

# OUR RELIGIOUS CONSECRATION

January 6th, 1997 - Letter to the Oblates in First Formation - Rome

Dear Oblate confreres,

This is the tenth in the series of my letters to Oblates in first formation and it is devoted to a document which concerns all of us in a special way. That document is the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, issued by His Holiness John Paul II after the recent Synod of Bishops. It is addressed to the whole Church but especially to consecrated persons. It bears the date of March 25, 1996.

The document is the result of discussion and reflection within the Church context on the occasion of the Bishops' Synod on consecrated life held in October 1994. Having been special secretary to the Synod assembly, I recognize the fidelity of this document to the final *Propositiones* and also to the linguistic group discussions and the more important interventions in the Synod itself. It also reflects the preparatory discussions which in some instances culminated in a national congress on the subject. The document also complements the preceding postsynodal exhortations: *Christifideles Laici* on the vocation and mission of the lay people in the Church and in the world of today (1988) and *Pastores dabo vobis* on the present condition of formation for priests and seminarians (1992). Together, these three documents specify the identity of the various states of life, their mission and their specific vocation in the Church (cf. VC 4, 16, 31, 32).

This letter is an invitation to you to study the exhortation in order to acquire a better understanding of our apostolic life (cf. VC 9), which is one of the forms of consecrated life (cf. VC 4-12, 32). So as to facilitate this personal and community meditation, I shall point out five general aspects, and then underline some elements of the document which are common to Oblate tradition.

## **I. General outlines of the exhortation**

The apostolic exhortation is a treatise on consecrated life. Therefore, we should not be surprised that it is lengthy. It begins with a deion of the different forms or categories of consecrated life. Then the first chapter reminds us of the Trinitarian and Christological sources of consecrated life and develops the theme. The second chapter deals with consecrated life as a sign of communion in the Church especially as fraternal life. The third chapter develops the missionary theme. The plan of the document follows an outline which has become classical. It describes the Christian identity as mystery, communion and mission. The plan is also that followed in *Christifideles laici*.

### *The Trinitarian aspect*

A radical following of Christ constitutes the core of consecrated life. Theology has always pointed out this fact. What is original in this document is the development of the Trinitarian aspect which states that the consecrated life becomes *Confessio Trinitatis* which is the title of the first chapter. Vatican Council II had stated that trinitarian life was the foundation of the life of the Church (cf. LG 1-9) and the source of mission (cf. AG 1-5). This postsynodal exhortation now places consecrated life in the context of the same Trinity, thus completing the theological reflection of the Council and applying it to a particular status of Christian life. We are reminded of the trinitarian image and communion not only in relation to consecrated life in general (cf. VC 17-21), but also in relation to each particular charism (cf. VC 36). The evangelical counsels are a gift of the Trinity and a reflection of trinitarian life in keeping with the experience of Jesus Christ (cf. VC 20.21). "The consecrated life, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, constitutes a closer imitation and an abiding re-enactment in the Church of the way of life which Jesus, the supreme consecrated one and missionary of the

Father for the sake of his kingdom, embraced and proposed to his disciples... The consecrated life truly constitutes a living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting as the Incarnate Word in relation to the Father and in relation to the brethren" (VC 22). Consequently the trinitarian perspective emphasizes communion in charity as the soul and basis of mutual relations (cf. VC 41-42, 47, 49-51) and of mission in the world (cf. VC 24, 72, 75).

#### *In the heart of the Church*

Consecrated life in the Church is not something isolated and marginal. "It is at the very heart of the Church... it is an intimate part of her life, her holiness and her mission" (VC 3). Referring to the Council Constitution (cf. LG 44), it emphasizes that "the profession of the evangelical counsels belongs indisputably to the life and holiness of the Church (VC 29). This means that "consecrated life, present in the Church from the beginning, can never fail to be one of her essential and characteristic elements, for it expresses her very nature. This is clearly seen from the fact that the profession of the evangelical counsels is intimately connected with the mystery of Christ, and has the duty of making somehow present the way of life which Jesus himself chose and indicates as an absolute eschatological value... The idea of a Church made up only of sacred ministers and lay people does not therefore conform to the intentions of her divine Founder, as revealed to us by the Gospels and the other writings of the New Testament" (VC 29; cf. 63, 105). This means that consecrated life is one of the Church's essential structures.

Consecrated life is one of the three states in the Church. "Although these different categories are a manifestation of the one mystery of Christ, the lay faithful have as their specific but not exclusive characteristic, activity in the world, the clergy, ministry, consecrated men and women, special conformity to Christ, chaste, poor and obedient" (VC 31; cf. 16). "In recent years there has been felt the need to clarify the identity of the various states of life, their vocation and their particular mission in the Church . . . These will be all the more helpful to the Church and her mission, the more their specific identity is respected" (VC 4). Communion with others is realized both in sharing what they have in common and in identifying what distinguishes them (cf. VC 30-33, 50-51, 54-56, 74).

Consecrated life is a gift of God to the Church (cf. VC 3, 105). "It continues to reassure the Christian people" (VC 3). "The Church and society itself need people capable of devoting themselves totally to others for the love of God. The Church can in no way renounce the consecrated life, for it eloquently expresses her inmost nature as "Bride". In the consecrated life the proclamation of the Gospel to the whole world finds fresh enthusiasm and power" (VC 105). It is for this reason that the Church wishes to involve everybody in supporting it (cf. VC 3, 13, 69, 106-108). However, the principal agents in its renewal, in its propagation, in its numerical increase and in its extension are the consecrated persons themselves (cf. VC 13, 109-110). The Church is confident that their response will be generous (cf. VC 3, 29, 40, 63) and she trusts in the Spirit whose strength continues to be the inspiration and support of consecrated life in the Church (cf. VC 5, 19).

#### *A pilgrim in history*

Consecrated life makes its journey through history, taking its form according to the changes and needs of the time. It is affected by the changes in the human condition. Its progress through history also explains in part the multiplicity of forms of consecrated life and numerous Institutes. "How can we not recall with gratitude to the Spirit the many different forms of consecrated life which he has raised up throughout history and which still exist in the Church today?" (VC 5). "In this perspective common to all consecrated life, there are many different but complementary paths" (VC 32), which manifest different aspects of the mystery and the ministry of Christ. "While individual Institutes have no claim to permanence, the consecrated life itself will continue to sustain among the faithful the

response of love towards God and neighbour. Thus it is necessary to distinguish the historical destiny of a specific Institute or form of consecrated life from the ecclesial mission of consecrated life as such. The former is affected by changing circumstances; the latter is destined to perdure" (VC 63).

"The present difficulties which a number of Institutes are encountering in some parts of the world must not lead to questioning of the fact that the profession of the evangelical counsels is an integral part of the Church's life and a much needed incentive towards greater fidelity to the Gospel. The consecrated life may experience further changes in its historical forms, but there will be no change in the substance of a choice which finds expression in a radical gift of self for love of the Lord Jesus and, in him, of every member of the human family" (VC 3). Among other present day problems mentioned by the exhortation, there is the problem of the decrease in vocations in some countries and an increase in others where there is often a lack of structures and means (cf. VC 2, 3, 64), the probable disappearance of Institutes which have in the past contributed to the life of the Church (cf. VC 63), the considerable number of older members in some areas (cf. VC 44), the need for the reorganization of works and the making of choices to answer the needs of today's world (cf. VC 63, 73, 81, 87). All these phenomena should not be a cause of discouragement but an incentive to greater creativity and renewal.

#### *Creative fidelity to the founding charism*

In recent years the theological category *charism* is used to point out the peculiarities and identity of the different forms of consecrated life (cf. VC 32, 36, 37, 48). The term specifies the sum of the aspects which distinguish a particular "family of consecrated persons", such as their spirituality, their fraternal life, their missionary contribution, etc. Sometimes reference is made to the identity of an Institute (cf. VC 48, 52), its particular nature (VC 45), its special spirit (cf. VC 48). It can be shared with the laity (cf. VC 54-56).

The members of an Institute must be faithful to their own charism which is a gift transmitted for the good of the Church. "In the first place there is need for fidelity to the founding charism and subsequent spiritual heritage of each Institute. It is precisely in this fidelity to the inspiration of the founders and foundresses, an inspiration which is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit, that the essential elements of the consecrated life can be more readily discerned and more fervently put into practice" (VC 36). "Institutes of consecrated life are thus invited courageously to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the times emerging in today's world. This invitation is first of all a call to perseverance on the path of holiness in the midst of the material and spiritual difficulties of daily life. But it is also a call to pursue competence in personal work and to develop a dynamic fidelity to their mission, adapting forms, if need be, to new situations and different needs, in complete openness to God's inspiration and to the Church's discernment. But all must be fully convinced that the quest for ever greater conformity to the Lord is the guarantee of any renewal which seeks to remain faithful to an Institute's original inspiration" (VC 37).

This creative fidelity must be preserved by the Institute, but it must also be promoted by the individual members in the various phases of their lives (cf. VC 70), thus ensuring the growth of the different dimensions of their existence, including the charismatic dimension. "Finally, all these elements are united in the dimension of the charism of the Institute, as it were in a synthesis which calls for a constant deepening of one's own special consecration in all its aspects, not only apostolic but also ascetical and mystical. This means that each member should study diligently the spirit, history and mission of the Institute to which he or she belongs, in order to advance the personal and communal assimilation of its charism" (VC 71).

## II. Convergence of Oblate Tradition

A reading of the Apostolic Exhortation brings to mind many of the basic values of our Oblate charism. The postsynodal document confirms them and gives a more in-depth presentation of them. I shall point out some of them, beginning with the experience of the Founder, then some passages from the document and references to the *Constitutions and Rules* so as to promote a deeper study of the various themes.

### *The following of Christ (sequela Christi)*

The experience of Christ, Saviour and Evangelizer, was the light and moving force in the life of Eugene de Mazenod. His spirituality and missiology are, above all else, Christ centered. Becoming other Jesus Christs, cooperators with the Saviour, teaching who Christ is: these are the convictions and commands transmitted by him to the Oblates. The different aspects of the de Mazenod charism can only be understood and lived in the context of an impassioned personal love for Christ.

The exhortation develops a number of these aspects and is therefore an inspiration for us. In a trinitarian perspective, the following of Christ becomes even more obvious. The image of the transfigured Jesus illumines the nature and requirements of consecrated life (cf. VC 14-16, 23-28, 29, 35, 40). Christ is the model and foundation of consecrated life (cf. VC 9, 22, 25, 77; CC 12, 19, 24), because he was the first to live this sort of life, and he entrusted it to those whom he has chosen (cf. VC 111), so that they would ensure that it would be perennially visible (cf. VC 109). "His way of living in chastity, poverty and obedience appears as the most radical way of living the Gospel on this earth, a way which may be called divine, because it was embraced by him, God and man, as the expression of his relationship as the only begotten Son with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. This is why Christian tradition has always spoken of the objective superiority of the consecrated life" (VC 18). The principal scope of the evangelical counsels is to make the person more like Christ. "By allowing ourselves to be guided by the Spirit on an endless journey of purification, they become day by day, conformed to Christ, the prolongation in history of a special presence of the Risen Lord" (VC 19).

Following Christ entails total involvement "living at his side and following him wherever he goes... becoming one with him, taking on his mind and his way of life" (VC 18; cf. CC 2, 4, 31). It entails "loving with the heart of Christ" (VC 75; cf. R. 12). In following Christ and in his mission we are cooperators with him (cf. 25, 36, 72; cf. CC 1, 2 33, 63). We must, therefore, be formed in Christ (cf. VC 93, 95; cf. CC 2, 4) and reflect his image (cf. VC 9), so that we will be a sign of Christ to the world, a living reminder of his way of existing and acting (cf. VC 22, 25; CC 15, 37). "You can and must say that you not only belong to Christ but that you have become Christ" (VC 109). This seems to echo what the Founder wrote in the first Rule, that the first aim of our life is to become other Jesus Christs.

### *Evangelization*

The proclamation of the Good News is at the very core of our missionary activity, both in the form of re-evangelizing Christians who have been abandoned and in first evangelization. The Oblates were founded for the re-evangelization of Christian communities in southern France; their rapid expansion and the development of their charisma was occasioned by their opening up to the mission *ad gentes*. According to Saint Eugene, faith was transmitted by proclamation, and the community is built up through evangelization.

The document *Vita Consecrata* invites everyone in the consecrated life to work for first evangelization, that is, for the proclamation of Christ to the people in every corner of the earth (cf. VC 77-78; C 5) and for the new evangelization of those who already know Christ (cf. VC 81),

emphasizing that “the proclamation of Christ has permanent priority in the mission of the Church” (VC 79; cf. 7). This requires daring and creative fidelity (cf. VC 73, 81; C 8). The document also points out the new requirements of inculturation (cf. VC 88, 98; CC 7, 104), ecumenism and dialogue (cf. VC 100-104; C 6) and the new *areopaghi* to be evangelized (cf. VC 73, 81, 87-92).

Our missionary influence, however, is not to be reduced to apostolic action, however urgent and necessary, which must be continually evaluated and reanimated. “Men and women religious will be all the more committed to the apostolate the more personal their dedication to the Lord Jesus is, the more fraternal their community life and the more ardent their involvement in the Institute’s specific mission.

#### *The poor are being evangelized*

Predilection for the poor was characteristic of the zeal and the missionary activity of Saint Eugene. While his apostolate was not confined to one social class and his priority was always for the proclamation of the word, the poor were his priority and they were the most abandoned souls. He was ready to receive them, to listen to them, to seek them out and to serve them as their pastor.

The exhortation emphasizes the choice of the poor which should be typical of those in the consecrated life. “The option for the poor is inherent in the very structure of love lived in Christ” (cf. VC 82; CC. 5, 8-9). Evangelical poverty “will be accompanied by a preferential love for the poor and will be shown especially by sharing the conditions of life of the most neglected” (VC 90; CC. 20-21). The promotion of justice is a consequence of this evangelical love. “Among the possible works of charity, certainly the one which in a special way shows the world this love ‘to the end’ is the fervent proclamation of Jesus Christ to those who do not yet know him, to those who have forgotten him, and to the poor in a preferential way” (VC 75; C5).

#### *Community life*

Living together as brothers, as an effective and credible means of accomplishing their mission of evangelization, was one of the orientations firmly chosen by Saint Eugene from the first beginnings of the foundation and throughout his life as Superior General. Community life means mutual support in the practice of holiness and living as brothers in a family. It is a preparation for the apostolate and witness to living the Gospel. Regularity and, even more so, charity are characteristic of this life. It is modeled on the life of Jesus with the Apostles and on that of the first Christian community.

We find these models and ideals of community life in the postsynodal exhortation (cf. VC 41-42; 45; C 3). The document also adds the trinitarian and ecclesial dimension. “So too, among his disciples, there can be no true unity without that unconditional mutual love which demands a readiness to serve others generously, a willingness to welcome them as they are, without judging them, and an ability to forgive up to seventy times seven. Consecrated persons who become of one heart and one soul, through the love poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit, experience an interior call to share everything in common: material goods and spiritual experiences, talents and inspirations, apostolic ideals and charitable service” (VC 42; cf. CC 3, 3, 39, 40).

Witness and joy should be characteristic of communities (VC 45; C 41), which are apostolic for themselves and not only because of the mission they accomplish (cf. VC 72; C 37). “Fraternal life, understood as a life shared in love, is an eloquent sign of ecclesial communion” (VC 42), “a place in which to experience the hidden presence of the Risen Lord” (ib; cf. C 3). “Placed as they are within the world’s different societies -- societies frequently marked by conflicting passions and interests, seeking unity but uncertain about the ways to attain it -- communities of consecrated life, where

persons of different languages, ages and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, are signs that dialogue is always possible and that communion can bring differences into harmony" (VC 51; cf. WAC 5-7).

### *The call to holiness*

The Good Friday conversion was, for Eugene, a firm resolve to become a saint, rather than a moral change in his life. Commitment to sanctity was characteristic of his whole life and was the invitation he issued to his companions. "Be holy" was a constant exhortation he addressed to his Oblates. He saw the religious vows as a commitment and a help in the pursuit of this end, a means of identifying with Christ.

The exhortation *Vita Consecrata* frequently repeats and emphasizes this duty-call. Holiness is the great challenge of our day for those leading the consecrated life; it is the major prophetic witness of our time (cf. VC 84-95). "The Church has always seen in the profession of the evangelical counsels a special path to holiness" (VC 35). The profession and practice of the evangelical counsels are a concrete path to holiness (cf. VC 20-22, 35, 87-93; CC 11-29). They are also the source of evangelical witness and prophetism (cf. VC 25, 76, 84-94; CC 15, 16, 21, 25). Fidelity to our charism and to our Founder "is a call to perseverance on the path of holiness in the midst of the material and spiritual difficulties of daily life" (VC 37) The path to holiness requires total dedication even to the point of martyrdom (cf. VC 24, 38, 86; Preface CC & RR).

Christian holiness is a gradual conforming to Christ (cf. VC 22, 35-38, 72, 76, 77; CC 2, 4). "To tend towards holiness, this is in summary the programme of every consecrated life, particularly in the perspective of its renewal on the threshold of the Third Millennium. The starting point of such a programme lies in leaving everything behind for the sake of Christ, preferring him above all things, in order to share fully his Paschal mystery (...) Apostolic fruitfulness, generosity in love of the poor, and the ability to attract vocations among the younger generation depend on this priority and its growth in personal and communal commitment. It is precisely the spiritual quality of the consecrated life which can inspire the men and women of our day who themselves are thirsting for absolute values. In this way the consecrated life will become an attractive witness" (VC 93).

Consecrated people must not only commit themselves to becoming holy; they must promote holiness among all Christians. This is part of their role in the Church. "Today a renewed commitment to holiness by consecrated persons is more necessary than ever, also as a means for promoting and supporting every Christian's desire for perfection (...) Consecrated persons, at the deepest level of their being are caught up in the dynamism of the Church's life, which is thirsty for the divine Absolute and called to holiness. It is to this holiness that they bear witness. The fact that all are called to become saints cannot fail to inspire more and more those who by their very choice of life have the mission of reminding others of that call" (VC 39; cf. 103). This is what is being increasingly asked of us by the laity, especially those who wish to be associated with our charism (cf. VC 54-56; RR 27-28). The spiritual life must therefore have first place in the programme of Families of consecrated life, in such a way that every Institute and community will be a school of evangelical spirituality (VC 93).

### *Unity of life*

Unity of life is an expression of growth and maturity in Christ. During the first years of his ministry, Saint Eugene struggled to reach a balance between apostolate and prayer. We too must make a constant effort to grow in harmony, which we can realize in our union with Christ.

On the subject of apostolic religious life the Exhortation states: "In every age, consecrated men and

women must continue to be images of Christ the Lord, fostering through prayer a profound communion with him, so that their whole lives may be penetrated by an apostolic spirit and their apostolic work with contemplation" (VC 9). Unity of life in Christ is expressed in three ways:

- Above all "the consecrated life manifests the organic unity of the commandment of love, in the inseparable link between love of God and love of neighbour" (VC 5; cf. 63, 67, 76-77, 84).

- It is also expressed in unity between action and contemplation: "Institutes involved in one or other form of the apostolate must foster a solid spirituality of action, seeing God in all things and all things in God (...) Jesus himself gave us the perfect example of how we can link communion with the Father to an intensely active life. Without a constant search for this unity, the danger of an interior breakdown, of confusion and discouragement, lurks always near. Today as yesterday, the close union between contemplation and action will allow the most difficult missions to be undertaken" (VC 74; cf. 9, 36, 75, 82).

- Finally, there must be unity between consecration and mission: "Those whom God calls to follow Jesus are also consecrated and sent into the world to imitate his example and continue his mission (...) Thus men and women religious will be all the more committed to the apostolate the more personal their dedication to the Lord Jesus is, the more fraternal their community life, and the more ardent their involvement in the Institute's specific mission" (VC 72). Our *Constitutions and Rules* point out different ways for growing in Christ's friendship and consequently for developing unity in our lives (cf. CC 56, 31-35, 69).

#### *Love for the Church*

Saint Eugene had a lively feeling for the Church right from his youth. It was for love of the abandoned Church that he embraced the priesthood and the ministry of the missions. Right from the beginning of the Institute he presented to his companions the ideal of the Church, the inheritance and spouse of Christ, which cries out for help to remedy the evils that afflict her. "The sight of these evils has so touched the hearts of certain priests, zealous for the glory of God, men with an ardent love for the Church, that they are willing to give their lives, if need be, for the salvation of souls" (*Preface*). Throughout his life the difficulties he had at various times with Church persons or institutions were the occasions for growth in obedience and love for the Church herself, because "it is not possible to separate the Church from Christ".

The exhortation might well have quoted Saint Eugene on the subject of fidelity to the Church. We could certainly apply to him what the document says in general: "In Founders and Foundresses we see a constant and lively sense of the Church, which they manifest by their full participation in all aspects of the Church's life, and in their ready obedience to the Bishops and especially to the Roman Pontiff" (VC 46). The exhortation recommends adherence of mind and heart to the magisterium (VC 46; C 6), the special link of communion with the successor of Peter in his unifying and universal mission (cf. VC 47; C 27), a coordinated and active integration in the particular Church which is promoted by constant dialogue (cf. VC 49-50, 74; CC 6, 12).

In a Church which is "essentially a mystery of communion" (VC 41) "fraternal life, understood as a sharing in love, is an eloquent sign of ecclesial communion" (VC 42; C 12). "Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to practice the spirituality of communion as witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God's design. The sense of ecclesial communion, developing into a spirituality of communion, promotes a way of thinking, speaking and acting which enables the Church to grow in depth and extension" (VC 46).

Consecrated life grows in the Church and contributes to her life and her mission in creative fidelity to the charism received from the Spirit" (cf. VC 29-33, 35-39). The specific contribution of each Institute to the Church is its faithful and creative living of its charism which each local church must respect and foster (cf. VC 3, 48-49; CC 5-7).

#### *Charity is the pivot of our life*

The naturally extrovert character of Eugene was the foundation on which grace developed an ardent love of the Lord, charity towards his religious confreres and an enterprising zeal for souls in need. He passed on this inheritance to the Oblates as his family. It is obvious from his final testament: charity among yourselves and zeal for souls outside.

Charity is the expression of sharing in the life of the Trinity. Consecrated life is a response to the love of God (cf. VC 17). "It is the Spirit who awakens the desire to respond fully; it is he who guides the growth of this desire, helping it to mature into a positive response and sustaining it as it is faithfully translated into action; it is he who shapes and moulds the hearts of those who are called, configuring them to Christ, the chaste, the poor and the obedient One, and prompting them to make his mission their own" (VC 19; C 12). The evangelical counsels are a reflection of the life of the Trinity which is love (cf. VC 21). "The consecrated life reflects the splendour of this love, because by its fidelity to the mystery of the Cross, it confesses that it believes and lives by the love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (VC 24; cf. CC 12, 14-16, 21, 24, 29).

Charity finds its concrete expression in fraternal life, of which the source is the communion of the Trinity (cf. VC 41) and the model is Christ who gave himself even unto the supreme sacrifice of the Cross. "So too, among his disciples, there can be no true unity without that unconditional mutual love" (VC 42). "If the Church is to reveal her true face to day's world, she urgently needs such fraternal communities, which, by their very existence, contribute to the new evangelization, inasmuch as they disclose in a concrete way the fruitfulness of the new commandment" (VC 45; cf. 85, WAC 14-18).

Consecrated life is the manifestation (epiphany) of God's love in the world. The mission is the fruit of charity. It is possible only if one loves with the heart of Christ. "He continually calls new disciples to himself, both men and women, to communicate to them, by an outpouring of the Spirit, the divine *agape*, his way of loving, and to urge them thus to serve others in the humble gift of themselves, far from all self-interest" (VC 75). "In the work of salvation, in fact, everything comes from sharing in the divine *agape* (...) The consecrated life eloquently shows that the more one lives in Christ, the better one can serve him in others, going even to the furthest missionary outposts and facing the greatest dangers" (VC 76; cf. C 37).

#### *Means of growth*

Eugene de Mazenod was a practical man and he used concrete means to live his Christian, religious and priestly commitment. He centered his life on Christ. Throughout his whole life he was always faithful to meditating the Word of God. The Eucharist, as a liturgical sacrifice and as a real presence was the center of his prayer and of his communion with his missionaries. He sought union with God in his meetings and in his apostolate. He passed on his convictions and his experience to his Oblates by writing them into the Rule.

The postsynodal Exhortation reminds us of the importance of traditional means in Christian and religious life. "The Word of God is the first source of all Christian spirituality. It gives rise to a personal relationship with the living God and with his saving and sanctifying will" (VC 94; cf. CC 31, 33). *Lectio*



*divina* is recommended; it is required by today's mission. "If the great challenges which modern history poses to the new evangelization are to be faced successfully, what is needed above all is a consecrated life which is continually open to the challenge by the revealed Word and by the signs of the times" (VC 81).

Personal and community prayer have their climax in the liturgy which unites the person with the Lord and with the Church. "An indispensable means of effectively sustaining communion with Christ is assuredly the Sacred Liturgy and especially the celebration of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours" (VC 95; cf. 38, 42). The same paragraphs emphasize the importance of the sacrament of reconciliation, spiritual direction, the Rosary, as do also our *Constitutions* (cf. CC 33, 36, 40). Personal discipline is also necessary (cf. VC 38; C 4) and a community rhythm of prayer (cf. VC 42; C 38).

The Exhortation recalls that the *Constitutions and Rules* are among the means of renewal because they "provide a map for the whole journey of discipleship, in accordance with a specific charism confirmed by the Church. A greater regard for the Rule will not fail to offer consecrated persons a reliable criterion in their search for the appropriate forms of witness which is capable of responding to the needs of the times without departing from an Institute's initial inspiration" (VC 37).

### *Mary*

Devotion to Mary has always been part of the life and apostolate of Saint Eugene and of the Congregation. Mary has confirmed and sustained them on their journey especially in the more important and delicate moments of their history. She is the companion, patroness, Mother and model of the Missionary Oblates and they are consecrated to God through Mary and with her as their model.

The Exhortation makes frequent mention of Mary. The Virgin Mary is the model of consecration and of the following of Christ. She received him and her merciful motherhood is fruitful (cf. VC 18, 23, 28, 34; CC 10, 13, 36, 46). "It cannot be denied that the practice of the evangelical counsels is also a particularly profound and fruitful way of sharing in Christ's mission, in imitation of the example of Mary of Nazareth, the first disciple, who willingly put herself at the service of God's plan by a total gift of self" (VC 18; cf. C 10). The Exhortation concludes with an invocation to the Virgin Mary (cf. VC 112).

### *Indispensable formation*

Saint Eugene prepared the future of the Congregation by being concerned for vocations and for their formation from the first months of the foundation. Ongoing formation was ensured by the rhythm of life, by community exercises, by theological and pastoral conferences and by the fraternal atmosphere of life lived more intensely in the intervals of the apostolate.

In the apostolic Exhortation, certain points are mentioned which are particularly meaningful with regard to the following of Christ and assimilation with him (cf. VC 64-65; CC 4, 15, 19, 24), to the intrinsic missionary dimension of consecration, to an evangelically critical awareness of the values and counter-values of culture (cf. VC 67; R 37), to the formation of formators who must make themselves experts in the path that leads to God (cf. VC 66).

Special emphasis is given to ongoing formation, because "commitment to formation never ends, (...) it is an intrinsic requirement of religious consecration" (VC 65, 69; CC 68-70). Guidelines are provided for its different stages and dimensions (cf. VC 70-71).

### *Capable of responding to the challenges of today*

The founder was able to discern the needs of the Church in his time and his response was courageous. He responded by parish missions and later by sending missionaries abroad, adapting methods creatively to circumstances. For the Oblates, responding to urgent needs has always been characteristic of their missionary approach and the source of fruitfulness in their apostolate.

Today there are new problems and new challenges. We must be faithful to our charism and respond creatively to the signs of the times, to the new areopaghi of the mission (cf. VC 73, 81; C 8). "The Spirit is calling consecrated men and women to present new answers to the new problems of today's world. These are divine pleas which only souls accustomed to following God's will in everything can assimilate faithfully and then translate courageously into choices which are consistent with the original charism and which correspond to the demands of the concrete historical situation" (VC 73b).

Some responses are perennially valid such as first and new evangelization which are a part of our original foundational charism. We must find the means of adapting them to persons and cultures. Others are newer, such as inculturation (cf. VC 78-80, 98; CC 7, 104), dialogue (cf. VC 100-104), involvement of the laity in the life of the Church (cf. VC 56). "The new evangelization, like that of all time, will be effective if it proclaims from the rooftops what it has first lived in intimacy with the Lord. It calls for strong personalities, inspired by saintly fervor" (VC 81).

With the support of the Church, we can afford to look to the future of the consecrated life with confidence and commitment. "Not only do you have a glorious history to remember and narrate, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look towards the future into which the Spirit is sending you to do even greater things". Therefore we are called upon to be creatively faithful, in order to respond to the challenges of our time and to be an understandable and challenging sign to people of today.