

OUR INCARNATION IN THE WORLD

December 8th, 1975 - Letter - Rome

The visit in Spain. - The Incarnation of Christ. - Our incarnation in the world.

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It will soon be Christmas, a feast of hope for all men, especially the poorest, the most humble – those who are capable of welcoming Christ with the heart of a child.

For us Oblates this feast follows quite closely another celebration which was a great joy and remains a sign of hope for the Institute: the beatification of Bishop de Mazenod. On that occasion I was able to see how much the Oblates are loved by those whom they serve and how much the simple people, the ordinary people, appreciate our proximity to them. They love the Oblates because they feel loved by them and they feel that the Oblates are very close to them. They came to Rome as forming to some extent a part of the Oblate family.

The visit in Spain

This past November I visited the Province of Spain, each of its communities. Their apostolic zeal, their desire to work for the poor and with the poor is strong and solid. At the same time, as in other Oblate provinces and in several sectors of the Church today, questions are being asked, concrete questions concerning formation, community life, and various forms of apostolic commitment. Such questions concerning the essential elements of our life are always a source of suffering. I returned from my trip with deep admiration for the work of our Spanish confreres and with great affection for them.

With all this in mind, I am writing to you today to initiate, together with you, some reflection on the mystery of Christ's Incarnation and on the meaning of that mystery in our lives as missionaries to the poor.

The Incarnation of Christ

In order to bring salvation to men, Christ wanted to become incarnate, to take on a body like theirs and to live their life like them and with them. He made himself like unto men, says St. Paul, in all things except sin.

When our Founder set out to evangelize the poor of Provence, he chose a similar way: to become poor with the poor, to speak their language and to go to them in order to tell them who Christ is. And when he sent his missionaries out into the world he told them: Go to the poorest, the most abandoned; love them, learn their language...

The same obligation holds for us today. It is at the root of our vocation as Oblates: to make ourselves poor with the poor and to go to them and live with them in order to reveal to them Jesus Christ through our love and our goodness, through the witness of our works and the proclamation of the Gospel message.

This obligation holds for all Oblates. It is, I believe, perceived by everyone of us, yet each Oblate understands and interprets it very differently according to his milieu, temperament and grace.

When considering the form of Christ's incarnation, we notice this first of all: not only did he make

himself man, he also freely willed to live the life of man in a situation that was poor. He could, while possessing wealth, have lived the life of a virtuous man. He did not want to do so. As Oblates we have made a similar option. To what extent do we live it? Complaints are often heard on this score. People will say that our lifestyle, our leisure hours, our manners, our behaviour, all correspond far more to those of the rich, the "rich who are good", the virtuous rich who are friends of the poor, than to those of the poor themselves.

Christ could just as well have lived his life as a man within the married state. He did not want to do so. The transcendence of his mission, it would seem, prompted him to witness by the free choice of celibacy that his kingdom was not of this world. Similarly also, while being well incarnated in a particular people, the Jews, and at a definite period of history, he did not want his love to be confined within these bounds. By virtue of the mission received from his Father, he was truly the universal Brother, the Saviour and Redeemer of all men.

All his life he burned interiorly with a dual love: love for the Father who had sent him into the world – he was passionately imbued with his Father's will – and love for all people whom he loved with an infinite tenderness to the point of giving his life for their salvation.

Our incarnation in the world

As Oblates we must take the model of our incarnation in the world from Jesus Christ. And we must all feel ourselves challenged by his mystery. Some still remain too far removed from their people, especially from the poor; they welcome the poor when they come to church, but they live at too great a distance from them and in a manner too different from theirs. Moreover, they don't go to them enough, particularly those who don't practise their faith or who have only a distorted image of Jesus Christ. Is it lack of zeal, or lack of élan, or lack of inner freedom stemming from routine generated by established ways...?

Others don't merit such a reproach. No matter what their concrete commitment may be, they live like the poor and close to the poor; they have succeeded in maintaining and developing a missionary spirit and a sensitivity to the poor. They spontaneously go forth in search of the "lost sheep", to those who are farthest away, to those who are the most marginal to the Church's life. Some of these Oblates, however, possibly due to a lack of discernment or of sufficient spiritual maturity, run the risk of committing themselves to dead-end courses of action. Far from being the presence of Jesus Christ and a way of evangelization, their manner of identifying with the life of the poor, of the working people, rather leads them to a progressive loss of the meaning of Jesus Christ, of the universality of his mission, and of the urgent requirements of his kingdom. What began in the beauty of hope ends in disillusionment.

For the Oblate, incarnation in today's world remains the normal way of evangelization. We must, therefore, proceed along this path with confidence and courage, but do so all the while having Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, in mind. What saves the poor is not the presence of one more poor person among them; rather it is the presence of Christ who is poor in their midst.

To all I wish a Merry Christmas and a Happy, Holy New Year! Next February 17 will mark the 150th anniversary of the approbation of our Institute. May the Immaculate Virgin, Mother of the Incarnate Word and Mother of the Oblates, help us understand more and more what we are and help us live this faithfully in the world of today.