

# OBLATES AND THE FORMATION OF PRIESTS

October 20th, 1983 - Letter - Papeete, Tahiti

*Inauguration of the inter-diocesan Major Seminary. - Oblates and the formation of priests. - What kind of priests? - A ministry we must not neglect.*

*L.J.C. et M.I.*

I spent October 12-20 visiting the Oblates in Tahiti. They are a small team of four Fathers and one Brother. One, formerly a missionary in Laos, is French; the others are American. All are members of St. John the Baptist Province to which the Delegation is attached.

Tahiti is a very isolated island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. It is eight hours flying time from Los Angeles and eight from Sydney, Australia. French Polynesia has a population of some 160,000; 52% of these belong to the Evangelical Church and 35% are Catholic. The first Catholic missionaries on the island were the Sacred Heart Fathers of Picpus who came in 1834.

The Oblates are there since 1977. They are in charge of a parish, St. Joseph of Faaa, near the airport, with a population of 22,000, 10,000 of whom are Catholic. They also provide pastoral services to neighboring islands, and they are especially involved in the formation of the local clergy.

## **Inauguration of the inter-diocesan Major Seminary**

The Oblates' motive for going to Tahiti was to contribute to the greater stability and growth of its local Church. With this perspective in mind, they expressed to Archbishop Michel Coppenrath of Papeete their readiness to open a Theology School which would also be a major seminary for the islands of French Polynesia. This was certainly a bold proposition, one which corresponded to a real need and which was enthusiastically received by the Archbishop and his main collaborators. Up to now, the seminarians had to be sent to the English-speaking seminary in Suva.

The official inauguration was yesterday, October 19. Its celebration led me to reflect on the formation of priests as part of the Congregation's tradition and apostolate. I want to share my reflections with you.

## **Oblates and the formation of priests**

Eugene de Mazenod chose the priesthood because he had witnessed the miserable condition of the Church and the clergy of his day. "I have committed myself to serving the Church", he wrote to his father on December 7, 1814, "because she is suffering persecution, because she is abandoned...". In such a Church he wanted to be "the priest of the poor".

His aim, when he founded the Oblates in 1816, was clear: to establish a society of missionaries, of folk preachers who would go into villages, rural areas and the most isolated places to teach people – especially the most abandoned – who Jesus Christ is and bring them the Good News of their salvation in Jesus Christ.

At the same time however – and it is important to note this – he asked the Oblates to be a spiritual help to priests, and even to undertake the formation of priests. We would work in vain at evangelizing the people, he explained, if there were no holy priests, men of doctrine and virtue who, after we had left, would stay with the people to continue and strengthen the work already begun

(cf. *1853 Constitutions and Rules*, ch. 3).

Thus, once established in Marseilles, he accepted that the Oblates take charge of the major seminary there (1827). Next came the major seminary of Ajaccio (1834), of Ottawa (1848) and of Frejus (1851). Today the Oblates are still in charge of the University Seminary in Ottawa, and of the seminaries in Roma, Lesotho, and of Maroua in northern Cameroon. At Grouard in the Canadian Northwest we also have Kisemanito Centre, a school forming pastoral workers from whose ranks, it is hoped, Indian priests will come one day, if God so wills it.

What did our Founder ask of the Oblates committed to this ministry? He wrote in 1853: "They will labor without ceasing to form Christ in the clerics, doing so with the assistance of his Immaculate Mother, the Virgin Mary, to whose patronage they will teach their pupils to fly with confidence in their needs" (*loc. cit.*).

### **What kind of priests?**

What kind of priests do Oblates want to form? Are there any distinctive marks which characterize their formation? I personally do think so.

Oblates want to form priests who are, first of all, men of Jesus Christ: men who have really opted for Christ and who have gradually made him the centre of their life; men who daily strive to know him more intimately, to identify with him, to let him live in them; men who have a burning desire to make him known to others.

Secondly, they want to form priests who deeply love the Church; for, as Bishop de Mazenod said, "To love the Church is to love Jesus Christ and vice versa" (*Pastoral Letter of February 16, 1860*). After the seminary, this love for the Church will normally lead them to carry out their ministry in close communion with the Pope and the bishops and in close collaboration with other Gospel workers.

Thirdly, they want to form priests who are filled with respect and affection for the people with whom and for whom they work, especially the poor; priests who are close to the people and constantly sensitive to the values they bear; priests who really want to involve the people as much as possible in the Church's ministries, and to support them in their effort to build a world that is better, more just and in line with the dignity of the human person.

Finally, they want to form priests who have a true and genuine devotion to the Virgin Mary: for the Oblate who is a formator of priests remains a son of the Immaculate Virgin.

### **A ministry we must not neglect**

I was glad to see the Oblates in Tahiti, in spite of their small number, providing such a service to the Church. To undertake this ministry, much faith and courage as well as competence is needed. But what greater service can we render to a new Church?

The Congregation herself, moreover, benefits from Oblates who are devoted to the formation of priests. Their knowledge of ecclesiastical sciences, their experience of the interior life and of the working of grace in human hearts are a source of wisdom and a blessing for the entire Institute.

By this letter I want to thank those among us who are engaged in this ministry. And I also want to add that if some of our scholastics have the required aptitude and interest for this type of apostolate, I strongly encourage them to persevere in this desire and make their interest known at the time of

their first obedience. The Congregation greatly needs qualified formators, as much for her own formation houses as for the seminaries entrusted to her.

I also want to thank in a special way those Oblates who, pretty well in all our houses, dedicate themselves to giving spiritual direction and to the ministry of confessing priests. This is a hidden and difficult apostolate, but one that is completely in line with the spirit of our vocation, one that is extremely important for the Church's life.

It will soon be Christmas, a special Christmas at the heart of the Holy Year. May Jesus, the Redeemer of Mankind, abundantly grant each of us the graces of reconciliation, forgiveness and peace that we need! And may each Oblate be to each person he meets a sign of God's forgiveness, love and peace!