

OUR RESPONSE TO THE NEEDS OF MEN

October 19th, 1976 - Letter - Rome

The visit of some Provinces. - Commitment of the laity. - Choosing our apostolic works. - Oblates exist for Christ and his mission. - Tribute to the Oblates of Laos.

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God so loved the world that He gave up his only begotten Son, not to reject the world but so that the world might find salvation through him. The Oblate will ever be mindful that it is this same love which consecrates him and gives him his mission (1966 Constitutions, art 9).

The feast of Christmas once again gives me the opportunity to come and greet you, to share with you.

The visit of some Provinces

This year also I have been able to visit several provinces of the Congregation: Belgium-North, Germany and Poland, in Europe; all the provinces of Southern Africa, of Western and North-western Canada up to the Arctic Ocean.

I can truly say that Oblates everywhere are continuing the mission of Jesus Christ. Like him and in his steps they are striving to liberate man, to evangelize him by revealing through their work and word the mystery of God who is love, justice, life and peace. And they do so with wonderful dedication in conditions that are in some instances most trying, whether it be apartheid in South Africa, the conflict against the faith in Poland, or the lack of reinforcements and the ageing of personnel in the missions of the Far North.

Their eyes are open to the needs of people, especially the poorest, to their strong desire for a more just and fraternal life. These Oblates are asking themselves the same crucial question the Church herself is asking: How can the Gospel message be effectively transmitted in today's world, a world increasingly seeking to develop itself without God and without believing in its own need of redemption? (cf. *Evangelica testificatio*, 52).

Concrete evangelizing activities differ according to local circumstances and perceived needs. Some Oblates are searching for new ways to be closer to the poor and to be more committed to their struggle; Gospel concern urges them to be wherever the future of the poor is at stake. Such searching is essential to the life and progress of our Institute.

Commitment of the laity

An instance in point: it is especially important to involve the laity more and more in our missionary work. One of my finest memories of this year is my participation, last January 14th, in a prayer meeting at a West Transvaal mining compound.

Some twenty Catholics were gathered in a barrack, with one of the miners presiding. The meeting – simple, sincere and really beautiful – lasted an hour. When it was over, I was asked to say a few words. I could only tell them how happy my colleagues (Fathers Motte, Hogan and Ligtoet) and I were to have been able to pray with them, that we all belonged to the same great family of God and that we would continue to pray for them. I also invited them to pray for the Oblates.

Once a week these people get together in this way. Thanks to the Father who looks after them, they have taken in hand their own Christian life. This is really marvellous; it is something we should aim at increasingly, that the laity in our care come to take upon themselves their Christian responsibilities in every field – social and political as well as economic and religious.

Choosing our apostolic works

Some there are who would like Rome and the General Council to hand down, in matters of apostolic commitment, well-defined decisions and absolute judgments: "This activity is Oblate; that one is not!".

Ordinarily, this is asking too much. Allow me here to refer to something Pope Paul VI wrote on May 14, 1971, in an apostolic letter to Cardinal Roy. After describing how diverse were the situations of Christians in the world, he added: "Faced with such varying situations it is difficult for us to make one single statement proposing a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our purpose, nor is it our mission" (no. 4).

This attitude, *servatis servandis*, equally applies to the General Council in regard to the Congregation's missionary activity. It is up to each Region and to each Province to analyse objectively the needs and appeals of the poor in its area; and to see by the light of the Gospel, the Oblate Constitutions and the Founder's spirit, how the Congregation can effectively answer those needs while remaining true to itself. In this matter, each and every Province has a duty to reflect and discern as a community. Such reflection must lead to concrete resolutions: a determining of apostolic priorities within the Province, a revising of existing works in the light of those priorities, and the promotion of new forms of commitment.

The General Council can, and should, be of help in this endeavour, but it cannot take the place of the Provinces. Its help will consist in encouraging, stimulating and offering discernment norms or criteria that will allow us to go forward in faithfulness to our common vocation and in union with the Church and the entire Institute.

Oblates exist for Christ and his mission

Oblates do not exist for themselves. They live for the glory of God and the salvation of men. "Their purpose", the Founder wrote, "is the same that the Son of God had in mind when coming on earth"... especially, "to evangelize the poor" (*Administrative Circulars*, I, p. 122).

There is only one way of properly fulfilling that aim: "To try to become other Christs" (1818 *Constitutions and Rules*, Part. 2, Ch. 1). The essential is all there. The more an Oblate centers his life on Christ and becomes a man with a deep inner life, the more he will be a good missionary – able and willing to go anywhere, to the very limits of the world and to the most difficult places, without peril to himself and with all the chances of effectively doing God's work.

Tribute to the Oblates of Laos

Before closing, I would like to pay tribute to our former missionaries in Laos^[1]. I want to thank them for the many fine examples of courage, confidence and zeal they have given to the Congregation. The latter has lived with them the drama that was their lot during this last year. To all Oblates I say: Merry Christmas! A Happy and Holy New Year! May the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Saviour, help us all reanimate the missionary grace that is within us!

[1] Consequent to the political changes that have occurred in Laos, the Oblates were expelled from that country.