

REFLECTIONS ON THE 34th GENERAL CHAPTER

November 15th, 2004 - Letter - Rome

Dear brother Oblates,

A few weeks have passed since the end of the 34th General Chapter. With the approach of the Christmas season I wish to share some thoughts with you on the challenges the Chapter placed before us.

First of all, on my behalf and that of the General Council, I want to thank all the Oblates for the confidence you have placed in us, as well as for your congratulations and assurance of prayer. I also want to express our gratitude to all who worked so assiduously for the Chapter, and to those who prayed for its fruitfulness.

“Witnessing to hope” was the core-theme of our assembly, which later became the title of its main document. To spread the word of hope has always been the mission of the Oblates; this is what we inherited from St. Eugene. In the same manner that our Founder read the situation of the Church in France and the wider world in the aftermath of the French revolution, we interpret the aftermath of the unprecedented transformations that have affected the whole planet during the 20th century. Today we have to proclaim our good news in a world that has changed and continues to change at a rapid pace.^[1]

There is much more to the Chapter than appears on paper. The capitulars will be able to give an account of its wonderful atmosphere of fraternity beyond frontiers. Naturally there have been shortcomings; intercultural encounters will never be free of tension. However, to the participants it rings true when the Chapter letter speaks of “fraternity and prayer, a spiritual event within which we felt the presence of the Holy Spirit”.^[2] In the opening days, representatives of the Oblate associations contributed in an important measure to the atmosphere. The Oblate Brothers constituted right from the beginning a very active group with its own articulate voice; above all, their gift of fraternity became visible to us all.

We find ourselves in a context of celebration as we start the implementation of the Chapter. On the 8th of December we commemorate the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. In October we entered the Eucharistic year, proclaimed by the Holy Father, and soon we will begin the 10th year after the canonization of St. Eugene. May these celebrations set a special tone for our efforts, making us feel closer to the sources of that hope to which we are called to witness.

The main documents have been published. In the fraternal spirit of the Chapter, within the context of celebrations of the year that lies ahead, it is now our task to understand well the will of the Chapter and to respond to it.

Let me share with you my personal way of reading the Chapter documents. The General Council has nothing official to offer at this point. It will be January 2005 before the new Council can meet and begin to map its response to the Chapter mandate. I will limit myself to ruminating on certain elements that strike me in the documents themselves, highlighting three aspects: our Oblate mission defined as witnessing to hope, the renewal of our religious life in community and the call to cross borders.

I. A mission of witnessing to hope

“Respond to the thirst of our world for hope.” (ChL) – This is how the Chapter formulated our mission.

The hope we proclaim is above all a person: Christ. Oblates are to preach who Christ is. In the Congregation we have also lived through a project that named our mission as one of *Immense Hope*. The Chapter understood itself as a phase in that project. It received a report on the work accomplished in the Immense Hope project over the past four years and endorses the further implementation of this project. The Chapter was ever mindful of the vision spelled out by the past three Chapters and provided multiple elements for future courses of action. The thrust of the Immense Hope project requires that self-evaluation and strategizing for mission become an on-going process, a culture in every Oblate Unit. It is like conversion, which can never be said to have been fully achieved. It is like a tool that we will use from now on.

Our duty to continue self-evaluation and strategizing for mission becomes clear through several critical statements of the Chapter letter which require a response:

- * “There is a need to define what it means to be a missionary in areas where the Church is already established.
- * Our understanding of social justice is still not fully integrated into our lives and ministry.
- * We need a new effort, perhaps even a radical new departure, in terms of dialogue with Islam.
- * As a Congregation, we have not done enough to respond to the deadly crisis of AIDS, particularly in Africa.”[3]
- * We characterized secularity as a “complex and pervasive reality”[4]. A pro-active response is needed and suggested by one of the Chapter recommendations.

In addition, there are some suggestions as to how we could respond, calling for:

- * New approaches to mission preaching, in collaboration with the laity and other religious;
- * Pilot communities to give an answer to secularity, to fundamentalism, to dialogue;
- * “Greater understanding and use of the media”:[5]
- * Youth ministry, which is highlighted as a concrete way of witnessing to hope, following the example of our Founder, and has been re-introduced into our Rule.

We can be grateful to the Chapter for having sharpened our awareness of today’s missionary urgencies and for indicating how we can respond to them. These urgencies fall well within the vision of the first ten Constitutions and Rules, and the reference to mission preaching and youth ministry harken back to St. Eugene himself. The first thing of importance for us Oblates is clarity about our mission. We live in a time of unprecedented change. If our mission consciousness were to be blurred, diffused, we would lose our *raison d’être*. If we are able together to set new priorities and to be daring, in a common approach, our mission will gain momentum and our Congregation will flourish.

II. Religious life in community renewed

In chapter two of the Recommendations, under the heading “Oblate community and religious life”, we are invited to do some thorough work in our own backyard. I see here one of the main Chapter concerns.

It is clear that in order to give to our world the hope it yearns for, we first need to be filled with the same hope. I ask myself: Is this hope enkindled in us to the extent that we can cast on earth the fire Christ wanted to bring? Can we measure up to the demands of evangelizing in this changing world, often in hostile or indifferent environments, or are we rather being seduced by false good news, offered to us through so many channels? Some Chapter statements question us seriously: "Our community life is often weak." "Our commitment to prayer needs to be strengthened."^[6]

The assembly did not mean to say that we have already been defeated. It affirmed on the contrary that the Oblates can count on some of their strengths, pointing to our closeness to the people, our commitment to the poor, as well as the growing number of lay associations, which challenge us to reclaim the Oblate charism, renewing our community and religious life. Within the Congregation, the wisdom of our elders and the gift that the Oblate Brothers are to us will contribute to our conversion. Conversion, however, is what is needed! Without conversion we cannot proclaim Christ as our hope.

The well we can draw from is the richness of our Oblate spirituality. In our Congregation, religious life is understood as **oblation**, self-giving. Our life as religious emulates the *kenosis* of Christ and of God. The Chapter Recommendations refer us to *Witnessing as Apostolic Community* where we read: "Like our Founder before us, we seek to gather around the person of Jesus Christ so as to achieve solidarity of compassion, to become a single heart that can be food for the life of the world."^[7] The text continues: "Therefore we choose **community** as a way whereby we are continuously evangelized and can be witnesses of the Good News in this graced moment of today's world." - Gathering around Christ as religious, we become community.

In practice, our renewal as religious and as community clearly calls for on-going formation efforts! This is what chapter two of *Witnessing to Hope* is about. We need to help actively, it says, the very person of the Oblate who is supposed to be a minister of hope "through the nurturing of the Oblate in his community and religious life; and the formation of Superiors and others sharing in leadership."^[8] A new element which surfaces here is that in order to achieve this, we are also encouraged to turn to the laity and to "discover the rich potential of the presence of associates who strengthen us in the Oblate vocation and mission."^[9] Here indeed some substantial work lies ahead of us!

The chapter on vocations also mentions community.^[10] The quality of our religious life in community constitutes a strong call. It is from there that we will be able "to invite young men, with their natural generosity and idealism, to join with us in responding to the needs of the world in the mission entrusted to the Church."^[11] True, vocations are always a gift, and the relationship between the quality of religious life in community and vocations cannot be taken for granted. I believe that - through the mystery of the Cross - many Oblate Units that today are being tested by the lack of vocations are contributing greatly to the blessings we receive in other parts of the world by their fidelity to the Oblate charism.

III. A call to cross borders

Our mission, our community life as religious, are lived out in an environment that has become global. *It is not surprising* that towards the end of *Witnessing to Hope* the Chapter comes to realize: "if [the recommendations] were to be seen as colored by a common motif, it would be that of internationality."^[12]

I think the expression *global village* strikes most people today as a very adequate metaphor for the world. We all live in the same, global village! Peoples and cultures connect, intermingle with each other and cannot avoid dealing with each other, much the same way as life unfolds in a village.

Like the world, the Congregation also looks different to us today. The Chapter letter speaks of “huge demographic shifts” that “have radically altered the face of the Congregation.” [13] The Holy Father takes this up in his message to the capitulars:

“I appreciate your reflection on the profound changes that are marking the Congregation, whose center of gravity is moving toward the poorest areas of the world. This extremely significant fact leads you to update formation, distribution of personnel, forms of government and communion of goods. Make clear choices in virtue of the priorities of your mission.”[14]

The new globalized reality calls us Oblates to a new way of practice, which will only be possible if based on a new consciousness.

New practice: *Witnessing to Hope* says that we need to make use of the strength of being a world-body in 67 countries, and that there already exists among us a growing desire to develop further our internationality.[15] Our future lies in “increasing our solidarity”![16] The Chapter has suggested concrete actions in this line, and I mention only some of them:

- * Broader personnel exchange among Units;
- * Founding of pilot communities for some new mission fields;
- * Establishment of regional and congregational post-novitiates, and consolidation of our formation houses;
- * Congregation-wide reflection on the place of higher education;
- * Review of our structures of governance: appropriate size of Provinces; strengthening the Regions; reviewing the Central Government;
- * Implementation of Capital Sharing II and assistance to increase locally generated revenue.

These rather daunting tasks will only become reality if grounded on a new consciousness. The expression *border-crossing*, which is perhaps richer than “internationality”, was used. For instance, the “the crossing of cultural and national borders” is recognized as essential for missionary formation.[17] Jesus, too, is seen as the one who crossed borders.[18] The capitulars point out that increased solidarity is an opportunity to “discover new faces of Christ”. [19]

In so far as an ethos of border-crossing inspires our missionary praxis, our religious renewal and our formation during the coming years, it will unleash new energies among us. In such an ethos, each Unit’s contribution will be seen by all the others as a particular gift for the good of the whole Congregation; all of us together could give an abiding witness to world around us.

IV. God’s work

At the 34th General Chapter the Oblates have chosen a hands-on approach. They have given themselves a lot of concrete work to do.

“We discerned that our task was to be practical, to offer some concrete challenges in terms of improving our community and ministry. Somehow, the hope engendered in the legacy of the

Congregation at this time needed to be transformed into deeds of action”.[20]

Explicit reference is made to the thrust of the documents of the three former Chapters; we remain in continuity with them and we want to bring to fruition the great ideals set forth in their pronouncements.

In my Chapter report, which includes the financial part presented by the Treasurer General, it was pointed out that fidelity to what we are today means that we must change. In particular we must change our ways of procuring and using our resources of personnel and material goods. The Chapter has responded with a whole series of actions that lie before us; I have mentioned some of them above. If we look at all of them ... the natural reaction is to ask ourselves: can we actually do all these things? Do we have a strong enough common vision to risk the future? Are we ready to pay the price of leaving nothing un-dared?

Right now, we cannot know how much we can achieve. The General Council will make plans to fulfill the Chapter mandate; but time and contingencies are factors we cannot completely master; at this point we do not know exactly how to comply with all these recommendations.

It is important to note that any significant move will be possible only with the positive “political will” of the provinces, delegations and missions and their superiors. Fortunately most of them have been capitulars! Together let us take the risk to make the Chapter document real!

And though we put our best efforts in all these actions, will they make a difference for the world?

“In a world greatly changed since the last Chapter in 1998, during times in which fear seems so prevalent, in which the divisions between rich and poor continue to grow and in which religions all too often seem part of the fear and divisions, we are tempted to ask: What hope might the world receive from our few and often imperfect, incomplete courses of action?”[21]

Is this not the moment to again return to our Chapter theme: **Hope**? Our first approach to the task must be through the hidden strength of hope. It would be a mistake to rely on our own strengths alone. Constitution 20 mentions hope when it speaks about the vow of poverty:

“When faced with the demands of our mission and the needs to be met, we may feel weak and helpless. It is then that we can learn from the poor, especially making our own their patience, hope and solidarity.”

The present Chapter has reaffirmed such values of “patience, hope and solidarity”, values of the poor who know that their strength lies in God. Like the poor in spirit, the capitulars put their hope in God who alone is the “Lord of this world”, “still very alive”. They describe him as the “God of Abraham and Sarah”, the emigrants, who left their homeland and set out into the unknown. The unusual expression “kenotic God” is used: the God who has been revealed to us in Christ is the One who gives himself away. Self-giving, *kenosis*, oblation ... it is from here that our action must begin. The radically new “does not come without personal cost and new vision.”[22] It can only happen if we are ready to let go.

Let us begin working at the Chapter implementation realistically, knowing that things may take some time and that difficulties are sure to lie on our path. We can trust the Lord that there will be a time for everything.[23] We can start being faithful in very little ways.[24] Even before any concrete plans are

ready, we can start right now, getting in tune with the spirit of the Chapter. Concretely, each Unit could already tackle the implementation of its own Immense Hope strategies. Units will find that the recommendations of the Chapter will compose very well with their own priorities and strategies.

The words of the capitulars offer a good conclusion as we commence our task:

“The focus of the 34th General Chapter has been to translate hope-filled words into concrete actions. The outcome of the Chapter is in the hands of all Oblates and of those who share in the charism. Through their joint efforts we can move beyond “hopes” to Hope. May Mary, our Patroness and Model of Hope, and Eugene, our Father and Founder, accompany us in our ministry of hope.”[25]

The feast of Christmas is at hand. It will be the Christmas of the Eucharistic Year. May I add my best wishes to you for this joyful feast. Christ came to dwell among us in the fullness of time, and still today through the Eucharist, he continues to stay with us. This is enough to sustain all our hopes.

Greetings in the newborn Christ and in Mary Immaculate who was the first to welcome him.

[1] The November 2004 Congress of religious life, organized in Rome by the unions of superiors general of men and women, uses the following schema to describe today’s reality: “Consecrated life, being more global than ever, feels challenged by various new phenomena. Included among them are: 1) globalization with its ambiguities and mythology; 2) human mobility with its migratory phenomena and accelerated processes; 3) the unjust and destabilizing neo-liberal economic system; 4) a culture of death and the struggle to promote life in the face of challenges from biotechnology and eugenics; 5) pluralism and growing differentiation; 6) postmodern attitudes and mentality; 7) the thirst for love and the distortions of love; and 8) hunger for the sacred and secularistic materialism. (Instrumentum Laboris no 17; see www.vidimusdominum.org).

[2] Chapter letter (ChL), page 1.

[3] ChL, page 2.

[4] Witnessing to Hope (WtH) 3.

[5] WtH, Appendix 2.

[6] ChL, page 2.

[7] WtH, chapter 2, WAC 6, 7.

[8] WtH 8.

[9] WtH 9.

[10] WtH 23, 27.

[11] WtH, introduction to the chapter on vocations.

[12] ChL, end of page 2.

[13] ChL, page 2.

[14] John Paul II’s address at the audience given to the Chapter participants.

[15] WtH, above no. 10.

[16] ChL page 2.

[17] WtH, chapter 3, introduction.

[18] ChL, towards the end.

[19] Cf. ChL, page 3.

[20] ChL, page 2

[21] WtH, conclusion.

[22] ChL, page 3.

[23] Eccl 3; WtH, introduction.

[24] Lk 16:10; WtH, conclusion.

[25] WtH, conclusion.