

JESUS CHRIST, THE CENTER OF OUR LIVES

January 25th, 1987 - Letter to the Oblates in First Formation - Rome

Dear Oblates in Formation,

I have decided to write regularly to all the Oblates in formation; I am thinking of at least one letter a year. I would like to share my hopes with you and in this way intensify communion with you and between 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.

You form a large and growing group: there are 159 novices, 588 scholastics and 64 Brothers in temporary vows. Ten years ago, in January 1977, there were 103 novices, 414 scholastics and 38 Brothers in temporary vows; last year there were 171 novices, 532 scholastics and 62 Brothers in temporary vows. I hope this increase will be a continuing feature and become even more considerable so that we can respond to the missionary needs and offer the Oblate charism as a service to all the Churches. Such growth in quality and quantity depends in part on you, on the authenticity of your lives and the creative influence you wield on people of your own generation.

I have met a certain number of you since my election as Superior General: nearly fifty of you in the Italian Province, about twenty in the International Scholasticate, about two hundred in Poland and one or the other in France. I found, in you, Oblates who are very much alive, imbued with a missionary spirit and love for the Congregation, and seriously devoted in your preparation.

In the many, albeit brief, trips that are already scheduled, I consider visiting your communities a priority. As the Constitutions point out (cf. C 49), 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 of Paksane in 1962-1963 and in the youth centre of Vientiane in 1971-1972.

This letter too renews the oneness existing between us. In spite of our different races, cultures and countries, all of us together make up one great Oblate family. We live in solidarity with each other as we journey together in following Christ (cf. C. 31). Our communion flows from the same call we have received (cf. C. 1), is characterized by our sharing of the same charism, and is constantly renewed through our relationship with Christ in the Eucharist (cf. C. 33).

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 1808; 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.

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.).

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 Savior; 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.