

JESUS CHRIST SOURCE OF OUR OBLATE BEING

January 6th, 1993 - Letter to the Oblates in First Formation - Rome

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)

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.