

THE DIRECTION OF THE YEARS AHEAD

January 12th, 1975 - Letter - Aix-en-Provence

The Congregation's roots. - Father de Mazenod. - The Oblate ideal today. - Our friends among the Laity.

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In this my first letter I wish to greet you and to assure you of my affection and desire to be of help to you during the next six years. I would also like to say how I envisage my role in serving the Congregation.

"Father and brother to all, (the Superior General) will imbue them with a love of the Gospel lived in an apostolic community in the midst of men" (1966 Constitutions, art. 137).

When I accepted the responsibility of Superior General last November, my mind turned foremost to that thought, to that "love of the Gospel" which is love of Jesus Christ, to be lived completely and without reservation "in the midst of men", especially the poorest, and in an "apostolic community", that is to say, like the Twelve who had left everything to be with Jesus and to go preach (cf. Mark 3:14). These were my thoughts, then, at that moment; and I thought, too, of our Founder and Father who, as the First Oblate, lived fully according to this ideal.

To accept becoming Superior General was to accept putting myself at the service of my brothers, of all my fellow Oblates, and to do so according to the particular charism of our Institute.

The Congregation's roots

I am purposely writing this letter in Aix-en-Provence, in the former Carmel where we were born. Why? Certainly, because 1975 is the year of Father de Mazenod's beatification; but there is a deeper reason. We have our roots in the Church of God: there is a "spirit", a "grace" which gives life to the Congregation and which was first received here, in this house, with the installation of the first community and the taking of the first vows in 1816.

At the time there were still no well-defined structures nor definite constitutions, but there was a spirit, a love and a zeal much stronger than all structures.

*"When our Lord wants to help his Church, he uses the following means: he calls forth a man to whom he gives a special grace and strength to serve him in a special way". This grace is "an efficacious grace wherefrom this man personally benefits and helps others to share in it". In a way this grace becomes that of the entire Institute: "When these men group themselves together, a body is formed, a congregation with this particular grace as its very own" (Fr. Jerome Nadal, SJ, quoted by J.-F. Gilmont, *Paternité et Médiation du Fondateur d'Ordre*, in R.A.M., 1964, pp. 404-405).*

As Oblates, it was Father de Mazenod who "by means of the Gospel engendered us in Christ Jesus" (Aelred de Rievaulx, quoted *ibid.*, p. 396). We have here a basic reality, the grace bestowed upon the Founder which we must constantly renew if we want to live and grow. Such was Paul's advice to Timothy: to fan into flame the gift that God had given him by the Apostle's hand (cf. 2 Timothy 1:6). It is a renewal to be undertaken with faith and love. This does not stop us from having our feet firmly planted on the ground and in today's world! Later on I shall return to this question of incarnation in the present world. Suffice it to say for the moment that in Marseilles, which I also visited recently, I was able to see Oblates who were well incarnated amongst today's poor: the derelicts, the black migrants, the labourers who work in metro construction, the young blind people... These Oblates are

present to their people through love of Christ and the poor, and they are there because of a given mission. My purpose today, however, is not to speak to you on this topic. I simply want to say a few words on the grace of the Founder and on what I personally intend to do as Superior General.

Father de Mazenod

Father de Mazenod was first and foremost a man who had encountered Christ in his own life and who knew him as Saviour (cf. E. LAMIRANDE, *Le sang du Sauveur, un thème central de la doctrine spirituelle de Mgr de Mazenod*, in *Etudes Oblates*, 1959, pp. 363-381). It was Good Friday in the year 1807. Eugene de Mazenod was 25 years old. He was profoundly struck on this occasion by the realization that he himself was redeemed by the blood of Christ, and this realization left a deep mark on his life. Moved to the point of tears, he wanted to respond to Christ's love by a complete gift of self. That is what led him first to the priesthood, then to missionary life, and finally to religious consecration. And the Church that he so passionately loved, he loved in Jesus Christ. "The Church", he was to write at the end of his life, "is the prize gained by the blood of Jesus Christ... To love the Church is to love Christ, and vice versa" (*Pastoral Letter* of February 16, 1860).

As a young priest, he soon felt the need to go to the very poor, the most abandoned, those to whom others would not go, and to go to them in order to teach them in their own tongue "who Christ is" and what their dignity is in the eyes of faith. Very early his priesthood became a missionary priesthood, sensitive to the appeals of those who are far away, and desirous of answering them with all his soul.

It was also very early that, as a young priest and young missionary, he felt the need to have companions, to live in community with them, and finally to commit himself by the vows of religion. There are other conceptions possible of what constitutes an apostolic man, but that is how Father de Mazenod conceived him to be. In so doing, he still remained open to other forms of cooperation, especially to that of associates who could join with the Fathers and live with them as brothers, without necessarily committing themselves to the priesthood or to directly apostolic works.

The Oblate ideal today

Is such an ideal still valid today? With all my soul I personally believe that it is. Were it otherwise, I would not have accepted the office that was entrusted to me.

In speaking to the Capitulars, and particularly to the Provincials, I stated how I thought I should fulfil my office:

- By a serious search for answers to the questions raised in the report on the state of the Congregation.
- By persevering and planned action to try and have these answers become a lived reality.
- By a greater insistence on the interior elements of our vocation and life. On this third point, I was more specific.

Concerning Oblate personnel, for instance, efforts must be made to help each one more to face Jesus Christ and to face the poor to whom he has chosen to give his life so as to aid them to discover Jesus Christ. That must be the core of first and ongoing formation, the centre of spiritual discernment in matters of vocations, of the re-orientation of one's vocation, or of a commitment which sees itself as more *avant-garde*.

Concerning Oblate mission, we must continue to go forward in the line of our missionary thrust and outlook, with the following characteristics: a greater insistence on explicitly proclaiming Jesus Christ

whenever possible; the development of a concerned awareness of the poor in every Oblate work, no matter what it may be, providing that work stems from a given mission; the development of a greater sense of the Church and of being rooted in the Church's life, if we want our missionary activity to be authentic; a special insistence on mission *ad gentes*, not necessarily to start new missions but at least to help and sustain those already in our care; finally, a clear encouragement to new, original missionary commitments, providing these take into account the above orientations: love of Jesus Christ, concerned awareness of the poor, and the sense of the Church.

Concerning our religious life, we have to work at self-evangelization. We need to discover anew that Jesus Christ is at the heart of our lives, and that our deep commitment goes far beyond structures. It is a matter of building without any reservation an apostolic friendship with Christ. The meaning of the vows and of prayer, the meaning of community and of mission can only be strengthened and developed if we succeed in re-evangelizing ourselves. In this area, I am confident that the beatification of our Founder will help us.

When reading this letter, you should not think that everything is clear and simple in the writer's mind! Some things are, others are not. We are all seeking – and I myself first of all – how we are to adapt our religious apostolic lives to the world of today. It is therefore with much gratitude that I shall receive whatever suggestions and comments you may wish to send me. Such sharing could prove to be extremely useful for the Congregation.

Our friends among the Laity

Before closing, I want to pay tribute to our lay associates: to honorary Oblates, to M.A.M.I. members and to all apostolic labourers with whom we work the world over. They are for us, and through us for the entire Church, helpmates and supporters of incalculable devotedness. It is due to their friendship, prayers and generosity that many of our missionary works saw the light of day and have continued to prosper. I ask you to greet them and thank them on my behalf; tell them how I wish that the ties binding them to the Oblates be strengthened and help them to grow in the joy and full development of their Christian lives.

I wish you all a happy feast day on February 17^[1]. Some Provinces have made of this day the starting point of an Oblate Year, one that will see the beatification of our Founder and will conclude with the 150th anniversary of the approval granted to our Constitutions. An excellent initiative! For us all may this be a year of reflection, of prayer and renewal in our vocation as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate!

[1] February, 17 is the anniversary of the official approval, in 1826, of the Oblate Congregation by Pope Leo XII.