become saints cannot fail to inspire more and more those who by their very choice of life have the mission of reminding others of that call” (VC 39; cf. 103).* This is what is being increasingly asked of us by the laity, especially those who wish to be associated with our charism (cf. VC 54-56; RR 27-28). The spiritual life must therefore have first place in the programme of Families of consecrated life, in such a way that every Institute and community will be a school of evangelical spirituality (VC 93).

Unity of life

Unity of life is an expression of growth and maturity in Christ. During the first years of his ministry, Saint Eugene struggled to reach a balance between apostolate and prayer. We too must make a constant effort to grow in harmony, which we can realize in our union with Christ.

On the subject of apostolic religious life the Exhortation states: *“In every age, consecrated men and women must continue to be images of Christ the Lord, fostering through prayer a profound communion with him, so that their whole lives may be penetrated by an apostolic spirit and their*

apostolic work with contemplation" (VC 9). Unity of life in Christ is expressed in three ways:

- Above all *"the consecrated life manifests the organic unity of the commandment of love, in the inseparable link between love of God and love of neighbour"* (VC 5; cf. 63, 67, 76-77, 84).

- It is also expressed in unity between action and contemplation:

"Institutes involved in one or other form of the apostolate must foster a solid spirituality of action, seeing God in all things and all things in God (...) Jesus himself gave us the perfect example of how we can link communion with the Father to an intensely active life. Without a constant search for this unity, the danger of an interior breakdown, of confusion and discouragement, lurks always near. Today as yesterday, the close union between contemplation and action will allow the most difficult missions to be undertaken" (VC 74; cf. 9, 36, 75, 82).

- Finally, there must be unity between consecration and mission:

"Those whom God calls to follow Jesus are also consecrated and sent into the world to imitate his example and continue his mission (...) Thus men and women religious will be all the more committed to the apostolate the more personal their dedication to the Lord Jesus is, the more fraternal their community life, and the more ardent their involvement in the Institute's specific mission" (VC 72). Our Constitutions and Rules point out different ways for growing in Christ's friendship and consequently for developing unity in our lives (cf. CC 56, 31-35, 69).

Love for the Church

Saint Eugene had a lively feeling for the Church right from his youth. It was for love of the abandoned Church that

he embraced the priesthood and the ministry of the missions. Right from the beginning of the Institute he presented to his companions the ideal of the Church, the inheritance and spouse of Christ, which cries out for help to remedy the evils that afflict her. *“The sight of these evils has so touched the hearts of certain priests, zealous for the glory of God, men with an ardent love for the Church, that they are willing to give their lives, if need be, for the salvation of souls”* (Preface). Throughout his life the difficulties he had at various times with Church persons or institutions were the occasions for growth in obedience and love for the Church herself, because “it is not possible to separate the Church from Christ”.

The exhortation might well have quoted Saint Eugene on the subject of fidelity to the Church. We could certainly apply to him what the document says in general: *“In Founders and Foundresses we see a constant and lively sense of the Church, which they manifest by their full participation in all aspects of the Church’s life, and in their ready obedience to the Bishops and especially to the Roman Pontiff”* (VC 46). The exhortation recommends adherence of mind and heart to the magisterium (VC 46; C 6), the special link of communion with the successor of Peter in his unifying and universal mission (cf. VC 47; C 27), a coordinated and active integration in the particular Church which is promoted by constant dialogue (cf. VC 49-50, 74; CC 6, 12).

In a Church which is *“essentially a mystery of communion”* (VC 41) *“fraternal life, understood as a sharing in love, is an eloquent sign of ecclesial communion”* (VC 42; C 12). *“Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to practice the spirituality of communion as witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God’s design. The sense of ecclesial communion, developing into a spirituality of communion, promotes a way of thinking, speaking and acting which enables the Church to grow in depth and extension”* (VC 46).

Consecrated life grows in the Church and contributes to her life and her mission in creative fidelity to the charism received from the Spirit” (cf. VC 29-33, 35-39). The specific contribution of each Institute to the Church is its faithful and creative living of its charism which each local church must respect and foster (cf. VC 3, 48-49; CC 5-7).

Charity is the pivot of our life

The naturally extrovert character of Eugene was the foundation on which grace developed an ardent love of the Lord, charity towards his religious confreres and an enterprising zeal for souls in need. He passed on this inheritance to the Oblates as his family. It is obvious from his final testament: charity among yourselves and zeal for souls outside.

Charity is the expression of sharing in the life of the Trinity. Consecrated life is a response to the love of God (cf. VC 17). *“It is the Spirit who awakens the desire to respond fully; it is he who guides the growth of this desire, helping it to mature into a positive response and sustaining it as it is faithfully translated into action; it is he who shapes and moulds the hearts of those who are called, configuring them to Christ, the chaste, the poor and the obedient One, and prompting them to make his mission their own”* (VC 19; C 12). The evangelical counsels are a reflection of the life of the Trinity which is love (cf. VC 21). *“The consecrated life reflects the splendour of this love, because by its fidelity to the mystery of the Cross, it confesses that it believes and lives by the love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”* (VC 24; cf. CC 12, 14-16, 21, 24, 29).

Charity finds its concrete expression in fraternal life, of which the source is the communion of the Trinity (cf. VC 41) and the model is Christ who gave himself even unto the supreme sacrifice of the Cross. *“So too, among his disciples,*

there can be no true unity without that unconditional mutual love” (VC 42). “If the Church is to reveal her true face to day’s world, she urgently needs such fraternal communities, which, by their very existence, contribute to the new evangelization, inasmuch as they disclose in a concrete way the fruitfulness of the new commandment” (VC 45; cf. 85, WAC 14-18).

Consecrated life is the manifestation (epiphany) of God’s love in the world. The mission is the fruit of charity. It is possible only if one loves with the heart of Christ. *“He continually calls new disciples to himself, both men and women, to communicate to them, by an outpouring of the Spirit, the divine agape, his way of loving, and to urge them thus to serve others in the humble gift of themselves, far from all self-interest” (VC 75). “In the work of salvation, in fact, everything comes from sharing in the divine agape (...) The consecrated life eloquently shows that the more one lives in Christ, the better one can serve him in others, going even to the furthest missionary outposts and facing the greatest dangers” (VC 76; cf. C 37).*

Means of growth

Eugene de Mazenod was a practical man and he used concrete means to live his Christian, religious and priestly commitment. He centered his life on Christ. Throughout his whole life he was always faithful to meditating the Word of God. The Eucharist, as a liturgical sacrifice and as a real presence was the center of his prayer and of his communion with his missionaries. He sought union with God in his meetings and in his apostolate. He passed on his convictions and his experience to his Oblates by writing them into the Rule.

The post-synodal Exhortation reminds us of the importance of traditional means in Christian and religious life. *“The Word of God is the first source of all Christian spirituality. It gives rise to a personal relationship with the living God and*

with his saving and sanctifying will" (VC 94; cf. CC 31, 33). *Lectio divina* is recommended; it is required by today's mission. *"If the great challenges which modern history poses to the new evangelization are to be faced successfully, what is needed above all is a consecrated life which is continually open to the challenge by the revealed Word and by the signs of the times"* (VC 81).

Personal and community prayer have their climax in the liturgy which unites the person with the Lord and with the Church. *"An indispensable means of effectively sustaining communion with Christ is assuredly the Sacred Liturgy and especially the celebration of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours"* (VC 95; cf. 38, 42). The same paragraphs emphasize the importance of the sacrament of reconciliation, spiritual direction, the Rosary, as do also our *Constitutions* (cf. CC 33, 36, 40). Personal discipline is also necessary (cf. VC 38; C 4) and a community rhythm of prayer (cf. VC 42; C 38).

The Exhortation recalls that the *Constitutions and Rules* are among the means of renewal because they *"provide a map for the whole journey of discipleship, in accordance with a specific charism confirmed by the Church. A greater regard for the Rule will not fail to offer consecrated persons a reliable criterion in their search for the appropriate forms of witness which is capable of responding to the needs of the times without departing from an Institute's initial inspiration"* (VC 37).

Mary

Devotion to Mary has always been part of the life and apostolate of Saint Eugene and of the Congregation. Mary has confirmed and sustained them on their journey especially in the more important and delicate moments of their history. She is the companion, patroness, Mother and model of the Missionary Oblates and they are consecrated to God through Mary and with her as their model.

The Exhortation makes frequent mention of Mary. The Virgin Mary is the model of consecration and of the following of Christ. She received him and her merciful motherhood is fruitful (cf. VC 18, 23, 28, 34; CC 10, 13, 36, 46). *“It cannot be denied that the practice of the evangelical counsels is also a particularly profound and fruitful way of sharing in Christ’s mission, in imitation of the example of Mary of Nazareth, the first disciple, who willingly put herself at the service of God’s plan by a total gift of self”* (VC 18; cf. C 10). The Exhortation concludes with an invocation to the Virgin Mary (cf. VC 112).

Indispensable formation

Saint Eugene prepared the future of the Congregation by being concerned for vocations and for their formation from the first months of the foundation. Ongoing formation was ensured by the rhythm of life, by community exercises, by theological and pastoral conferences and by the fraternal atmosphere of life lived more intensely in the intervals of the apostolate.

In the apostolic Exhortation, certain points are mentioned which are particularly meaningful with regard to the following of Christ and assimilation with him (cf. VC 64-65; CC 4, 15, 19, 24), to the intrinsic missionary dimension of consecration, to an evangelically critical awareness of the values and counter-values of culture (cf. VC 67; R 37), to the formation of formators who must make themselves experts in the path that leads to God (cf. VC 66).

Special emphasis is given to ongoing formation, because “commitment to formation never ends, (...) it is an intrinsic requirement of religious consecration” (VC 65, 69; CC 68-70). Guidelines are provided for its different stages and dimensions (cf. VC 70-71).

Capable of responding to the challenges of today

The founder was able to discern the needs of the Church in his time and his response was courageous. He responded by parish missions and later by sending missionaries abroad, adapting methods creatively to circumstances. For the Oblates, responding to urgent needs has always been characteristic of their missionary approach and the source of fruitfulness in their apostolate.

Today there are new problems and new challenges. We must be faithful to our charism and respond creatively to the signs of the times, to the new areopaghi of the mission (cf. VC 73, 81; C 8). *“The Spirit is calling consecrated men and women to present new answers to the new problems of today’s world. These are divine pleas which only souls accustomed to following God’s will in everything can assimilate faithfully and then translate courageously into choices which are consistent with the original charism and which correspond to the demands of the concrete historical situation”* (VC 73b).

Some responses are perennially valid such as first and new evangelization which are a part of our original foundational charism. We must find the means of adapting them to persons and cultures. Others are newer, such as inculturation (cf. VC 78-80, 98; CC 7, 104), dialogue (cf. VC 100-104), involvement of the laity in the life of the Church (cf. VC 56). *“The new evangelization, like that of all time, will be effective if it proclaims from the rooftops what it has first lived in intimacy with the Lord. It calls for strong personalities, inspired by saintly fervor”* (VC 81).

With the support of the Church, we can afford to look to the future of the consecrated life with confidence and commitment. *“Not only do you have a glorious history to remember and narrate, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look towards the future into which the Spirit is sending you to do even greater things”*. Therefore we are

called upon to be creatively faithful, in order to respond to the challenges of our time and to be an understandable and challenging sign to people of today.

II
TEXTS ON FORMATION

XI

MISSIONARY CHALLENGES IN OBLATE FORMATION

Our mission is within the context of a living charism, a charism which grows with the experience of the Church and its increasing self-awareness. Its roots are not only a source of inspiration but also point to objectives which are clear (1).

Mission for the Founder

At the beginning, mission for the Founder meant the evangelization of the poor in the countryside and in the poorer areas of the city. The objective of this mission was to “re-Christianize the working class people”, “the return of the masses to the Church”. In today’s terminology we would speak of second evangelization.

In his study on the concept of evangelization, Fr. Gilbert concludes: “For Eugene de Mazenod as Founder – as Bishop his thinking was to assume the full dimension of the mission – the evangelization of France consisted in making Jesus Christ known and in spreading his Kingdom in souls by means of missions and retreats among the poor and most abandoned of the people, by using a style of preaching that was both simple and adapted. In the same spirit, special attention was to be given to young people, to prisoners, to immigrants and to other marginal and underprivileged groups. Finally, in order to consolidate this work of evangelization, the apostolate to the clergy was to be added and even the direction of Major Seminaries. If we are to be faithful to the Founder, we must, for love of Jesus Christ and his Church, try every means to

reach those most abandoned, that is, those least touched by the ordinary Church structures, so that we may bring them the Word of God and salvation in Jesus Christ.” (2)

Twenty-five years later the Oblate commitment was not only to change its geographical horizons but also to take on a new objective “*the evangelization of non-Christians*” with emphasis on first evangelization. The priority given to the evangelization of non-Christians in these countries is obvious in the Founder’s writings (3). We find in this new commitment a deeper dimension of the Oblate charism: “*they have not gone there merely to re-Christianize but to continue directly the mission of Christ who came to evangelize and to save all men and to awaken the divine life in every creature*” (4).

We have here two objectives of the same missionary charism, as the Founder was to state towards the end of his life: “*It seems to me that each one of them (the Oblates) is an apostle called through a special choice of God’s mercy, like those whom Our Lord chose during his time on earth, to announce the good news of salvation in every place; in Europe to awaken sinners who have never understood or have forgotten that they are Christians, in places far away to proclaim Jesus Christ and make him known and to open the gates of heaven to so many peoples who would never have known or loved God had it not been for our members*” (5).

The consensus reached in the 1982 Congress on evangelization provides a synthesis which is historically reliable (6). The Founder had well-defined missionary priorities which were not exclusive and took account of the concrete opportunities and limitations, as well as the capacity of persons and the needs of the Congregation.

The Founder expresses the objectives of evangelization as a trilogy: conversion or the salvation of persons, the good of the Church or the extension of Christ’s Kingdom, the glory of God.

The first Oblates accepted the Founder's outlook and tried to achieve the objectives he proposed according to circumstances and possibilities (7).

This twofold priority of first and second evangelization has been enriched according to needs and according to ecclesial awareness with regard to mission. Compared with the missionary outlook of the Founder, some of today's needs are completely new such as interreligious dialogue, while others, such as inculturation, the role of the laity, commitment to justice, are seen in a different perspective (8).

The Objectives and priorities of the mission are clearly expressed in the new Constitutions and Rules: (cf. CC 5, 7), which integrate the new dimensions such as dialogue (CC 6, 8; R 8), commitment to justice (cf. C 9; RR 8, 9, 144), inculturation (cf. CC 7, 104; RR 8, 29, 32, 37, 59, 70), the formation and involvement of the laity (cf. RR 6, 13, 27, 28) (9).

The new Constitutions also emphasize the poor as those to whom the Oblate mission is specially addressed (cf. CC 5, 8, 45, 73 etc.), the nature and final aims of evangelization: to make Christ and his mission known (cf. CC 5, 7, 9). This is within the framework of authentic Oblate tradition (10).

In keeping with the sources of our tradition and also with the calls of today's world, the 1986 Chapter points out the challenges to be faced if we are to be missionaries in today's world and genuine evangelizers. The Chapter not only points out the situation of those to whom our mission is addressed (poor, secularized world, a diversity of cultures), but also the relationship with those involved in the work of evangelization itself (laity, the Church, apostolic communities).

A new understanding of mission

The many and rapid changes in the world provide a new call to mission. The emerging awareness of the Church

concerning her life and her role in the world opens new horizons for the mission.

The objectives of mission have a wider scope. The Church must invite people to be converted and build Christian communities, but she must also aim to have all men enter the Kingdom of God and walk in its paths as from this moment. The Church has a salvific role with regard to those who do not belong to her ranks or who will never enter her fold and she must fulfil this role in her activity and in her very being (cf. RM 18 – 20).

Mission is carried on in a multiplicity of ways which are naturally complementary, but which are sometimes selective because of historical circumstances. The worship of God, the service of charity, witness and explicit proclamation, respectful and growing dialogue, the promotion of justice and of Gospel values, are some of the facets of mission itself. Priority must be given to proclamation, and all ecclesial activity tends to that end (cf. RM 41 – 60).

The organizers and those responsible for the mission have increased in number and become more diverse. The local churches are all agents of the mission, both in their own surroundings and on a universal level. Special vocations explicitate and emphasize the missionary vocation of all, both in their countries of origin and in their new countries. The laity themselves are being sent into the vineyard both for personal service, to serve society and to announce the Gospel in missionary communion (cf RM 61 – 74).

The mission arena is everywhere. Missionary activity is necessary among those peoples where the Church has not yet been planted or where the Church is insufficiently developed. Today, however, the mission field has been extended because of migration which has brought considerable numbers of people into countries which are traditionally Christian. It has been extended also because of the means of communication, because of special meeting

places such as universities or international institutions. I am convinced that the arena of missionary activity among Moslems could be successful in the West rather than their Arab habitat, provided our local churches have the necessary missionary dynamism and are fully aware of the international conditions and influences involved (cf. RM 31 – 40).

Mission is new because of the methods to be used. It must be carried on with respect for persons and cultures, in dialogue and understanding and in promoting what are genuine values, in giving witness which is rooted in one's own identity. Today mission is the result of osmosis from all Christians rather than the work of a few specialists even though the latter continue to be necessary (cf. RM 42 – 43; 55 – 56).

The newness of today's mission is rooted in the awareness that the risen Christ, through the Spirit, continues his salvific mission in the world and he associates the Church with that mission. The mission has its stages and its special moments which the Church must discern and in which the Church must cooperate generously (cf. RM 4 – 30).

Mission is a call to Christians and to communities not only to be available and generous but also to be holy so that they may recognize the expression of God's salvific love for the whole of humanity and help to make it known (cf. RM 77, 87 – 92).

The newness of mission, of which I have developed a few aspects, requires adaptation to different circumstances (MR 17 – 18) and fidelity to one's specific charism (cf. RM 77; 87 – 92). All the "*orders or states*" of the People of God have proper characteristics which are manifested in their way of living the Christian vocation and the mission which are proper to them. Each religious Congregation has its own charism which complements the others (cf. MR 10 – 11). Therefore all are not expected to do the same thing within the local church, but each must contribute according to its

proper charism. The Oblate charism is that among all forms of ministry preference must be given to the proclamation of the Good News.

The new areopagi of the mission

St. Paul, in his missionary apostolate, found new methods and challenges among the Greeks. The Areopagus where he spoke to them of the Good News is the symbol of the new ways and challenges which the mission must confront today (cf. RM 37 – 38).

Mission is always carried on in the concrete milieu of history and local conditions. As the scene of mission today I would like to point out seven special areas. The aim of mission is always the Kingdom of God expressed both eschatologically and temporally and the Church is the sign and sacrament of the Kingdom. Mission activity par excellence is always the proclamation of the Good News which is Christ. In the world of today, however, this aim and this activity pass through special media. I shall mention seven of them: dialogue, inculturation, human promotion, the “global village”, witness, charity, spirituality.

We live in a pluralist world, in touch with other Churches and other religions. Society is animated by humanist and secularized cultures. In this context dialogue is the way to be missionary. Dialogue is both an overall attitude and a specific activity. It expresses respect for and movement towards persons and groups. It is the promotion of authentic values and therefore is a path to salvation. It is mutual availability and growth. It presupposes and promotes one's own identity. Normally, it is a channel through which witness of one's own faith passes: It means mutual availability and growth together. It presupposes and fosters self-identity. It is in this context that witnessing to one's own faith normally comes into play. Thus dialogue is not separate from

evangelization and must not be excluded. In some places it is the only form of ecclesial presence possible. For the Christian it flows naturally from the Gospel and grows in a personal relationship with Christ (cf. RM 55 – 57).

The Church, of its nature, is a sacrament, that is, a sign of salvation, of the love of God for humanity, of the unity of humanity with God. Inculturation is a universal requirement of mission because it not only fosters facility of communication but makes the ecclesial community itself a sign and an instrument of salvation and consequently a challenging reality.

It can have different meanings in different cultural contexts. In religious cultures, especially in Asia and among the ordinary people, it should be an incarnation of the religious values themselves. It should answer both local and universal challenges which are often themselves changeable. It must take account of the past, be open to the future and rooted in what is essential (cf. RM 52 – 54).

The modern world is suffering from injustices, both new and old, from deep-seated socio-economic differences, from numerous attacks on human rights. The Church should be the leaven for the transformation which must be brought about. Human promotion is a service to humanity, an incarnation of Gospel values and a path to evangelization. Overcoming human conditionings, whether they be personal, local or international, requires not only prophetic condemnation but also a conversion of heart and the transformation of cultural values and social structures, all of which flows from a relationship with Christ (cf. RM 58 – 60).

Being in touch with the world as a form of exchange on a planetary level is one of the new areopagi of the mission. Persons can be contacted, and not only through modern techniques and means of social communication, even when national borders are closed to missionaries. International institutions, places of study and meeting places, forms of

mutual service, permanent or temporary migration, are all new milieux for the mission. The future of the Church among these peoples may well depend on such forms of contact (cf. RM 37, 82).

A sense of the maturity of peoples and persons, esteem for their values, the possibility of personal choice, are all elements of interpersonal contact and witness. Interpersonal witness is a means of breaking down barriers and reaching out to people. This must become a dimension of the Christian presence so that the Gospel seeps in by osmosis. Although, in the primitive Church, there were people sent out, the Gospel spread mainly by osmosis. This form of witness is effective only if rooted in personal conviction (Christian identity) and in fraternal charity (RM 26, 42).

Charity is a basic "social sacrament" of the mission, just as Christ is the "primordial sacrament" in the life of the Church. It is the theological and anthropological attitude which should animate every activity and every relationship. Its concrete forms in the world today are hospitality and human promotion which are practicable everywhere and have widespred effects (cf. RM 60).

Spirituality is a new areopagus for proclaiming the Gospel. This is true not only of Asia where it is the primary criterion in the evaluation of any religion, but also in the West and in Latin America where many are in search of movements and teachers to help them in their interior growth. The increase in the number of movements which are other than Christian is an indication of this trend (cf. RM 38, 87-91).

A formation to meet the new challenges

The Christian mission is being carried on everywhere. It should and can be accomplished through the cooperation of

all even though there will always be a need for specialized workers. Consequently, missionary formation for all is becoming an urgent need in the Church as is also an adequate formation for animators and specialists in the mission. This kind of formation has requirements which are common to the whole People of God and others which are proper to the different groups.

We must try to discover more clearly the missionary dimension of every Christian vocation. Every Christian is one who is sent out, a witness, a cooperator in the building up of the Church and of the Kingdom. This awareness should increase as one's own Christian identity and social influence develops. In a pluralistic world Christian identity grows in dialogue, in confrontation and in witness.

Every Christian community must discover its missionary dimension both in relation to its own geographical milieu and in relation to other peoples, to the world, to the universal Church. For the community to live Christ means to witness to him and to serve him "outside the walls", that is, outside the circle of those who practice and belong to the community, and even outside of one's immediate milieu.

If these are the major tendencies of mission in the Church, in which our specific sharing in the work must be integrated, what should be the initial formation given to our candidates? If every Christian and every community must be formed for the mission to which all are called to make their own contribution, what type of preparation should we have as Oblates who are called to be specialists in that mission?

Our formation should be based upon some essential objectives, which may not be exclusive to us but which, for us, will have a certain nuance and certain points of emphasis. These are objectives at which we must aim, but they are also milestones along the way by which we must check the formative process. They are ways of being in which every Oblate must grow (11).

The Oblate, an ardent follower of Christ

Oblate formation really begins when the candidate experiences Christ and it reaches a deeper level as the life of the candidate becomes centered on, integrated with and united to Christ in a personal relationship. Unless this personal relationship exists, formation remains skin deep and the formation structure does not have a solid foundation (12).

This is why the principal article on the novitiate (cf. C 56) concerns relationship with Christ and the different ways for achieving it (13). Therefore, the whole of the Constitutions rotate around this relationship with Christ from the first article dealing with the missionary call to that on the following of Christ (cf. CC 1, 4) and all those on the vows and on the life of faith and on community (CC 3, 37, 40), on mission (cf. CC 5, 6, 7, 9), on formation (cf. CC 45 ff.), on the exercise of authority (cf. CC 73, 80).

Oblate life should be Christocentric because it is missionary. There can be no Christian mission without Christ, a Christ who is experienced and witnessed constantly by the missionary (cf. RM 4-11). The mission is a way of being, before being a way of acting. The missionary is a cooperator more than an instrument. Therefore there is a unity between being a disciple and being a missionary (cf. C 1) and the resultant growth is proportional. The new Constitutions emphasize this unity and thus enhance the deeper meaning of religious life.

Every religious charism emphasises a mystery or a ministry of the life of Christ (cf. LG 46). In our charismatic experience Christ is perceived as Saviour and evangelizer (14). The approach is strictly missionary: Saviour for the whole of humanity through his life and ministry. The salvation aspect, for the Founder, stems from his Good Friday experience and is expressed in the outpouring of Christ's blood for us. It is well stated in Article 4 of our

Constitutions. Therefore the experience of Christ and his Cross is an essential testing point in formation and one that is constantly being sent by the Spirit. Christ contemplated as Saviour becomes the perspective from which Eugene, and consequently the Oblate, sees the different realities. *"Through the eyes of our crucified Saviour we see the world which he redeemed with his blood"* (C 4). Oblates are called to be *"cooperators with the Saviour and co-redeemers of the human race"* (Rules 1818).

In keeping with the Founder's experience and also in keeping with the Oblate charism we could also say that Christ is to be imitated as evangelizer. Our special way to collaborate with his work is the evangelization of the poor. Having examined the condition of the Church, the Preface of our Rules seeks a solution by asking: *"What did our Lord Jesus Christ do when he wished to convert the world?"* In reply the Oblate chooses the way of holiness and evangelization. Commenting on the Rules, Eugene says: *"Will we ever have a full understanding of this sublime vocation? To do so it would be necessary to fully understand the excellence of the aim of our Institute. It is unquestionably the most perfect which it is possible to have in this world because the aim of our Institute is the same as that of the Son of God when he came upon earth... He was sent specially to evangelize the poor... and we have been established precisely to work for the conversion of souls, and especially to evangelize the poor"* (15).

We can say, therefore, that the experience on which the Oblate charism is based is Christ seen as Saviour and followed as evangelizer. We share in his mystery as Saviour and in his ministry as evangelizer.

This experience of Christ may be had in different ways just as the ways of his love for us and the ways of human experience are many. In the Constitutions there are suggestions which emphasize the missionary aspect of this experience. For example, experience through the Word of

God, the Eucharist and the liturgy (cf. C 56) has an eminently missionary dimension (cf. C 33). There is also the experience of Christ through humanity, through events (cf. C 56) which we have present in our prayer itself (cf. C 32). Apostolic work is “a personal encounter with the Lord, who through us gives himself to others and through others gives himself to us” (cf. C 31) and also a milieu in which we grow in our “friendship with Christ” (cf. C 56). Community life is another way of experiencing and witnessing to Christ (cf. CC 3, 37). There is a proportion between experience of Christ and the intensity of missionary dynamism (cf. CC 45, 37). Relationship with Christ requires continuous conversion, constant growth, a daily refocusing of our missionary outlook in changing situations and according to the calls we receive. Thus both apostolate and prayer become contemplation and communion with Christ.

This Christocentric and missionary spirituality is important not only in our calling as witnesses in first evangelization but especially in the new areopagi of mission – inculturation, justice, witness, spirituality – where the proclamation of the word must be made spontaneously, simply and, as it were, by osmosis. It will come through in our willingness to receive persons and in our respect for values which are rooted in the Word. It is for this reason that Pope John Paul II writes: “*the true missionary is the saint*” (RM 90).

Relationship with Christ is an introduction into the life of the Trinity. It is the Spirit who causes full knowledge and growth in Christ; “*This same Spirit forms Christ in those who endeavour to follow in the Apostles’ footsteps. As they enter more deeply into the mystery of the Saviour and his Church, he moves them to dedicate themselves to the evangelization of the poor*” (C 45).

There is unity not only between spirituality and formation but also between spirituality and mission. All

three, formation-spirituality-mission, are the gift and work of the Spirit and it is in response to this gift that we give our answer and our cooperation.

The Oblate, a missionary

The Oblate cannot be other than missionary, whatever he may be called to do or be able to do in any moment of his life. He is missionary as an Oblate, that is, by living the specific charism in solidarity with the mission of the Congregation. The characteristics of the Oblate mission are outlined in the Constitutions and the challenges to be met are regularly indicated by Chapters and by Provincial Congresses (16).

Our missionary formation must have certain characteristics which it will be useful to recall:

a) Christocentric: The missionary spirit of the Oblate must come from and be nourished by his love of Christ who so loved his own that he gave his life for them (cf. 1 Jn 4, 10). *“Through the eyes of our crucified Saviour we see the world he redeemed with his blood, desiring that those in whom he continues to suffer will know also the power of his resurrection”* (C 4). The Oblate should not be motivated by ideology or any human outlook but by a faith vision which coincides with that of Christ, by an attitude of love *“which enables him to love others as Jesus loves them”* (R 12).

b) ecclesial: It is also required that he hear *“the call of Jesus Christ within the Church through people’s need for salvation”* (C 1). There must be an ecclesial perception of the needs of salvation (17). The Lord does, in fact, call and send out his Church and us in that Church. The mission does not belong to us; it belongs to Christ and is entrusted to his Church (EN 14). The Oblate mission grows, is accomplished, undergoes changes, within the mission of the Church. Living in communion with the Church’s pastors and

accepting their teaching and their directives are missionary requirements (cf. C 6). This attitude towards the Church, both universal and local, must be fostered in formation. It is this attitude which makes it possible to recognize and “respond to the most urgent needs of the Church” (cf. C 7).

c) universal: The missionary mandate which must be assimilated in the life of the missionary is of its nature universal. The heart of every missionary should be open to the world, he should give his life for the salvation of the world even though his incarnation is among one particular people as was that of Christ. Formation should help the candidate to overcome parochialism and the many cultural, intellectual and psychological barriers with which he is surrounded and which tend to enclose the person within nationalistic boundaries (cf. R 59). Information on an international level, especially concerning the Oblate presence in the world, and intercultural experience during the period of formation can be of considerable help in this sphere. Realizing that there are missionary needs even outside his own culture and his own people is a sign of the authenticity of a vocation. When nobody in a group declares his readiness to go abroad I tend to have doubts about the formation program, just as I would also if nobody declared his readiness to stay in his own country, which is very seldom the case nowadays.

d) kerigmatic: Mission, for the Oblate, is directed to the explicit proclamation of Christ (cf. C 7). Formation must create this availability for evangelization since without it the authenticity of a vocation is doubtful (28), and formation should enable the candidates “to present Christ’s Gospel in such a way that it reaches the hearts of their contemporaries” (R 60). The ability to witness to his faith in community and abroad, helps the candidate grow in his vocation and is a sign of missionary ability. Taking part in the ministry of evangelization, especially in missions among the people,

during formation years, normally arouses the enthusiasm of the young men and confirms them in their vocation (18).

e) to the poor: In our Oblate mission we “*give our preference to the poor with their many faces*” (cf. C 5). The authenticity of our service to them may be verified according to two practical attitudes: our availability to proclaim Christ to them and our ability to adopt a simple lifestyle. Integration in a poor milieu and contact with people who are poor can be of help. Love for them will enable the candidate to understand the requirements of justice and to integrate these requirements in his own missionary activity (19).

f) creative and positive: Being a missionary in today's world requires, finally, that the candidate develop a twofold attitude: creativity and the ability to take advantage of what is positive. In a world of rapid change, in societies imbued with different trends and made up of different groups, he must be able to recognize inherent values whether old or new, in order to link up with them and build upon them. There is also a need for creativity since “*seeking out new ways for the Word of God to reach their hearts often calls for daring*” (CC 8 and 46). The era has passed when it was sufficient to demand conformity which was very often devoid of dynamism. It is time to promote initiative and coresponsibility right from the period of first formation.

The Oblate, an apostolic man

Human and Christian maturity is an indispensable requirement in the Oblate. A missionary must learn to overcome egoism and, while acknowledging his own limitations, he must try to grow in openness to others and develop a sense of responsibility (20).

The purpose of the vows is to create a new being, the man of the Gospel, who reacts almost instinctively like Christ. Our asceticism should be missionary (cf. CC 4, 34, 63).

Considering the challenges which face the mission today, the characteristics of the apostolic man should be:

- the ability to live with the people and to love the poor, but as a consecrated person;

- the ability to adapt and be inculturated while preserving what is essential;

- the ability to dialogue and to appreciate the values and positions of the other person while keeping his own identity;

- the ability to choose what is positive without absolutizing it;

- the ability to live with tension while retaining his calm.

Developing this kind of maturity requires the creation of new interior attitudes rather than providing techniques. Such attitudes are: the ability to listen, to sympathize, to make balanced judgements. Harmony must be developed between the different dimensions of human, Christian and religious life (cf. CSO). Integral development of the personality is the result of a lifetime commitment but it must have reached a sufficient consistency by the end of first formation. The candidate, therefore, must develop self-discipline, be guided by his formators and his community.

The Oblate, a man of communion

A new requirement in the missionary is that he be a man of communion, that he acquire the ability to cooperate in the one mission entrusted to the Church and being accomplished through the sharing of different charisms which are complementary to one another.

The Church is, in fact, charismatic, a body provided with specific and complementary gifts for the mutual building up of its members and the coming of the Kingdom. Relationships are developed and modified in communion (1965 Synod) which flows from charity as was illustrated by the Synod of 1995 and later Synods.

Even religious life is seen by Vatican II as an assembly of distinct and complementary gifts which show the multiform riches of Christ and adorn the face of his Church (AG46).

The 1986 Chapter, points to the mission with the laity as a preferential field of our apostolate and emphasizes that the Oblate must be a man of communion which gives rise to cooperation within the Church and in and through the community.

In the domain of formation there are three points to be insisted upon:

a) the Oblate must acknowledge and respect his own identity as well as that of others. It is not up to him to accomplish all the aspects of the mission when there are corresponding charisms for this task. The pontifical exhortation on the laity, "Christifideles laici", points out what should be the particular contribution of the laity, since they too are fully active participants in the Church's mission team. The same can be said of the different religious and missionary charisms. Renewal in the Congregation depends on respect for our own identity and that of others;

b) this outlook makes it important to develop in the candidates the ability to listen, to exchange, to communicate etc. They must become accustomed to cooperation in work and life. These qualities should be developed in an atmosphere of respect and charity and not one of condescension or manipulation [Communications] (R61);

c) community life should be the exercise ground for communion and not a ghetto of separation. The Oblate is called upon to live community life at different levels: with his confreres, with the local and universal Church, with those who share in the same activity or apostolate, with the parish etc. The Oblate community should be an apprenticeship in mutual communion, an exercise ground for cooperation, an experience of the Church, a sign and model of ecclesial community. Therefore the formation community should be a

family rather than a structure, a sharing rather than a performance.

I think that some missionaries are unable to work with lay people and are unable to animate the ecclesial community because they have never had a genuine community experience.

The Oblate, a man of reflection and study

It would not only be an illusion but a serious mistake to think that the missionary of today does not need a solid formation and an ability to reflect and study. In a complex world of change, the mission needs men with a sound intellectual formation, who are able to select and study the great problems of the day and who are creative in opening up new paths. Good will is not enough. For example, I think that the inculturation process is stagnant because there is a lack of ability to reflect among the mission workers.

As regards the requirements in formation I would emphasize the following.

a) Biblical formation is essential for our task as evangelizers.

b) In theological matters we must be at ease in our relationship with the Magisterium.

c) Every candidate must acquire an ability to choose and study problems, an ability to learn from experience and reflect personally on what he has studied (cf. RR59, 65).

d) Initial preparation should be a solid formation, which provides the basis on which each can complete his study according to the conditions in which he is placed. For example, it is not to be expected that in the first cycle of theology the candidate should acquire a detailed knowledge of the various religions, cultures or missions etc., but it is necessary that he acquire a knowledge of Christology and ecclesiology which will enable him to approach these subjects

later. The danger today is not that the period of study be too prolonged but that it be insufficient.

It would be useful, even necessary, for the Congregation to prepare and to have Oblates specialized in the crucial dimensions of the mission today: the Word of God, communication of the faith, inculturation, dialogue, justice, etc. This specialization could be at different levels, theoretical or practical. The Roman universities provide about twenty subjects for specialization at licentiate level. People could also acquire specialization gradually through personal reflection and study. A more technical form of specialization, however, is to be desired.

On the subject of specialization, there are two criteria which I consider to be very important: it should be in keeping with our mission and should be at the service of the mission. Complementarity in specialization could enrich a Province and the Congregation.

The Oblate, a man of discernment

Discernment has been pointed out as the priority task in formation. Personal discernment is the “ability, acquired through experience, to recognize the movements that come from God in order to choose them, and the movements that come from the world or from the demon in order to reject them”. This is essential for the spiritual growth of the person.

There is also missionary discernment, which is reading the signs of the times, distinguishing between the seed of the Word and the effects of evil. Prophetism requires that this reading be done in faith and discernment (cf. C 9). This discernment can be enriched and made more reliable by the community (cf. C 26), both as regards persons (cf. CC 51, 53, 55), and as regards the mission (cf. CC 72, 81, 105, 111).

Apostolic experience in formation

I have suggested a number of times that missionary and intercultural experience with the poor is important. Today first formation is no longer thought of as separate from the apostolate which is a dimension thereof. This pastoral experience goes along with formation which is devoted mainly to intellectual activity. In these circumstances it is important to establish equilibrium so as not to impoverish study but rather to motivate it and to motivate personal and community evaluation.

More frequently nowadays we find that there is also a longer period of missionary immersion, from a few months to one or two years in a different cultural context. The success of this experiment depends on the preparation of the candidate beforehand and the accompaniment during the period itself. The experiment has proved positive in different cultural contexts and at different periods of the formation process. This experience will not only test the specific vocation of the candidate and prepare him for the apostolate but it should also help him to integrate different elements and give greater unity to his life.

A pilgrimage

In conclusion I quote a pen picture from the Constitutions which I like very much and which gives a good description of the formation process and also of the nature and method of the mission. "*We are pilgrims, walking with Jesus in faith, hope and love*" (C 31).

Formation is a process of personal growth, in which the missionary becomes daily more identified with the person, the mission and the life of Christ. It is walking together with him. We are pilgrims with him and with others — whether Oblates or non Oblates — ours is a theological journey.

The formators are part of the group who travel that path: pilgrims with Jesus and with their younger brothers. Growth is continual.

NOTES

(1) This text was prepared for the European session of formators in 1989 and revised for the international sessions of formators in Rome in 1991. Fernand Jetté, What do I expect of formation? in *The Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate, (Addresses and Written Texts) 1975-1985*, Rome 1985, pp. 215-229;

Jesus Christ the first formator of Oblates, *ibid.* pp. 231-249; Formation according to our Rules, *ibid.* pp. 251-270.

(2) Maurice Gilbert: *Le Fondateur et l'évangélisation en France in Vie Oblate Life*, 42, 1983.

Paul Poupard: *Le Bienheureux Eugène de Mazenod et les premiers missions des missionnaires de Provence, 1816-1823*, in *XIX Siècle-Siècle de grâce*, Paris 1982, pp. 65-98.

Marcello Zago: *Evangellizzazione e missione nel carisma Oblato, Dizionario dei valori Oblati*, Roma 1996.

(3) Giovanni Santolini, *L'évangélisation "ad gentes": la vision et le pratique du Fondateur*, in *Vie Oblate Life*, 42, 1982, pp. 127-139.

(4) Giovanni Santolini, *op. cit.* p. 139.

(5) Letter to Fr. Mouchette, 17.II.1859, *Ecrits oblats*, XII, p. 115.

(6) Summary of the Congress on Evangelization, in *Vie Oblate Life*, 43, 1983, pp. 355-357.

(7) Cf. a number of articles on the response of the Oblates to evangelization and their outlook on mission and how it is put into operation: in France (Yvon Beaudoin); in England (Austin Cooper); in Ceylon (Robrecht Boudens); in Canada (Gaston Carrière et Romuald Boucher); in USA (Bernard Doyon, Clarence Menard); Donat Levasseur: *L'évangélisation et les Supérieurs généraux de la Congrégation*; Joseph Pielorz: *Les Chapitres généraux de 1818 a 1861 et l'évangélisation*; Aloysius Kedl: *Les Oblats et l'évangélisation dans les chapitres généraux de 1867 a 1966*; Francis George: *L'évangélisation et les chapitres généraux de 1972 a 1980*; Marcello Zago: *L'évangélisation chez les Oblats d'aujourd'hui*, in *Vie Oblate Life* 42, 1983, pp. 141-352.

(8) According to the Founder, either the mission among the non Christians would result in their conversion or would have to be abandoned. "If there is no hope of this (their conversion) we shall have to abandon this mission". (Letter to Bishop Allard, 28.X.1859, *Ecrits oblats*, IV, p. 215). The Founder saw the need for adaptation so as to be closer to the people and become one of them, have a knowledge of their language; he also saw the need for certain social consequences of the re-Christianization process, e.g. the restitution of goods for which he established a restitution tribunal; the need also to involve the laity as he did in these tribunals.

(9) Paul Sion: *L'évangélisation dans les différentes éditions de nos Constitutions et Regles*, in *Vie Oblate Life*, 42, 1983, pp. 321-339.

(10) Emilien Lamirande: *Les pauvres et les âmes les plus abandonnés*, in *Etudes Oblates*, 20, 1961, pp. 3-19;

Gaston Carrière: *Les bénéficiaires de notre pensée missionnaire*, in *Etudes Oblates*, 31, 1972, pp. 283-311;

Herménegilde Charbonneau: *Les pauvres et les âmes les plus abandonnés d'après Mgr de Mazenod*, in *Vie Oblate Life*, 36, 1976, pp. 127-133.

(11) General Administration, *General Norms for Oblate Formation*, Rome 1984; Mario Camarda, *La formazione dell'Oblato negli scritti del Beato Eugenio de Mazenod*, Roma, 1982.

(12) Fernand Jetté: *Jesus Christ, the first formator of Oblates*, in *The Missionary O.M.I.*, Rome 1985, pp. 231 - 249. Maurice Gilbert: *La vie spirituelle du Scolastique et la Règle*, in *Etudes Oblates*, 12 (1953), pp. 39-55.

(13) I have commented on this article during the second meeting of Novice Masters. cf. BEF, *Actes de la deuxième rencontre européenne des maîtres de novices OMI/Grottaferrata*, Rome, 1-6 February 1987, pp. 11-18.

(14) There are a number of articles on the salvatorian aspect of the Oblate charism: Emilien Lamirande: *Le sang du Sauveur. Un thème central de la doctrine spirituelle de Mgr de Mazenod*, in *Vie Oblate Life*, 19, 1960, pp. 3-27;

Angelo D'Addio: *Eugène de Mazenod et le Christ*, in *Vie Oblate Life*, 38, 1979, pp. 169-200;

Maurice Gilbert: *Introduction à la spiritualité oblate*, in *Vie Oblate Life*, 43, 1984, pp. 210-230.

(15) *Notes de Retraite*, October 8, 1831, in *Choice of Texts*, n. 9.

(16) Cf. *General Norms on Oblate Formation*, Rome, 1984, chap. I; Martin Quéré, *Monseigneur de Mazenod et le Missionnaire Oblat*, in *Etudes Oblates*, 20 (1961), pp. 237-249; Albert Perbal, *Mgr de*

Mazenod pour le recrutement et la formation des missionnaires in *Euntes Docete*, 13 (1960), pp. 328-357).

(17) Giuseppe Mammana, Eugène de Mazenod et l'Eglise, in *Vie Oblate Life*, , 41, 1982, pp. 3-23, 139-164, 249-276.

(18) The experience of direct proclamation of the Word has made a deep impression on candidates in different cultural milieux such as Paraguay, Argentina, Uruguay, Italy, Germany.

(19) Cf. Gregorio Iriarte: Formación para la Vida Religiosa dentro del contexto latinoamericano, in *Selección de Estudios Oblatos*, Roma, 28 (1989), pp. 3-18, and Raymond Schoenstein Raymond and Vicente Lopez: Hacia un nuevo estilo de formación desde los pobres, *ibid.* pp. 19-48.

(20) Here the reference to the apostolic man is not the same as in the Founder's writings. For him it means the radicality of the following of Christ and zealous cooperation with his mission. Cf. Maurice Gilbert: Sur les traces des Apôtres, in *Etudes Oblates*, 16 (1957), pp. 293-301; Giovanni Santolini, L'Évangélisation "ad Gentes": la vision et la pratique du Fondateur, in *Vie Oblate Life*, 42 (1983), pp. 129-132; Marcello Zago: "L'homme apostolique, Lettre aux Oblats en formation 1991.

(21) Cf. The 1986 Chapter document, *Missionaries in Today's World*, nn. 68-73.

(22) Cf. Fernand Jetté, Jesus the first formator of the Oblate, in *op. cit.* pp. 231-249.

XII

THE AIMS OF THE NOVITIATE

Introduction

The role of Novice Master is very important in the Congregation. It is the Master of Novices who, in fact, must help to provide unity of life and lay the foundations on which the candidates will build their lives as religious. From my own experience, I can see the importance of the novitiate and I think that the same may be said for every Oblate. Opposition, tensions, lack of unity among Oblates can often be traced to the novitiate, as the Founder himself stated.

I wish to dwell on two aspects which I believe are fundamental in our charism and which condition the renewal of the Congregation and the success of the novitiate. These two aspects are: our relationship with Jesus Christ and our community life. They are at the very core of our charism. In our recent General Chapters, there has been a rediscovery of our relationship with Jesus Christ and the importance of community. I shall then conclude with some reflections on Mary and formators.

1. EXPERIENCING CHRIST

In the section of our Constitutions dealing with the novitiate, the most important article is number 56. This text speaks of the friendship with Christ into which each novice must enter and in which he must grow. *"The novice, led by the Spirit and living with him, develops his personal*

relationship to Jesus and gradually enters into the mystery of salvation through liturgy and prayer." In the novitiate, the novices must experience Christ personally and together. Their guide in this experience is the Holy Spirit who is the principal agent in our sanctification and in our mission.

Evidently our whole lives must be lived with this orientation. "*We are pilgrims, walking with Jesus in faith, hope and love*" (C 31). That description sums up the whole Oblate life. We may ask, however, when do we begin to recognize in a special way, our life's companion? The answer is, in the novitiate! Even if we have had other similar experiences beforehand, the novitiate must be really centered on Christ.

Article 56 is a veritable treatise on Oblate spirituality. It should be the guiding light for the whole novitiate program. It points out how we are to experience Christ, how we are to get to know him, how we must learn to walk with him. I shall list ten ways for achieving this end and comment on each one of them.

Prayer

Constitution 56 begins with prayer, which may be community or personal prayer. Prayer is an interpersonal relationship with Christ, or with God through Christ. What is really important during the novitiate is to learn to pray.

There are spontaneous forms of prayer, but there are also forms that may be learned. Let us take, for example, meditation which we must do throughout our lives. Can we learn to meditate? I am aware of this aspect of prayer perhaps because of my experience in the Orient. The Buddhists are very attentive to methods of meditation. However, there are also Christian methods of meditation. There are even schools of prayer: the Sulpician school, the Carmelite school, the Ignatian method etc. The novitiate should be a school of prayer. Later on each one will find his

own method. There are certain elements, however, which cannot be left out in any method, for example the fact that prayer is an interpersonal relationship to Jesus Christ. I refer here to article 33 of the Constitutions: *"In the prolonged silent prayer we make each day, we (the Oblates) let ourselves be moulded by the Lord and find in him the inspiration of our conduct. Following our tradition, we devote an hour each day to mental prayer, part of which is spent together in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament."*

There is a form of prayer which may be called new: its distinguishing feature is sharing, exchange. The Constitutions also mention that communities should share their faith (cf. CC. 38 – 40). If this skill is not learned in the novitiate, it will be difficult to learn it later.

Therefore, the novices must learn to pray in order to recognize Christ, to know him better, to enter into and develop a personal relationship with him and become his companions.

The liturgy

As a second way to encounter Christ, article 56 mentions the liturgy. In our novitiates, the initiation to the liturgy is important. There are various aspects to the liturgy but we must try, above all, to instil its spirit. We must place ourselves in Christ so as to meet with the Father and enter into the life of the Trinity in the name of the whole of humanity. Here again, it is important to grow in friendship with Christ and gradually acquire greater intimacy with him, not only through personal and community prayer but also through the liturgy. As well as the Mass, the liturgical prayer of the divine Office was important for our Founder. According to the primitive Rules, it constituted one of the aims of the Congregation by rendering glory to God and praying for the Church. The present Constitutions state: *"The Liturgy of the Hours is the prayer of the Church, the*

spouse of Christ. In it we praise the Father for his wonderful works and invoke his blessing on our mission. Each community will ordinarily celebrate part of the Hours in common. Where possible, the faithful will be invited to join us in this public prayer of the Church” (C 33c).

The Word of God

Listening to the Word of God is the third way pointed out by Constitution 56 to reach a closer friendship with Christ. *“(The Oblate) becomes accustomed to listen to the Lord in Scripture.”* This is already a form of meditation. We know that the Benedictine school of meditation is based on the reading of the Bible. In Oblate tradition, the daily reading of the Scriptures for fifteen minutes is a pleasant study which is conducive to prayer. It is a contact with God. It is not merely a study of the meaning of the text or of its exegesis, but a way of nourishing our spiritual life, that is of developing a closer friendship with Jesus Christ. Our present Constitutions remind us of this aspect: *“The Word of God nourishes our spiritual life and apostolate. We will not only study it diligently but also develop a listening heart, so that we may come to a deeper knowledge of the Saviour whom we love and wish to reveal to the world. This immersion in God’s Word will enable us to understand better the events of history in the light of faith” (C. 33b).*

In our novitiates there is ordinarily an introduction to the Bible. We should also have an introduction to Lectio divina.

The Eucharist

Constitution 56 also states that we must become accustomed to listening to the Lord in the Scripture and meeting him in the Eucharist. Our Founder made the Eucharist the center of his life and of the life of the Congre-

gation. It was through the Eucharist that he kept in touch with his Oblates throughout the world. Faith in and devotion to the Eucharist are a part of the Oblate charism. That is manifested by simple gestures such as the visit to the Blessed Sacrament before leaving the house, before going on a mission, after meals, but especially in the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice. *"The Eucharist, source and summit of the Church's life, is at the heart of our life and action. We will live such lives as to be able worthily to celebrate it each day. As we participate in its celebration with all our being, we offer ourselves with Jesus the Saviour; we are renewed in the mystery of our cooperation with him, drawing the bonds of our apostolic community ever closer and opening the horizons of our zeal to all the world. In gratitude for this great Eucharistic gift, we will seek the Lord often in his sacramental presence"* (C. 33a).

The Eucharist provides warmth for our meeting with Christ; it helps us to avoid making our prayer an intellectual exercise. It is important that our novices acquire a taste for this personal meeting with Christ in the Eucharist, which for us is a continuation of the Incarnation.

The first four means pointed by Constitution 56 are traditional in the Congregation. Prayer, the liturgy, the Word of God, the Eucharist are ways for entering into friendship with Jesus Christ so that he becomes our companion, the center of our lives.

In human beings

Constitution 56 then points out two aspects which I believe to be important. It says that we must *"recognize (Christ) in other persons and in events."* This is fundamental to missionary spirituality and for the unity of the missionaries' life as well as for missiology. Herein lies the reason for the great change in mission. Interreligious dialogue has its rightful place in the Church and is part of its mission because God is at work in the heart of every human being.

The Church has a role to play with regard to every human being, especially religious persons because religion is the special way in which to experience God. This awareness of the presence of Christ in each person has brought a change, a change in missionary method. We must begin with the human being because God is already at work in the heart of each one. Inculturation, listening to the other is not done merely for anthropological or methodological reasons. It is based on the fact that Christ, through his Spirit, is present in other persons, in other religions, in other cultures. The missionary must try to discover the presence of Christ in persons in order to walk with them and with Christ. Basically, it is a question of being in harmony with Christ in order to collaborate with him. Through the mission we are cooperators with Christ.

This outlook which originates in the Council supports our Founder's conviction that we are cooperators with Christ. Besides, it is also based on Sacred Scripture. It helps us unify our lives and discover the true nature of mission: sharing in Christ's work of salvation.

The most beautiful reflections on the theology of the conscience as the place where God is at work, where God is present, are to be found in *Gaudium et Spes*. This Constitution emphasizes the fact that God is incessantly and continually knocking at the heart of each person, even if that person obstinately refuses him entry. God always comes back again because he loves the person. Therefore the person is never condemned while in this life.

It is also said that every human being is called by God. According to the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, all Christians are part of the Mystical Body and all human beings are called to be members of the Body of Christ. Being called to Christ means that human beings are always on the way, that God can always intervene in them and always work in them.

That is a dimension of missionary spirituality which must not be placed in opposition to the four aspects I

mentioned earlier (prayer, the liturgy, the Word of God, the Eucharist) but which must be integrated with them: God is at work in the hearts of human beings.

We must begin by discovering God in those who are members of our community. This aspect of the Lord's presence in our brothers and in the community is developed in Constitutions 3 and 37.

In the course of my missionary experience, I have often understood what I must do by seeing people in the presence of Christ, especially during the oraison in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. By trying to see again those whom I have met during the day in the presence of the Blessed Eucharist, my relationship with them changes. That is a very simple form of prayer which helps us to see persons in the light of faith. It becomes possible to see them in a new light.

As formators we must have new eyes to see our novices, the people in formation, the community, every human being in a new light. It is possible to develop a sort of sclerosis whereby we continue to see as good those who are no longer good, or to see as bad those who have changed for the better. This new outlook comes from faith; it helps us to see persons as Christ sees them. How does he love people? How does he work in them? How does he love these people? How does he judge them? This is interpersonal charity which makes Christ present. "Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est." Where two or three are not just together, but pray together and have mutual charity, Christ is present. Constitution 56 provides us with a whole pedagogy for our relations with others.

In events

Constitution 56 then asks us to recognize Christ in events. We can sometimes become "ideologized" by a reading of the signs of the times which is not based on faith in Jesus Christ. That can cause tensions even within the Congregation.

It is not easy to see events as Christ sees them, to see them in him. It takes practice. It presupposes the whole problem of discernment, of reading the signs of the times. Discovering Jesus Christ in persons and events are two fundamental aspects of missionary spirituality. Of course, these aspects must be articulated together with the other elements of this spirituality.

In our Founder

The Constitutions also point out three other elements which help the growth of our friendship with Christ: the life and mission of the Founder; the history and traditions of the Congregation, the apostolate.

These are very important points in the organization of the novitiate. How should we present the Founder and the Congregation to the novices?

"(The Oblate) comes to contemplate God at work in the life and mission of the Founder." It is not merely a question of having a good knowledge of the Founder's history, of what caused him to do this or that. We must see the Founder with the eyes of faith. *Mutuae Relationes* speaks of a Founder's charism as the gift of the Spirit to the Church for the growth of the Mystical Body (N. 11; cf. *Lumen Gentium* 44-46). We must try to see how God acts in the charism which we share.

For us the Founder is, in fact, a paradigm, a model. He is the image or model in which we see ourselves, the movement into which we must be integrated. This movement is guided by the Spirit of Christ. That is the only way in which the Founder may be understood because there can be no mission without the Spirit. It is therefore important that we discover Christ in the Founder and in the mission entrusted to us.

Beginning with this outlook, we can rewrite the whole of our spirituality. For example, the Founder's intuition that

“the founder of the Congregation is Jesus Christ” shows us that he became one with him who is the principal agent of the work. His statement that we are “cooperators with Christ” expresses the same intuition. Eugene experienced Christ the Saviour; he contemplated him throughout his life; he saw everything and everybody in him. In his ministry he followed Christ the evangelizer, the model of his apostolate. It is important that the novices learn to understand this truth from within in order to give unity to their lives, to the charism, to their vocation.

In the history of the Congregation

Constitution 56 also points out that we should discover Christ in the history and traditions of the Congregation. Obviously we must not canonize the whole of our history, because we are marked by sin as well as by the grace of God. Shades and faults are not lacking. We must discern so as to find out what is good in our history, what is life-giving. A Congregation, just like the Church, may not cut itself off from its history. That would be to die. Even the Protestant churches are rediscovering history. There is more than just the Bible to be considered; there is a history which bears within it the Word of God.

History is important for us as a Congregation, whether it is the history of a Province or of the Congregation or of a Region. Therefore it is important that the history of the Congregation be transmitted in the novitiate and it is important that it be seen as a movement, a charism which is living, developing and which continues to challenge us today.

Traditions are an expression of life. Obviously, all of tradition is not essential, but neither is it of secondary importance. It is an incarnation at work. Consequently, we ask ourselves how much of that incarnation must remain as it evolves. The novices must be imbued with an attitude of

fidelity to what is essential and valid as well as the creativity to respond to new challenges.

Discovering Christ in the life of the Founder and of the Congregation is a new approach. It is in keeping with the theology of religious life today, a theology which is rooted in Vatican Council II and, even before that, throughout patristic tradition.

In the work of the apostolate

Article 56 concludes with this statement: *“Opportunities for pastoral experience in an Oblate setting help (the candidate) realize the demands of a missionary vocation and the unity of apostolic religious life.”* The apostolate is an opportunity to discover Christ, to grow in friendship with Christ. It is a traditional aspect of the spirituality of the Founder and of the Congregation. In the 1818 Constitutions, the Founder emphasizes that our ministry must be an encounter with Christ. The ministry of confessions, of preaching, are not only a sharing in “his work” but a “being with him.” A fundamental aspect of the apostolate is that the apostle is with Christ and is sent by him without being separated from him. In our lives and mission we walk with Christ.

The pastoral experiences for young Oblates in formation which have been introduced in recent years are opportune, even during the novitiate. These activities should not be merely or mainly with a view to the apostolate, a means of learning working methods, but they should be with a view to creating in the life of the candidate a unity which is rooted in understanding, friendship and companionship with Christ.

This Article 56 is very beautiful. The important element in the novitiate is not to elaborate structures but to learn truly to contemplate God, to become friends of Christ by

different ways and means. The candidates can then continue their formation, whether as scholastics or Brothers. When these foundations are laid they can continue to live the rest of their lives. Seeking out and serving the poor is not the primary aim of our charism. There are others who seek and find them better that we can. Besides, our principal mission to the poor is not to help them solve their social problems, even though charity requires us to do so, but in order to be Jesus Christ in their midst, to show them who Christ is.

We cannot proclaim Christ, however, if we do not live in him, if we are not identified with him as article 2 of our Constitutions says so clearly. The novitiate is really fundamental for the whole of our Oblate life and for the future of the Congregation. We must learn to build unity in our lives starting with Christ. We must become pilgrims who follow Christ. Our whole Oblate religious life will thus become a "sequela Christi" so that we may "be with him" and "be sent by him."

In a community

It would seem that this paragraph 56 of the Constitutions has forgotten an important way to experience Christ, the way of the community, community life. For this we must look elsewhere in the Constitutions. Evidently what is said about finding Christ in every human being must apply first of all to our brothers in community. Community life is a special realization of the presence of Christ. *"The call and the presence of the Lord among us today bind us together in charity and obedience to create anew in our own lives the Apostles' unity with him and their common mission in his Spirit"* (C. 3). *"By growing in unity of heart and mind, we bear witness before the world that Jesus lives in our midst and unites us in order to send us out to proclaim God's reign"* (C. 37). Not only does community life introduce us to Christ by

sharing and example, but it makes him present and active for growth of the members and for their pastoral activity. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18, 20).

Unity of missionary life

This article 56 may be illustrated by two other articles of the Constitutions:

"We achieve unity in our life only in and through Jesus Christ. Our ministry involves us in a variety of tasks, yet each act in life is an occasion for personal encounter with the Lord, who through us gives himself to others and through others gives himself to us. While maintaining within ourselves an atmosphere of silence and inner peace, we seek his presence in the hearts of the people and in the events of daily life as well as in the word of God, in the sacraments and in prayer. We are pilgrims walking with Jesus in faith, hope and love" (C. 31).

"It is as missionaries that we worship, in the various ways the Spirit suggests to us. We come to him bearing with us the daily pressures of our anxiety for those to whom he sends us. Our life in all its dimensions is a prayer that, in us and through us, God's Kingdom come" (C. 32).

2. COMMUNITY LIFE AND THE NOVICE MASTER

The second aspect to which I wish to draw your attention is community life. Rule 41, which also deals with the novitiate, seems to me to be very important. It says that in the novitiate, the novices learn about community life with its joys and tensions, its spirit of charity and mutual support. Community life should help the novices to become integrated and to integrate the different aspects of life as well as to initiate them into the self-denial which is part of

religious apostolic life. It helps to overcome difficulties and tensions.

This article 41 of the Rules is very revealing and should be read together with what is said about community life in Constitutions 37 and those following. It is easy to see why the novitiate "ad personam" is a problem because there is no community. I am not speaking of an Oblate community but a community which is particular to the novitiate. I shall not dwell on this point: I shall leave it for you think about, judging from your experience.

I merely wish to make three remarks which concern mostly the Novice Master in his relations with the community.

a) The Novice Master must himself be a community man, not merely a guide. The difficulty for the Novice Master is that often, he is a member of two communities: an Oblate community and the novitiate community. These are two dimensions for the Master of Novices since he must show that he belongs to both these groups. He must be truly a community man in the Oblate community and also with the novices.

Being a community man means being a man of sharing, a man of support. Giving and receiving are always necessary. The witness given by the Novice Master of belonging effectively to the larger community is, I believe, essential for the novitiate. He must be a community man in the community to which he belongs, even if that is a District community.

b) The Novice Master must be a community man with the novices. How can he be in community with the novices? With them he must not only be a Master but also a companion. Previously, it was customary to speak of the Novice Master as one who kept in touch with each one and with the community; he was someone who checked up on the novices, helped them in their discernment. That is an essential part of his responsibility. I believe he must also be a

community man in the sense that he knows how to be spontaneous, to share the faith, support, rest and apostolate of the novices. Nowadays that is easier because young people everywhere are more ready to communicate and to be open.

“Communion” is, in my view, one of the signs that the Spirit is leading his Church and humanity. It can be found at every level in the mission and in Christian communities. It can be found even in non-Christian religions, and that is something new.

c) My third remark concerns the cooperators of the Novice Master in the novitiate. There is much wisdom in Rule 44. It brings up a point which is very delicate and very important. The role of the Novice Master is unique. It is he who must help the community to live in unity, to go forward together. He is responsible for the progress of the community and of each individual. His role is unique with regard to each one in assessing their progress and the authenticity of the vocation they have received from God.

However, the Novice Master cannot discern alone. He must share with his collaborators concerning the progress of the novices. Novitiate formation has an essentially community aspect. I have spoken about discovering Christ and growing in friendship with Christ through prayer, Sacred Scripture, the liturgy, the history of the Founder. Those who teach liturgy or present the Founder should be integrated in this spiritual community progress. The formation of the novices requires constant and cooperative discernment both community and personal.

3. MARY AND THE FORMATORS

It is said that we Oblates have a tradition of always concluding with Mary. If it is a tradition, it means that it is not merely a formality.

In December 1986, when I was at Obra, in Poland, I had what seemed a spiritual experience. I understood that a house of formation must be a house where Mary is really present. There can be no family without a mother. Those who fill the role of Mary in a special way are the formators. Obviously, Mary is still the Mother for everybody. It is persons who become a sign, they become the sacrament of Mary in a formation community. Who are they? I believe it is the formators, and especially the Novice Master, who must represent Mary to our Oblate candidates. I shall underline just two aspects of this statement.

a) Constitution 10 presents Mary as the model of the Oblate, because she received Christ continually in order to present him to others, in order to give him. I believe that we should do as Mary did. We are the first to receive Christ in our lives and to give him to others, especially to the novices whose progress we accompany and to whom we have a special responsibility. What has been said about the novitiate and the means of discovering Christ so as to be his friends, is true of us also.

Therefore we must, above all, be like Mary, constantly receive Christ in our lives as she did, in faith, hope and charity. During the novitiate our faith is often put to the test but it is also stimulated: faith with regard to persons, with regard to ourselves etc. Hope! If we do not have hope, I believe that everything would become paralyzed, all would end in the novitiate. Our hope must be like that of Mary: hope in the Temple, hope at Cana, hope at the foot of the Cross. We must be men of charity to receive Christ and present him continually to others. If we are totally committed to Christ, we will be able to present him spontaneously as Mary did. She presented Christ to the Apostles spontaneously after the Resurrection, but she also presented him to others in Nazareth and during his public life.

b) Another way to imitate Mary is by creating a family atmosphere, as Mary did at Nazareth, or in the Cenacle. There is no formation if there is not a family atmosphere if people do not feel at home, if there is not a spirit of trust and mutual respect. I see that as one of the greater difficulties in novitiates and scholasticates.

That could be a delicate matter, for example, if formators come from elsewhere or even if they come from the same country but from a different culture. The family spirit! If the novices see us as their judges, as people who make unloving decisions, formation is not possible. It is impossible to have formation if there is not a family spirit to back it up. Mary's role shows us what the formator's role should be.

Obviously firmness is necessary, decisions must be taken, but there should be a "family spirit" within that framework. That is part of the Oblate charism.

Let us look at our Founder! He was able to create a family atmosphere. He used to say: "*All Superiors of Congregations may have the most beautiful qualities, but there is no one among them who loves his subjects more than I love my Oblates.*" Each formator must have this love which our Founder had for his Oblates: it is a really personal love, the ability to form a family atmosphere as Mary did at Nazareth.

Conclusion

My address to you has been very simple, more a soul sharing than an intellectual message. I believe that, if we build our novitiates on two basic principles, Christ and community life, the future of the Congregation will be assured and we will have a new Springtime. For me, that Springtime does not consist principally in numbers. Revival will be real and fruitful only if it is in the dynamic of our charism. The charism is a grace which has been given, but it

is also something new which is rooted in our experience of Christ. The Oblate charism is the inheritance of Eugene de Mazenod. It is also the gift which each one of us and all of us together receive from the Spirit in our fidelity to Christ and in our creativity in responding to the missionary challenges of today.

NOTE

(1) Address given to European Novice Masters, Grottaferrata, 3rd February 1987.

XIII

LETTER TO FORMATORS

This third letter for the Year of De Mazenod is addressed primarily to those involved in formation work (1), for you are called to contribute in a special way to what is at stake in this time of renewal, of extension of the Oblate charism and promotion of vocations. This message, however, concerns as well the other Oblates because we should all understand this ministry and give it our support.

You formators have an essential role in the Congregation. You accompany the personal and community growth of young generations, and you prepare the future mission of the Institute. You imitate Jesus who formed his Apostles, so your ministry is of capital importance, even if it is often neither gratifying nor easy. The Founder chose the best Oblates for this ministry. Many of his letters were addressed to them. To those who were charged with this work, he insisted *"that everything must be sacrificed in favour of this primary duty. Above all he (Fr Pons) must provide his brothers with all the means in his power to help them make progress. In my opinion, the least negligence in this matter would be an unpardonable fault"* (SC 456). When faced with a formator's inevitable difficulties, he recalled, *"Our Lord, our divine exemplar, had to be very patient with his beloved Apostles who were often unbearable and troublesome"* (ST 457). He pointed out the major lines of formation: it should be *"manly and religious but fatherly. This is the method I adopted in the beginning when I myself was in charge of training our members"* (ST 459). Saint Eugene monitored the

scholastics' journeying. During the last year of his life, he wrote to the moderator of scholastics at Montolivet: *"My eyes, and still more my heart, are forever turned toward those dear sons who are the hope of our family. I am happy that they understand the sublimeness of their vocation and are courageously endeavoring to become holy religious"* (ST 461).

You contribute to formation above all by your witnessing, which has its source in the authenticity and integrity of your life. Good example is what attracts; it influences far more than do words. The effectiveness of our ministry always depends on the grace of God and on the response that we give it, a response that finds its source in our oneness of life with Christ.

Your ministry consists in journeying with the candidates. This must be done in a fraternal way, especially when the candidates already share the same consecration and are members of the same Congregation. For this mission which you have received from the Congregation and the Church, you are not simple spectators but men responsible for transmitting Oblate values. You have to verify if the candidates are capable of this kind of life, if really they are faithful to their vocation, if their growth corresponds to the stages of their commitment. Toward those who are in formation, we must go beyond constraint as well as resignation, to seek together with them what the Spirit suggests.

You have been charged with helping to assume the Oblate charism in all its richness and beauty, but also with all its demands. To this end it is important that you be in relation with the living person of the Founder, that you live syntonically with the Congregation, the Church and its magisterium, that you be attentive to the missionary challenges of today and tomorrow in the world.

In your sensitive and important ministry, it is necessary that you work in close collaboration with the other formators, teamworking with them and welding real fraternal

bonds. In unity and collaboration between you, formators, will you find above all the most fitting way and means of formation and become exemplars of community life. As well, the formation community is the normal milieu for your personal growth and mutual support. That is why in these recent years the General Administration has required that formation never be entrusted to only one person.

It is important that you take care of your personal growth and ongoing formation as Oblates and as formators. Even if a prior preparation to this sensitive ministry is desirable and even necessary, strive to make yourselves always more capable of carrying it out well by deepening its various aspects and multiple demands. The frequent documents of the Church and the Congregation on these themes should be helpful to you.

Be happy with this apostolate. Don't regret other forms of commitment. Give it all your energy and heart. It is a great responsibility, but still more so is it as well a grace for you. When another ministry is asked of you, you will find that the qualities you acquired are useful in other fields. Formators are also needed for the laity and particularly for those called to share the spirituality and mission of the Oblate charism.

Thanking you for your services I ask - through the intercession of Saint Eugene and Mary Immaculate - that the Lord confirm you in the vocation to which you have been called and in which you journey with your younger brothers and future candidates. The future of the Congregation largely rests on you.

NOTE

(1) Letter addressed to formators on the occasion of the De Mazenod Year, March 1996

XIV

PERPETUAL OBLATION

In this passage from the Gospel, Luke reminds us of the prophetic and missionary vocation of Jesus. "The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me... He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor" (Lk 4, 18). Fulfilled in time and in space, this prophetic vocation has its beginning in the eternal love of God: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you" (Jer. 1, 5). It was true for Jeremiah and in a special way it was true for Christ (1).

Dear Brothers and Sisters, today we are celebrating and witnessing the same mystery. In fact our Christian, religious and missionary vocation is a participation in Christ's vocation, as St. Paul tells us in the letter to the Ephesians: "Before the world was made, the Father chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence" (Eph. 1, 41). Our vocation is understood and lived in Christ's vocation. Our oblation is lived in Christ's self offering to the Father for the salvation of humanity.

Dear Brothers, in making your final profession you are answering the call of Christ, who invites you to be his disciples and to continue his mission. His invitation to you is absolute and eternal, your response is now becoming final, definitive, total.

In our Oblate tradition we call the final profession a perpetual oblation, a word which reminds us not only of our family name, "Oblates of Mary Immaculate", but reminds us especially of the total dedication of Christ who offered himself completely to the Father.

With regard to this oblation, I wish to underline some of its aspects or dimensions:

Total oblation of ourselves

Our oblation should permeate and transform all of our life. Through the Spirit we are consecrated and become companions of Christ. So the whole of our life must manifest that consecration. Our relationships with others, our use of goods, our decision making, our way of judging and acting must be in harmony with this oblation. Our missionary activity is the consequence of our being followers of Jesus and sharers in his mission (cf. C 1). Your missionary zeal and creativity will be in proportion to your fidelity to this vocation as we can see from the example of Blessed Joseph Gerard. In order to live our vocation with integrity and authenticity, our whole life should flow from our oblation, from our Oblate charism.

Oblation in Christ

That is possible if we surrender ourselves to Christ. As our Constitutions say: *"We strive to reproduce in ourselves the pattern of Christ's life... we give ourselves to the Father in obedience even unto death and dedicate ourselves to God's people in unselfish love. Our apostolic zeal is sustained by the unreserved gift we make of ourselves in our oblation, an offering constantly renewed by the challenges of our mission"* (C 2). For the sake of Christ and his Kingdom, we must become identified with him and *"through his eyes see the world redeemed with his blood"* (C 4) and *"love others as Jesus loves them"* (R 12).

Like Jesus, we must harmonize our behavior and our activities with our vocation. In the words of our Holy Father

in his missionary encyclical: *"In Christ there is an identity between the message and the messenger, between saying, doing and being. His power, the secret of the effectiveness of his actions, lies in his total identification with the message he announces: he proclaims the Good News not just by what he says or does but by what he is"* (RM 13). The purpose of our religious consecration is to bring about that same unity in us, unity between our life and our mission, a unity which has its source in Christ. That is why the Founder wrote in the first Constitutions and Rules: *"Whoever wishes to become one of us must have an ardent desire for his own perfection and be inflamed with love for the Lord Jesus Christ"* (CC & RR p. 54).

Oblation in community

The third point I wish to make is the communitarian dimension of our Oblate charism. Our oblation makes it possible for us and also requires us to be witnesses in apostolic community. In making our profession we enter the Congregation definitively, we make a commitment to it and we undertake to grow in the company of our brothers in the common vocation which all of us have received. *"We will help each other find joy and fulfillment in our community life and in our apostolate, supporting one another in our resolution to be faithful to the Congregation, whatever the circumstances which could provoke its dispersal or tempt us to withdraw from it"* (C 29).

At the end of his scholasticate in Rome, and again during our conversation in Sabon House shortly before his death, Michael Ncgobo told me that he had come to understand that community life was not merely a requirement for the period of formation, but for the whole of our lifetime. The recent General Chapter called the attention

of the Congregation to the dimension of community life (2). I am convinced that the future of each Oblate and the future of the Congregation depends on the quality of our community life, of the interdependence and communion among ourselves which is realized through community life.

Oblation through Mary

Dear Brothers and Sisters, considering the requirements of our vocation, we could perhaps sometimes become fearful. But in our journey, we have Mary as our companion and help. With her we can be confident about the future. In fact, as our Constitutions say: *“Mary Immaculate, in her faith response and total openness to the call of the Spirit, is the model and guardian of our consecrated life”* (C 13). She will help us to be open to the call of the Spirit by her example and by her intercession. Together with her we have many intercessors and companions who have been faithful to the same vocation we have and who are now in God’s company. As they succeeded, so can we, for God’s glory and for the service of the Church. This is our calling! Amen.

NOTES

(1) Homily given on the occasion of a perpetual oblation ceremony in Cedara, 22nd October 1993.

(2) General Chapter 1992: Witnessing as Apostolic Community.

XV

ROLE OF AN OBLATE SCHOLASTICATE

We are all here to share this Golden Jubilee with you: His Excellency the Apostolic Delegate, the Bishops, friends, staff and students past and present of St. Joseph's Theological Institute (1).

We have come together to give thanks to the Lord for 50 years of the existence of St. Joseph's. In this Institute many, especially priests and religious, have received their formation and are now working in South Africa and elsewhere. Thus the influence of St. Joseph's is spread far beyond the country.

So let us give thanks to the Lord who has made it possible to enable many people to become ministers in his Church. That formation has not only been intellectual, but integral, open from the beginning to the richness of the different races of this and of other countries. It was the condition laid down by the General Administration from the beginning.

Let us give thanks for the dedication of so many formators and for the collaboration not only of the Oblate Provinces of South Africa and other countries but also for the collaboration of other Congregations.

Formation of the Apostles at the core of Christ's mission

The passage from the Gospel (Lk 10) which we have just heard tells how Jesus appointed seventy-two disciples and sent them out ahead of him. Before sending them out,

however, he instructed them concerning the need for labourers in his harvest and also as to how they should behave and act. When their work was done, the Lord welcomed them back and together with them he made an evaluation of the mission accomplished, stressing the importance of the quality of their life rather than the actions done. The formation of the Apostles and the disciples was part of the mission of Jesus. It was indeed the very center of his mission, it was the core of it.

St. Joseph's Scholasticate, called St. Joseph's Theological Institute, has accomplished that same mission, verifying the authenticity of the call to that mission and forming apostles and disciples to continue the mission of Jesus. Thus, after hearing this passage from the Gospel, we can affirm as Jesus did in the synagogue of Nazareth: "This text is being fulfilled" here, not only today but for the past 50 years.

Just as the the seventy-two disciples came back rejoicing and sharing the great events of their mission, so today, many formators and students are back here in their Alma Mater to rejoice and to thank the Lord.

Scholasticate and Theological Institute

Although at the beginning the Theological Center was identified with the Oblate scholasticate, there is now a clear distinction between the theological Institute and the various communities belonging to the different Congregations. This clear distinction is not intended to create a dichotomy between the academic and the other aspects of formation (human, Christian, religious, priestly, pastoral). Through a constant collaboration you are trying to foster an integral growth of all the students in their respective charisms. That is made easier when at least some of the members of the respective communities are professors and if there is a constant evaluation not only of the quality of the teaching but

of the global formation provided here and in the individual communities.

Integral formation

The apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, issued after the last Synod on the formation of priests in the circumstances of the present day, indicates the areas of this formation and the subtitles outline its essence:

- human formation, the basis of all priestly formation;
- spiritual formation: in communion with God and in a constant search for Christ;
- intellectual formation: understanding the faith;
- pastoral formation: communion with the charity of Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd.

Missionary formation

Looking back on the history of this Institute and considering the needs of the student, I would like to underline two elements of this global formation for the future. First of all, the missionary dimension. Your Church is the fruit of recent missionary activity. There are still missionaries from abroad in your midst. They are not just the remnant of a world which is coming to an end but the seeds of a life which must grow. *"The evangelizing activity of the Christian community, first in its own locality, and then elsewhere as a part of the Church's universal mission, is the clearest sign of a mature faith"* (RM 49b; cf. 77). In fact *"Faith is strengthened when it is given to others"* (RM 2). The missionary encyclical repeatedly invites us *"to be open to the Church's universality and to avoid every form of provincialism and exclusiveness or self-sufficiency. Local Churches, although rooted in their own people and their own culture, must always maintain an effective sense of the universality of the faith,*

giving and receiving spiritual gifts, experiences of pastoral work in evangelization and initial proclamation, as well as personnel for the apostolate and material resources” (RM 85). An Institute such as this has certainly a missionary vocation for South Africa and must develop the proper means to achieve this purpose.

In communion with other charisms

The second point I wish to make concerns the charismatic dimension of religious life. Most of the students come from religious Institutes. Religious life is not a least common denominator: it is rather a variety of gifts of the Spirit for the building up of the Church. The various aspects of the spiritual, pastoral and religious life should be lived in the context of one's own charism, which is the expression of one aspect of Christ's life and mission (cf. LG 46). In this field also your theological Institute has a special role to play not only for the benefit of the students but also for the development of the local Church.

Formators

In the history of St. Joseph's Theological Institute there is one difficulty which keeps on repeating itself: the problem of finding and retaining a sufficient number of competent professors and formators. This is understandable because the task is both difficult and demanding. However, let me say to all formators both present and future: this is the most necessary and important of the missionary tasks in the Church, just as it was at the core of Christ's mission. So devote yourselves generously to it and make yourselves available and suitable for it. Do it as Jesus did it, guided by his Spirit who is the principal Agent of mission and formation.

Both the Council and the post-Synodal Document, *Pastores dabo vobis*, insist that all formation should be centered on Jesus Christ, the source of our life, of our ministry, of our existential unity. This was the message of the first reading taken from the letter to the Ephesians. May we always center our life on Him and make Him known to the people to whom we are sent. Let us do as Mary did; she received him continuously in her life in order to share him with all the world, whose life he is now and forever.

NOTE

(1) Homily on the occasion of Golden Jubilee celebration in Cedara, South Africa, 19th November 1993.

THE ROLE OF THE SUPERIOR IN A FORMATION COMMUNITY

In my experience as Superior General, there is a fact which I have always seen as evident: there can be no personal or missionary renewal without true community life and this is not possible without a real local Superior (1). Besides, the General Chapters, in their reflection on our renewal, show that this fact is becoming increasingly evident. They emphasize that mission, community and personal growth are closely linked together.

Beginning with the 1966 Chapter, held immediately after the close of Vatican Council II, the link between mission and community was proclaimed and therefore its theological and consequently witness giving role. *"The Oblates are religious missionaries in and through the community to which they belong"* (C. 42). Having spoken about the communion of mind and heart, achieved through sharing, dialogue and mutual fraternal help, the text states: *"They shall thus give witness before men that Jesus is in their midst and unites them in order to send them to proclaim his Kingdom"* (C. 45).

Together with the document "Missionary Outlook" the 1972 Chapter issued a document with a richness of content on "Community", which seems to have attracted less attention than the former. After the departure of Fr. Hanley, the 1974 Chapter renewed confidence in the fundamental values of Oblate life and in this context it stated: *"the value of community life was one of the treasures and the requirements of Oblate life which was more specially emphasized"*. The new

Constitutions of 1980 have amply developed the theme of community life in general and its implications for the mission in matters of fidelity and growth, as well as in formation.

The 1986 Chapter points to apostolic community life as one of the challenges facing us in order to be missionaries in today's world. *"it is itself mission and at the same time it is a qualitative sign of the mission of the whole Church"* (MTW 109). Finally, the last Chapter focused on community life: *"We choose community life as the way whereby we are continuously evangelized and can be witnesses of the Good News in this graced moment of Today's World"* (WAC 7). The district community is an authentic and important expression of the local community, but it should live up to all its requirements (cf. *ib.* 23.5). *"Witnessing as apostolic community has important implications for formation"* (*ib.* 25). *"Witnessing as apostolic community requires that first formation be such as to help the young Oblate become a disciple and man of community"*

1. THE FORMATION COMMUNITY AND ITS AGENTS

1.1. The formation community has its own *special characteristics* even though it must satisfy the human, christian, religious and missionary requirements of every Oblate apostolic community. Its specific character comes from its role of promoting initial formation, of which the requirements are different from those of ongoing formation. Therefore its constitution is special as emphasized by C. 51:

"As disciples of the same Lord, the formation personnel along with those in formation make up one community. While remaining close to the candidates, the formators constitute a nucleus at the heart of the formation community. They have a specific responsibility to the Church and to the Congregation as well as to the candidates."

Oblate formators are attentive to the ways grace moves those who are in formation. In a challenging and encouraging way they accompany them in their integral development as persons, in their spiritual growth and in the ongoing discernment of their Oblate vocation”.

The formation community, therefore, has a special importance and a unique responsibility. In fact it prepares the future of persons and of the mission. If there are serious deficiencies, the persons and the community will suffer the consequences ever after. The Founder was very demanding on this point (2). One of the reasons for the success of the Congregation is attributed to the careful formation provided from the beginning, even though the Founder appears to have often been dissatisfied with its realization. His complaints show us the high ideals he expected in formation.

1.2 The different agents in initial formation

a) The Constitutions present clearly the importance and the requirements of formation and point out the theological and anthropological outlook which underlies it. According to the Founder’s Preface the ideal of the formator is Christ himself forming his Apostles. This is the model mentioned in the Constitutions in the first article of the second part devoted to formation.

Jesus personally formed the disciples he had chosen, initiating them into the “mystery of the Kingdom of God” (Mk 4: 11). As a preparation for their mission he had them share in his ministry; to confirm their zeal he sent them his Spirit” (C. 45).

The direct action of Christ in formation is recalled by CC. 50 and 52. The last Chapter, in 1992, developed this theme: *“The image that summarily expresses what we wish to say is that of Jesus the Formator who calls and gathers his*

disciples around himself, who builds bonds of unity and love between them, empowers them with his Spirit, and sends them out to be his witnesses” (WAC. 26; cf. Preface, CC. 3, 37).

Christ acts through his Spirit, who is the formator par excellence. This same Spirit forms Christ in those who endeavor to follow in the Apostles’ footsteps. *“As they enter more deeply into the mystery of the Saviour and his Church, he moves them to dedicate themselves to the evangelization of the poor” (C. 45; cf. 49).*

Christ is not only at the center of our mission. Through his Spirit he continues to be the principal agent of the mission, of the whole life of the Church and its members. Formators must be attentive to the movements of the Spirit in order to regulate their own interventions which are necessary but always subordinate to the action of the Spirit (cf. C. 51b).

b) The first agent in the whole formation process is the *community* which is apostolic especially within itself, in order to be capable of influencing and giving witness to the world outside it. The overall accomplishment of formation is a community process.

“Oblate formation takes place in the context of an apostolic community. We are all involved in the process of mutual evangelization, supporting one another in a healing and empowering way. Together, we create an atmosphere of freedom and mutual trust in which we call each other to an ever deeper commitment” (C. 48; cf. 46, 49 and the corresponding Rules)

The cooperation and responsibility of all are implied (cf. C. 49, R. 41). We are reminded of the formative role of the apostolic community by the last Chapter (cfr. WAC 7, 8, 23.4, 37).

c) The role of the *formators* is indispensable.

While remaining close to the candidates, the formators constitute a nucleus at the heart of the formation community. They have a specific responsibility to the Church and the

Congregation as well as to the candidates (C. 51). They are not merely spectators, or controllers of the progress being made by the candidates. They must challenge them, help them, accompany them in their integral growth (cf. *ib.*). The same team spirit should be present in the novitiate also, even though the principal task is that of the Novice Master (cf. R. 44, C. 57). In my third letter for the Demazenod Year I speak of some aspects of the formators' role, upon which the future of the Congregation largely depends (3).

d) The *candidates to be formed* are also agents in their own formation and in that of the other members of the same community. Without their openness, availability, cooperation and goodwill, formation is not possible. They are responsible for their own formation, not independently and self sufficiently, but closely linked to the community and in particular to the their formators.

Helped by the formation team and their spiritual advisors, they will gradually become men of God, missionaries rooted in Christ, who are ready to give themselves totally through their perpetual oblation" (C. 65; cf. CC. 47, 49; RR. 52, 53, 60, 65).

1.3 There are *different roles* within the formation team even though they have a common responsibility. The role of the Novice Master is outlined in the Constitutions and by tradition (cf. CC. 55, 57; RR. 44, 46).

a) The role of the spiritual director is indispensable for personal progress. The Rules recommend spiritual direction for every Oblate "in order to discern God's action in his life and to grow through his personal and apostolic experiences and difficulties" (R. 21; cf. 11, 12). It is particularly indispensable for those in the first formation process.

In Oblate tradition, which follows the tradition of the French seminary, every formator except the Superior may be a spiritual director. Therefore preparation in the art of spiritual direction should be provided for every formator (R.

35). In smaller formation communities the spiritual director may be chosen outside the community. In this case it is important that the director know the charism of the Institute and the style of community life. Otherwise there is the risk that accompaniment become separated from real life. In any case, spiritual direction should be an essential part in the formation process of every Oblate. Its absence causes grave inconvenience, as I can tell you from experience.

b) There are also other complementary duties within the formation team, such as the area of studies, pastoral work, the use of money (cf. *Formation Directory*, chapter II). Especially in larger formation communities, specific tasks are assigned, such as spiritual director, director of studies and director of pastoral experience.

2. ROLE OF THE SUPERIOR IN A FORMATION COMMUNITY

There is no mention of the Superior of the formation community in the part devoted to formation. Evidently, what the Constitutions say in general about the Superior applies to him also. His role, however, has its own special features because of the nature of the community, which includes within it the group of formators (cf. C. 51). His role is to be concerned with the whole community, both the group of formators and every member of the community.

2.1 For the general part concerning the role of the Superior, I shall repeat much of the second letter for the Demazenod Year, devoted to this topic (cf. Information OMI, January 1996). The role of the Superior is not merely operative. He is more than just the facilitator of the group. His role is also of a sacramental order. In fact, community life lived in faith makes Christ present (cf. C. 37), and the Superior is the sign of Christ (cf. C. 80). *"The local Superior animates and directs the community to further the apostolate*

and the best interests of the members" (C. 89). The best interests concern the integrity of the Oblate vocation. To Fr. Soullier, who had recently been appointed Superior of the Limoges community, Saint Eugene wrote: "*See to it that devotion especially reigns in your midst. It is monstrous to see religious with so many means of sanctification and perfection stagnating in indifference and tepidity*" (23-IX-1854).

It was pointed out by the last General Chapter, and confirmed by the intercapitular assembly, that the apostolic community is the place and source of our witness, and consequently of our mission. I have seen the beneficial results of the efforts being made in this direction in many parts of the Congregation. In every case, it was obvious that the key person in this sort of community renewal is the local Superior, with the support of the Provincial and following the guideline priorities of the Province. "*The quality of the local Superior is a determining factor for the Congregation's life. For this reason, the Chapter considers the formation of local Superiors to be a priority*" (WAC 23.6). In fact a number of Provinces organize courses to develop the skills of community animators; they hold extended council meetings with the local Superiors to promote community animation. This enables the Province or Delegation to become an apostolic body (cf. C. 92).

The Superior "*is the pastor of his brothers*" (WAC 23.6). He is responsible for the internal and missionary management of the community and he must take care of every member. The Founder wrote to Fr. Honorat, the first Superior of Canada, inviting him "*to unite the hearts of your subjects in charity and meekness rather than guide them with authority*" (29-IX-1841). Writing two years later to the same Superior he said: "*it is the Superior's duty to appreciate all his subjects as it is their duty to appreciate their Superior*" (7-X-1843).

As the promotor of fraternal charity, the Superior must involve all the members of the community and especially his

council in decision making. On another occasion the Founder wrote to Fr. Honorat: *"In heaven's name, correct yourself and give up taking responsibility alone when it should necessarily be shared with others. It is by showing trust, by knowing how to change one's own ideas and adapt them to those of others that one attracts their sympathy, their cooperation and their affection"* (10-X-1843).

The whole community, and especially the Superior, are called to progress and grow according to the charism of the Institute as expressed in particular in the Constitutions, in unity with the Major Superiors. *"In government, whether spiritual or temporal, you should not either permit or do anything which is foreign to the spirit of our Institute"* (20-IX-1841) which is, of course, the spirit of the Founder himself. In a letter to Fr. Guigues, he wrote that the mission of Oregon required a Superior who was *"a generous and experienced man, full of the spirit of God, immersed in my spirit, who will act as I would act myself"* (24-I-1847).

I shall conclude with two texts from the Founder: *"Remember that you must be an example to all. Pray often about the duties of your responsibility; it is no small matter; be careful of yourselves"* (2-V-1835). *"Call fervently upon the Lord and on our good Mother and then use all your skill and knowledge to succeed"* (5-X-1851). The grace of God will not be lacking.

2.2 The Superior of a formation house has a *special rapport with the group of formators*. Together with them he is responsible for the formation of the candidates. He must have regular meetings with them to assess the candidates, especially on the occasion of calling to vows and orders. These meetings, however, run the risk of becoming formalities if there is not some regular manifestation on both the faith and human levels. The essential dimensions of formation must be studied together, planning must be done and the various responsibilities must be assigned but always in a spirit of unity. The

unity of the formation group is important in formation; I would venture to say that it is a necessary condition for effective formative action. A divided formation group is harmful.

2.3 The Superior has a *personal role also with regard to each candidate* in formation. He must have a real rapport with each one. It is he who helps the candidate to evaluate his integration in the various aspects of life, who challenges him on his weaknesses, who encourages him. The spiritual director helps in the process of discernment based on what the candidate tells him but the Superior has a more global perception of the candidate's position based not only on what the candidate confides in him but also on what he observes and hears from others. The Superior must create an atmosphere of trust in order to make this approach possible. In certain cultures and situations this may be difficult but it is always necessary.

3. WAYS AND ATTITUDES TO LIVE THE MISSION OF SUPERIOR

3.1 *The Superior believes in the community.*

a) *Believe first of all in the "theological" value of the community*, which is called upon to be the expression of trinitarian communion (prophetic dimension) and the reactualization of the ecclesial community (memorial dimension). The religious community is a sign of the Kingdom of God which is to come and is already present in a way (eschatological dimension). By means of mutual charity, Jesus becomes present in and through the community (Christological dimension). *"By growing in unity of heart and mind, we bear witness before the world that Jesus lives in our midst and unites us in order to send us out to proclaim God's reign"* (C. 37).

b) *Believe in the formative value of the community.* It is a means “for us to be continuously evangelized and be witnesses of the Good News in this graced moment of today’s world” (WAC 7). It helps us to overcome individualism which is the evil of the modern world (ib. 8). Faced with the frictions resulting from life and the ministry, “it has a role in bringing about healing and reconciliation” (ib. 23.4). It is a school of ongoing formation (ib. 37).

c) *Believe in the missionary value of community.* The presence of the Lord in the community “enables us to live again the communion of life and the common mission in his Spirit” (ib. ib. 10). “As we become one heart and one mind, our communities will become more and more apostolic; by the quality of the witness they give they will bear fruit that lasts” (ib. 13; cf. 37).

The community is apostolic in itself, especially in its being. It does, in fact, prophetically contest sin and evil today as in the past, and in particular individualism and power: it is a “sign of the new world born of the Resurrection”, “it is an invitation, “it is a sign of hope” (ib. 7, 8, 9). It thus becomes “the banquet table to which we invite mankind” (ib. 6, 8). “By becoming disciples who follow Jesus, they can by that fact better share in his mission as apostles” (ib. 15).

It is also *apostolic in its working,* insofar as it promotes, elaborates and sustains a community missionary plan (ib. 18), 23h, 24, 36). It is also a means to exercise the mission. “We can be effective evangelizers only to the extent that our compassion is collective, that we give ourselves to the world not as a coalition of freelance ministers, but as a united missionary corps” (ib. 7). It is important that this “community faith” be transmitted during the period of first formation.

3.2 *The Superior loves the community*

That means loving the members of the community, taking care of them (cfr. WAC 10, 11), being available to all

(cfr. R 88), being the good shepherd, sacrificing himself. It also means loving community life with its dynamics and manifestations. It means knowing how to be present, considering commitment to community as a real ministry, his first and essential duty.

The Founder is an example of this affective love for the members of the Congregation. He saw himself as a father filled with love for his sons. He achieved that love and modelled it on the love of the Father in heaven and the love of Christ. He wanted charity to be the *"pivot on which the whole of our being hinged"* (29-VII-1830). As he said to Fr. Dassy, *"I recommend that you use sweetness in your method of governing. Do not weary people, be charitable and patient. When necessary, be firm but never severe."* (14- X-1848).

3.3 *The Superior leads the community*

To lead means to be an example for the whole community. This is the principal way in which to animate his confreres. The most negative influence on the candidates is the infidelity of the formators and especially of the Superior.

One of the most frequent suggestions made by Saint Eugene to Superiors was the need to be exemplary in fidelity to the Rule. *"Be careful to give the most scrupulous example of punctuality in all that is prescribed by the Rule, both as regards persons and things"* (to Dassy, 7-III-1848). *"Be first in giving the example of regularity and fidelity in all things"* (to Verdet, 4-5-1854). This regularity, however, was not to be without consideration for persons, as he pointed out to Bishop Allard: *"do not put all persons on the same footing but be ready to encourage each one to give what he can by kindness and affability... The weak tend to be discouraged if they receive only reproof. Find ways of touching their hearts, you will obtain all things in this way. Our divine Saviour taught us this himself"* (10-XI-1857).

3.4 *The Superior animates the community*

a) He *brings it together*, promoting unity of heart and mind, “so that we learn to share in depth our personal histories, missionary ideals, and lives of faith” (WAC 12; cfr. 39), that we “mutually support one another, share with one another, care for each other” (ib. 11) and “establish interdependence and a profound communion” (ib. 10).

b) He *helps the community* to evaluate its own progress in evangelical discernment “in all the elements that comprise it” (ib. 19, 20, 23a+b+c), and provides it with a suitably programmed rhythm of life. “Living community in terms of communion-interdependence requires a regular rhythm of meetings and retreats” (ib. 23.2)

c) He helps the community “to develop a common missionary project. This could be a good means of bringing people together for reflection and missionary action” (ib. 23h; cfr. 12, 18, 24, 36). A formation community also has a missionary project in which formation is the priority.

d) He promotes a “spirit of collaboration and initiative and genuine dialogue within community” (ib. 11). Consultation with the Council, and with the whole community was a regulation which the Founder often repeated to Superiors, including those of formation houses (4).

e) One way in which to animate persons and the community is to *present the challenges to be overcome* and the defects to be corrected. The Founder protested strongly against the weakness of local Superiors: “They are afraid to call to order those who go astray and they condescend too easily to their weaknesses... In this way, if we are not careful, our houses will soon become merely hotels where a number of priests live beneath the same roof without any religious spirit or regular discipline” (Circular letter of 2-II- 1857).

3.5 *The Superior prays for the community*

Since the community is a theological reality (sharing in the trinitarian communion, a sign of the Kingdom, having Jesus present), it is a gift of God prior to and more than being the result of human effort. The missionary encyclical points out that prayer is one of the ends and ways of missionary activity, together with proclamation, the establishment of the Church and the promotion of the evangelical values of the Kingdom.

“Finally, the Church serves the Kingdom by her intercession, since the Kingdom by its very nature, is God’s gift and work, as we are reminded by the Gospel parables and by the prayer which Jesus taught us. We must ask for the Kingdom, welcome it and make it grow within us; but we must also work together so that it will be welcomed and will grow among all people until the time when Christ “delivers the Kingdom to God the Father” and «God will be everything to every one»” (RM 20). The Founder is an example of a Superior who prays for his community. For him the Eucharist was the meeting point where all Oblates came together.

Conclusion

I believe that every formator, and especially the Superior, has a *marian role* with regard to his community. Mary points out to us the path we should follow.

- Like Mary at the Annunciation we must discern the Will of God for ourselves as well as for others and with them.
- Like Mary at Cana we must be very attentive to what is going on around us in the community and in its members, intervening discreetly and lovingly when that is required.
- Like Mary on Calvary we must be alongside our confreres especially in their suffering, in all its forms.

- Like Mary in the Cenacle we must unite with our confreres in prayer and in expectation of the Spirit whose presence we need at all times.

NOTES

- (1) Address given to session for formators, Rome, June 1996
- (2) Cf. Choice of Texts, nn. 430-447 for the novitiate; 448-451 for the spirit of the Congregation; 452-475 for the Scholasticate.
- (3) Cf. Information OMI, March 1996
- (4) Cf. Choice of Texts, nn. 509-514.

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