

# THE CONGREGATION'S PRIORITIES

January 12th, 1979 - Letter - San Antonio, Texas

*New categories of poor people. - Involving the laity in our activities. - Personal conversion. - Apostles of certainty.*

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This time I am sending you my Christmas greeting from San Antonio, Texas. Here we have just concluded the sixth joint meeting (a meeting with the Provincials and the members of a Region), the last before the Chapter. This session brought together some sixty Oblates. The warmth of a Texas welcome is proverbial. We all experienced one, and for this I say a heartfelt thanks to the Southern Province which is this year celebrating the 75th anniversary of its foundation.

From these plenary sessions held in the different Regions, certain common elements and overall orientations are emerging more and more. These express both the unity of the Congregation and its determination to work in a given direction. I would like to comment on three of them.

## **New categories of poor people**

First, there is the deep concern for the poor, especially for those referred to as "the new poor". More and more the Congregation is taking note of the fact that our world today is creating poor people, new categories of poor people. This is a major challenge for us to accept. Often these poor people are national minorities, migrants, and refugees – not only the "boat-people" from South-East Asia, but also all the others we meet in different countries: Mexicans, Cubans and Puerto Ricans in the United States, Portuguese, Spaniards and Italians, Arabs and Africans in the more industrialized countries of Europe...

A few weeks ago, at Cayenne in French Guiana, I was crossing a large square when I noticed several blacks standing as though waiting for something. I heard Father Charrier, a missionary to the Hmong, make this sad remark: "Here, Father, is the new slave market!". These were people from Haiti who came each day to offer their labor at very cheap rates... against the law. And I thought of all the Haitians who are looking for work in Surinam, in Miami, in Montreal...

The Oblates of Haiti are doing good work in Haiti. What are the Oblates of the other Provinces doing to help the Haitians who are living in their territory? And what knowledge of their situation do they have? It is questions such as these that many Oblates have been asking for some years now in regard to many other migrants.

In France, for example, the miners, especially the Poles, used to be the workers who were the most poor, whose life was the hardest. We have done much for them. Today, it is the North Africans, the Turks... What are we doing for them? The same is true for England: the new poor among the migrants are no longer the Irish but often the blacks from the British Antilles and the Indians... How interested are we in them?

In posing these questions, I am not forgetting the enormous complexity and newness of the problem such as it exists today; but neither can I forget the Founder's cry directed to Father Semeria in Ceylon: "When will you begin to win the unbelievers? Are you only on your island as parish priests of old Christians?" (*Letter of February 21, 1849*).

The youth, too, belong to the new poor. In many countries of the West, they are lost in a world that has become foreign to them, a world that has no time for them, a world that has no work to offer them, a world which confronts them with many questions without ever having an answer for them. In several countries we Oblates have lost contact with the youth. We are feeling this more and more, we suffer from this, and we are trying to re-establish this contact... Some Provinces, like Italy, are succeeding admirably; others are not.

Among the new poor are also the unemployed, those unjustly exploited, the peasants being deprived of their land, as we see happening in Latin America; and, on a different level, the atheists and the people who are indifferent to religion. Their number is constantly growing in Europe, in the United States, in Canada, in Australia.

The Congregation is alert to all these appeals. She knows that she cannot respond to all of them. But she is also aware that she would be unfaithful if, after having taken into account her present condition, she did nothing to respond to them, either through lack of daring or because she is too established in comfortable ministries.

### **Involving the laity in our activities**

A second major concern that is noticeable throughout the whole Institute is the determination to associate lay people to the Church's activity and to our own work. Two considerations impel us in this direction. One is of the theological order: we understand better the role of lay people in the Church, their ministerial responsibility, and the necessity of apostolic commitment if they wish to live fully the grace of their baptism. The other, often more effective, is of the practical order: unless the laity fully assume the role that belongs to them, the Church, due certainly present in these different currents that are sweeping across the Church. It is up to us to discern this, and to cooperate with his action as much as possible.

### **Personal conversion**

Finally, here is a third strong concern which is expressed from plenary session to plenary session: the need for personal and community conversion, and for a greater authenticity in our religious life. How can we evangelize today if we no longer have credibility? And how can we have credibility if we only half-live the Gospel values we preach? For instance, if prayer is absent from our lives, how can we be a presence of God among men? And if our option in favour of the poor does not include a greater sharing and the choice of a life-style that is more poor, what fruit can it yield?

Several years ago now, the regretted Father Maurice Lefebvre, killed in the service of the poor in Bolivia, remarked in this regard: "Because we live a lie, the truths we bring make no headway". If the Congregation is to bear witness, indeed, if it is to survive, it needs men of prayer, men completely given to Jesus Christ, men who are really poor.

In regard to poverty – to mention but this one point – it is essential that there be among us some who are truly poor, that there be more and more of them (for there are some already!), and that they be so voluntarily and simply, joyful, because they have heard the call of Jesus, thanks to their contact with the world of the poor. These fellow brothers we ought to support and assist.

More and more the Congregation is hearing this call to conversion and to the reform of its life. Some efforts are being made to respond to it, but they remain somewhat modest and limited, and the road to be taken is not always sufficiently clear for us to set out upon it. It is my fervent hope that the next

Chapter will bring us a little more light in this matter and give us new impetus. We must pray very much for this intention.

It will soon be Christmas. Christ will come into our midst. He will again invite us to follow him with joy, in truth, in love, in service to our brothers. May he help us enter fully into the mainstreams that are flowing across the Congregation, namely, concern for the poor, openness to the ministries of the laity, reform of our lives!

### **Apostles of certainty**

As a last word and as a New Year's greeting, may I repeat the wish that Archbishop Frank Hurley of Anchorage (Alaska) addressed to the Oblates at the joint meeting: In a changing world filled with uncertainty and doubt, be the apostles of certainty, of the certainty founded on Jesus Christ and on the depth of your faith in Jesus Christ!