

OBLATION THROUGH VOWED CHASTITY

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A call to develop the riches of the heart

Introduction

“Consecrated celibacy calls us to develop the riches of the heart. It is an affirmation of life and love; it expresses our total gift of self to God and to others with all our affection, with all the life-giving powers of our being” (C 16).

Does this beautiful formulation of our Constitutions and Rules not evoke what Genesis tells us about *living and loving*? Our sexual condition shows that we were created in God’s image for love. “God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them”, and “found it very good” (Gen 1:27,31). Chastity is all about living this original destination of our sexuality, to experience its goodness and to live it in a way that it reflects God himself as in an image.

I. An Oblate Spirituality of Chastity

About Love

Let me start this reflection on the vow of chastity with a few words simply on love. The Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore once said: “Chastity is a richness that proceeds from the abundance of love and not from a lack of love.” Our Constitutions are explicit about love. “Consecrated celibacy”, we read, is “a sign of the perfect charity which will be fully revealed only in the Kingdom”. By it we “free ourselves for a love which reaches out to everyone” (CC 15;16).

Our love will express itself in many ways

It expresses itself with human persons: the people whom we serve must feel it; true friendship may grow out of it. The Oblate Rule says: “Sincere friendship can foster the growth of an apostolic person, enabling one to love others as Jesus loves them” (R 18b). The brothers with whom we live in community are among those to whom we owe our love. “The first place where dialogue [or love] is necessary is among ourselves, in our own community, where we evangelize one another. A word is only true if in fact it reflects a truth within our lives”, observes the ‘98 Chapter letter.[1]

Love demands the right choice of the object of its desire. Psalm 24 characterizes the just person as someone who “loves not worthless things” (Ps 24:4). The temptation is always there to be carried away by worthless things, idols, by meaningless relationships. Our Christian faith tells us that sexuality is something sacred. It provides the material for a sacrament in similar ways as bread and wine are used for the Eucharist. In the same way as bread and wine can be misused and may even become instruments for greedily exploiting people’s needs, love can be misused in duplicity of life and in destructive relationships. But this does not take away the sacredness of bread and wine and of sexuality.

Love according to the Christian tradition includes loving ourselves. We sometimes need to be reminded to love ourselves, to take care of our own best interests. This includes the need to accept being loved by others – for instance to accept that a community cares for us if we become old and

frail and feel we have little to offer for all we receive.

Love means to give oneself to something worthy, and to give oneself totally to what is totally worthy, namely to God. If we act like this, love will have its own reward, though we do not love because of the reward.

Chastity - A Gospel value

Jesus grows up in a Jewish family and is closely attached to it most of his life. According to the Gospel genealogies, it is a family with a rich tradition: Israelites and foreigners, saints and sinners belong to its ancestors. Jesus is the son of Abraham and David, and, for the New Testament, also the son of Joseph and the son of the Virgin Mary. Faithful to biblical tradition, Christians have always highly valued marriage and family, and for Catholics marriage is even a sacrament of God's love. Chastity of marriage constitutes an integral part of the Gospel which describes the marriage bond as holy by its very nature, as it was "in the beginning" when man and woman were created in God's image.

However, Jesus, through his celibate life-style, and by the teaching that explains his state of life, proposes to some a second way of living chastity. Celibate chastity has been given to us at the dawn of Christian faith. It appears concurrently with God becoming human in Jesus Christ and thus it is seen as somehow linked to the very mystery of the Incarnation.

This new way is announced in Christ's birth from the Virgin Mary. Celibate chastity becomes the choice of some of his first disciples and a multitude of others through the centuries. It remains, however, a charism which is given only to some. Even today, only a small number of Christians have chosen this pattern of life. Among the Catholics those in consecrated life are about 1.3 per thousand.

Christian chastity has therefore more than one expression: Marriage and family are exalted by Jesus and the Christians, and at the same time, through valuing celibacy, they are not seen as absolute.

A scene in St. Luke's gospel may open up for us a first missionary perspective of celibate chastity. When the twelve-year-old Jesus surprises Mary and Joseph by his apparent insensitivity to family bonds and stays in the temple without telling them, his justification is: "Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs?" (Lk 2:49) Jesus will be busy with his Father's affairs also in the future. Later he will say that in the era of Noah many were busy with buying and selling, with getting married and being given in marriage, so much that they did not recognize the signs of the times. Jesus knows other urgencies, he knows that he has to undergo a baptism; he is impatient to cast fire on the earth. The mission received from the Father makes him choose celibate chastity.

Some foundations for our spirituality of celibate life

What are the spiritual sources we can draw from in our Oblate life, so that we can resonate and be aligned with the Gospel values of chastity and celibacy? Although there is no elaborated Oblate spirituality on this point, we can name some elements either from our tradition or from our present experience.

A sign of the Kingdom

All Christian ways of living our sexuality are grounded in the full revelation of God's love. We realize

that for God the purpose of creating us as male and female, was to make us understand that he is love, community, Trinity. God has created marriage as an image of the Trinity. Note that the Trinity comes first!

It is proper to our fallen human nature that we tend to forget the Divine and see only the creation, or at least we invert the order of model and image. Here celibate chastity is called to become a special sign. The celibate chastity of Jesus, Mary and the others who have received such a call, points in a radical way to the revelation that God alone is the source of Love, that the Trinity comes first. It says that this Love suffices. It expresses stunningly and by a contradictory and apparently counter-natural way of life, the primacy of God.

We Oblates too have followed Jesus to the point that we have copied his pattern of life. "In answer to a special invitation from Christ, we choose consecrated celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom." (C 14) "We live our celibacy as a sign of the perfect charity which will be fully revealed only in the Kingdom." (C 15).

The heritage of the Founder

What did celibacy mean for Saint Eugene? When we look into de Mazenod's writings we will not find many explicit references to this vow. In his time, sexuality - today's "theme number one", was not discussed in the open. However, some casual phrases of Eugene show us his healthy understanding of marriage, or point out the efforts needed to lead a chaste celibate life.

"Marriage is holy, therefore, it cannot be an obstacle to holiness", he writes to his sister on the occasion of her marriage.[2] "Marriage is a good thing for those who are called to it", he tells his mother.[3] However, Eugene realizes that he is called to another state of life. His commitment to chastity and celibacy is firm. Charles Antoine de Mazenod, father of the Founder, writes about him from Palermo, in 1814: "He is solid as a rock and pure as a lily".[4] Our *Dictionary of Oblate Values* comments on this: "The reason why he was 'solid as a rock and pure as a lily' was not because he had lived a sheltered life, but rather that in all circumstances, he willed to remain true to himself." [5]

His personal integrity induces him to lead others towards the virtue of chastity. He puts his youth sodality in Aix under the patronage of Mary Immaculate for this reason. He also introduces strict rules for the youth group about attending certain public performances and the theatre. He often warns the young, the Oblates and the people of his diocese with words like these: "Is it not at these shows that this demon, this vice of impurity, since we have to use the word, reveals himself with the fullness of his power?" [6] To an Oblate plagued with temptations against his vow he gives advice full of common sense.[7]

Faithfulness to a chaste life has not led St. Eugene to attitudes of a lonely bachelor. Everybody knows of his deep friendships and of his very big heart, especially for the Oblates. He calls his affection for them "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" [8]

What C. 16 quoted above says comes true in Eugene's life: "Consecrated celibacy calls us to develop the riches of the heart. It is an affirmation of life and love; it expresses our total gift of self to God and

to others with all our affection”.

Interfacing different vocations of love

A spirituality of celibate chastity has to be situated in a larger context. “Let the universal Church, the universal body, all her members divided and distributed in their several offices, let them all follow Christ. ... There the innocence of virgins has its place, there the chastity of widows has its place, there the purity of marriage has its place,” writes St. Augustine. [9] Our celibate love will thrive on life-relationships with men and women who follow the different vocations of love which exist in the body of the Church, and also in the family of St. Eugene’s charism. Through those same contacts our vow can become an inspiration for others. This is expressed clearly in R 18c: “As the generous example of married or single lay persons often inspires us, Oblates in turn, by their own genuine affection and fidelity, will inspire them to faithfulness in the face of their struggles and difficulties.”

This applies particularly to our relationship with the members of our different lay associations. As we discover together that it is the same charism that makes us live, lay people will provide us with feedback on our state of life and at the same time they might find inspiration in us. The values of every one’s state of life will be recognized more clearly; in our case, we may become more conscious that celibate chastity is a “precious gift of grace which the Father bestows on some,” as Vatican II puts it, and that it can constitute “an uncommon source of spiritual fruitfulness in the world”. [10]

Our vow shows again its missionary dimension in this interfacing with other vocations. How important is the apostolate with families and couples! The fidelity of Christians in all walks of life, and our own fidelity to the vow will speak more loudly than words. The same applies to the pastoral care of singles, or of homosexual persons, or of divorced persons or the sick and those suffering from AIDS who in virtue of their own circumstances are asked to live a continent life similar to ours.

By resonating together rather than being separated or isolated, the different vocations in the Church can carry out the mission of creating a new culture of Christian sexuality. Someone said that there are two areas which are particularly hard to evangelize: the way we use our money and the way we express our sexuality! Shouldn’t the different vocations take on the challenge of evangelizing these two areas as a common task?

Oblation and celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom

Back to our particular vocation. If we want to add more about chastity in the life of our Founder we have to move to the basic values that motivate his life. One of these is “oblation”. For St. Eugene, our designation as “Oblates” is more than a generic term; it means total self-giving in union with Christ. The vow of chastity is one of the expressions of this total giving of ourselves to God and to our neighbor.

For the Founder, oblation has to do with mission. When Jesus speaks to the Twelve of celibacy “for the sake of the Kingdom” (Mt 19:12) he indicates its missionary dimension. Members of religious orders might have to understand their mission in a variety of ways according to their particular vocation: for example, a contemplative will see it differently from an active religious. An Oblate should feel that he is celibate because his particular mission requires it (C 12). Doing what he does he is no longer fit for marriage (a “eunuch”, Mt 19:12) since he is totally taken up by the Father’s missionary love for the poor. “God wishes to reveal himself to the world as its Savior. We are called to cooperate with Him in this endeavor of love,” [11] as we said at the last General Chapter. The

cause of our mission to the poor and abandoned takes up all our vital energies.

The beauty of total oblation is expressed in the person of Mary, handmaid of the Lord, whose surrender to God's will has been complete. Her oblation has been spotless and pure. Our Constitutions say about her, in the section on chastity: "Mary Immaculate, Virgin and Mother, will be the Model and Guardian of his consecrated love" (C 24).

Another approach to oblation would be from the mystical marriage of the Church with Christ, her bridegroom. We find an echo of this in our Constitutions: our choice is to give witness "to the depth of the Church's covenant with Christ, her only Spouse" (C 15). St. Paul writes: "I am jealous for you just as God is; you are like a pure virgin whom I have promised in marriage to one man only, who is Christ" (2 Cor 11). Would Paul, or in fact God himself not vouch jealously for the integrity of our oblation, our consecrated love?

Our considerations so far about spirituality are the basis for the last part of this letter which will deal in a more practical way of the vow of chastity in relation to our missionary life and to the different cultures in which we live.

II. Chastity and Mission

Chastity and day-to-day missionary life

Our formation

Our missionary life begins with the time of initial formation. As an integral part of formation, early on we need to hear about the spirituality of celibate chastity. We also need to deal very openly with the models of sexual life we find around us and evaluate them making use of the teachings of the Church. In this way, the concrete manners of remaining faithful to our vows can be explored, living in the present world and in a concrete Oblate community. Openness and honesty at the first stages of formation will allow us for a good start and will support our perseverance during a lifetime.

A good start . . . in what kind of spirit did we make our vows at the beginning? Let me quote some passages on chastity, recently written by African scholastics in view of their perpetual vows.

"With this vow I consecrate myself to God as a total gift of self and self sacrifice. I am offering myself to the people I am living with and also to those whom I serve. With this vow I grow in love with Jesus Christ and with my fellow brothers and sisters. I feel free for the love of everybody; I am open for friendship and fraternity. The vow of chastity challenges me mostly in self-discipline and self-control. With it I am bound to the Lord and to His people."

"By the vow of chastity, I renounce the right to marry and the right to have my own family. I choose total abstinence from sexual acts and sexual relationships. I live this vow for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Through the vow of chastity I consecrate myself to God and at same time I avail myself at all times to the service of the Christian community."

"The vow of chastity is a commitment of love between Christ and myself. It calls for a chaste mind, chaste in behavior, chaste in attitude, chaste at heart, etc. In order to live this vow properly, I need to be vigilant, practice prudence and not to be shy to approach people who can help me properly live my life of celibacy. In this regard, my spiritual director has been and will always remain important in

helping me understand what my vow of chastity requires of me and how best to live according to its demands.”

Such paragraphs express high ideals. They will be tested in the very crucible of service in God’s vineyard ...many hours ...many days...indeed a life-time.

Later stages of life

How does our life according to the evangelical counsel of celibacy continue after the years of initial formation? We experience here a change to a harsher, less protected environment but often gain in exchange the support of people whom we serve in ministry. Responding to their demands, we might for some years give less importance to deepening the spirituality of chastity and give most of our energy to a very active life.

At a certain moment, after the first busy and enterprising years, the following question may come to us: What I do, my work, is it worth giving my life for it? We begin to doubt whether it is worth renouncing family life only for the many things we have to do. We begin to realize, in an existential way, that consecrated chastity must have a deeper motivation than just coming in handy in our professional obligations.

In that way, after the first years in active ministry I may feel invited to achieve a more profound vision of my vow of chastity. I begin now to realize that perhaps I should consider less “what” I do and see more “how” I do it. My life must not consist in just doing missionary work but in being totally given to God’s mission like Christ. Is the quality of my being a missionary worth giving my life for? Is it worth the sacrifice of those who accompanied me in my vocation? Ultimately, is it worth the sacrifice of Christ himself, who gave himself up so that I might have life in abundance?

As the years go on, I am invited to more depth in my celibacy, living it as a Paschal mystery. The victory of resurrection is never achieved without the dark night of the cross. Even if I stay very firm in my vocation and find happiness in it, as a celibate I will always feel that celibacy is a sacrifice. Though I may live in community and may be loved by the people to whom I minister, I will regret not having my own family. Being a missionary abroad makes the homelessness even more dramatic: one goes to another culture, to places where a supportive community of Christians might not yet exist, where one is considered a foreigner and has to speak a language which is not one’s own. Celibacy remains a cross and a renunciation in many ways but for us, it is the access road to the life of the resurrection.

Therefore celibate chastity must be matched by a paschal, radical way of life. In one of our provinces some young Oblates opted for a particular difficult mission area in their country. A reason that motivated them strongly was the fear of not remaining faithful to chastity, were they embarking on a too easy way of life.

Spiritual resources

As we accumulate years in the service of mission we realize more and more how exactly Christ’s word applies to us: “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Also our vow would come to nothing without Christ. The human need of intimacy can be fulfilled to a certain degree by “sincere friendship”, “by frank and honest affection” as R 18b says. But it is for someone else that we have reserved the greater portion of our heart. In a recent Church document we read: “consecrated life is ... an experience of sharing, a special grace of intimacy. It is becoming one with him, taking on his mind and his way of life, and it is a life taken up by Christ, touched by the hand of Christ, a life where

his voice is heard, a life sustained by his grace.” [12]

Chastity, for unmarried and married persons alike, will always need to be preserved using prudence and discipline. I will not develop this aspect further in my letter. Even with prudence and discipline, it is a fact that people fall in love, even though already committed be it through marriage or through vows. If this happens to us, we will have to struggle - recognizing what comes from God, grieving the path we have not chosen, seeking counsel if we need it. We were never promised that we would be free from struggle but we were promised help.

Our consecration is a commitment we make to God, but it is also God's commitment to us. We will need to have confidence in this covenant during the battles of our lives. If our heart is given to Christ and our mind is attuned to the Gospel and the sound teaching of the Church (and not to what other voices suggest), our chastity will be safe over the years. We will joyfully experience the truth of the fifth beatitude: "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God" (Mt 5:8).

The gospel of chastity in different cultural worlds

Christ's ongoing incarnation demands of us missionaries that we give full attention to the context in which our message is to be proclaimed and to the language we are to speak. In every place, the surrounding culture exerts an enormous influence on us, and also on how we see the values of Christian chastity and consecrated celibacy; and on how our vow is interpreted by others. How is the language of the Gospel understood when it comes to the value of chastity, according to the different contexts in which we live?

Diverse contexts for Christian chastity and consecrated celibacy

The context is very different in every one of the 65 countries in which the Oblates are present. Among the different cultures, secularized environments have a particular importance for us because they are present in many parts of the world and, through the process of globalization, they seem to expand their influence more and more. All of us will need to learn the "language" of this particular context. There are also situations where other cultures are predominant. We can mention the great Asian religions, Islam, the traditional religions and popular Catholicism. By crossing cultural borders we can be helped to relativize certain difficulties we experience, or to see in perspective certain affirmations we receive in a given part of the world. If we hold up the Gospel values, including chastity, against the background of different contexts, they may shine in a new light.

Secularized environments

There are many positive sides to the view on sexuality which the secularized society offers. We need to recognize them consciously. Let me name some of them. We can only be happy about achievements such as: the value given to the body, the openness in which sexuality can be discussed, the recognition of the equality and complementarity of the sexes, the new opportunities taken up by women.

On the other hand as Christians we are by nature critical of any culture. Secularism in the negative sense brings with it a reductive understanding of the human person. When the relationship with God is overlooked also the view of sexuality becomes reductive. *Vita Consecrata* expresses this as follows:

"The first challenge is that of a hedonistic culture which separates sexuality from all objective moral norms, often treating it as a mere diversion and a consumer good and, with the complicity of the means of social communication, justifying a kind of idolatry of the sexual instinct. The consequences of this are before everyone's eyes: transgressions of every kind, with resulting psychic and moral suffering on the part of individuals and families." (VC 88)

Where secularism is strong, it is not at all easy to bring up the subject of celibate life. At this point we cannot avoid mentioning the sins and scandals committed by priests, religious, and even senior Church leaders, which have been given wide media coverage.

The knowledge of the scandals, the pressure of the media and the avalanche of accusations have on the one hand made us realize how much we owe our people the witness of a chaste life, a life according to our vows. They expect it of us, they trust us. With deep sorrow we feel responsible for the victims of any abuse, especially children and minors. This is a time of humility and purification for the entire Church.

Another effect is that this storm has created a lot of nervousness in the Church and also among us Oblates. In certain situations accusations have gone from some very clear, sad cases of sexual abuse to all kinds of physical or cultural abuse over the past 50 years and more.

These times are not encouraging for prospective vocations. At the end of it all, certain fundamental questions might come up even in ourselves. Do we ourselves perhaps entertain doubts regarding our own way of life? Yet, we may just be panicking. In such situations, as when being accused in exaggerated ways, we can take recourse in St. Eugene as our patron saint since he himself, as a young bishop, went through similar experiences.^[13]

Is the secularized world itself gradually getting tired of the idolatry of the sexual instinct? There seem to be already some indications of it.^[14] But like all the other cultures, this one too will not cure itself. It needs evangelization: it has the right to experience through us Christians a new event of incarnation of Christian chastity right in its core.

Other cultural surroundings

The cultural universe in which we are immersed in many countries is either distant from secularization or only partially affected by it. The Christian ways of living our sexuality are then being placed in these contexts. We could distinguish four such situations.

First, there is the environment of the great Asian religions. Religious life evidently exists in this context, for instance in Buddhism. This makes it relatively easy, even today, for a young man to enter a juniorate at the age when his Buddhist peer joins a monastery. It can be observed that most of our Oblate juniorates are located in Asia. To make the vow of chastity later on and to remain faithful is therefore not counter-cultural at all.

The situation in predominantly Muslim countries is different. At least in the places where we work there is scarcely a model for religious life, except maybe for the existence of some Holy Men. On the other hand, the family enjoys strong protection in Islam. Though celibacy is not easily understood it is taken seriously, and the harsh discipline enforced in these cultures also helps our missionaries to appreciate the demands of fidelity to the vow.

The ancestral religions offer another environment, where fertility is valued highly and the extended family traditionally regulates the relationship between the sexes. The post-synodal

document *Ecclesia in Africa* suggests that the Church can also be understood as a family.[15]The Church as extended family provides the framework to live according to the Gospel values, including chastity.

Finally there are contexts strongly marked by popular Catholicism or other Christian cultures. While these sometimes seem to be too tolerant of human weakness, the faith value of chastity is generally preserved. Deviations are clearly recognized as sins and not rationalized away. In these contexts the meaning of celibacy is more easily understood.

What has changed for all of us?

Though there is a wide range of cultural diversity, we realize that over the last few years some insights have developed which Oblates apparently share in common across cultures. This seems to be a common result of the dialogue with the different environments that surround us. I can immediately observe four points:

- We have become more open and more honest about sexuality and do recognize it as an essential part of our human condition.
- Christian chastity is understood by us as the right use of our sexuality according to the respective state of life and personal condition. We speak of chastity in married life, before marriage, etc., and do not restrict the term only to celibate life.
- We see ever more clearly that we are called to be different from the globalized culture and that it would be dangerous to indiscriminately believe its compatibility with Christian values. We must strive to find ways and means of offering to the world credible alternatives and as such make Christian chastity and our celibate lives stand as a strong counter-culture.
- We begin to realize that our stance must be firm, well-anchored and decisive if we do not want to be engulfed in attitudes contrary to the Gospel.

Conclusion

For us Oblates, the vow of celibate chastity has an eminently missionary meaning. It speaks to others of the life of Jesus, Mary and so many others. It highlights how much the discipleship of Christ can affect a person, including the consecration of his sexuality by this particular vow. It evangelizes, more through action than through words, an essential part of our human relationships.

There is a large field of evangelization which lies before all believers: the difficult task of creating a Christian culture of sexuality. We will only achieve it by resonating together with the other Christian vocations. To summarize what celibate chastity means for mission let me quote once more *Vita Consecrata*:

“The consecrated life must present to today's world examples of chastity lived by men and women who show balance, self-mastery, an enterprising spirit, and psychological and affective maturity. Thanks to this witness, human love is offered a stable point of reference: the pure love which consecrated persons draw from the contemplation of Trinitarian love, revealed to us in Christ.” (VC 88)

What we can learn from the media reports is that we are far from being perfect in living out our special vocation. With humility and God's own patience let us every day start over again, renewing daily our commitment.

"I watched the little children play. They were not satisfied with their game. They stopped, they thought, and they said, "Let us begin again." It reminded me of the living out of our lives. Some things are not right. How often do we admit it and say, "Let us begin again" and do it the proper way? *Finita la commedia* (the farce is over), the game is up. Stop, begin again, and do it God's way. Such dissatisfaction with the way things are going is a point of growth, a challenge to perfection."^[16]

[1] EPM 12.

[2] Letter of December 4, 1808, in *Oblate Writings*, I, vol. 14, no. 35, p. 79.

[3] Letter to his mother, November 29, 1809, in *Oblate Writings*, I, vol. 14, no. 64, p. 146.

[4] *Positio super introductione causae*, Romae, 1935, p. 651.

[5] Article on *Chastity*, by H. J. Trümper, OMI.

[6] "Mandement à l'occasion du Carême 1843", in *Scripta Servi Dei*, vol. I, Oblate General Archives, sheet 119.

[7] *Selected Texts*, 216.

[8] Letter to Father Anthony Mouchette, December 2, 1854, in *Oblate Writings*, I, vol. 11, no. 1256, p. 253-254.

[9] Breviary, alternative reading for the common of Holy Men.

[10] *Lumen Gentium*, no. 42.

[11] *Evangelizing the Poor at the Dawn of the New Millennium* (EPM), 9.

[12] *Starting Afresh From Christ*, Instruction of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life..., May 19, 2002, #22, which quotes from *Vita Consecrata*.

[13] The Veze affaire in 1838; see Jean Leflon, *Eugène de Mazenod*.

[14] Recently the *Newsweek* magazine had on its cover the title "The New Virginity" (December 9, 2002). It published stories of young people who, for different reasons, declared their decision to remain virgins until marriage.

[15] "Not only did the Synod speak of inculturation, but it also made use of it, taking "Church as God's Family" as its guiding idea for the evangelization of Africa." (Eccl. in Africa 63).

[16] From the Feb 2002 Natal newsletter.