

# THE OBLATE, AN APOSTOLIC MAN

January 25th, 1991 - Letter to the Oblates in First Formation - Rome

In this year's letter I wish to speak with you about another aspect of our charism - the quality of our being missionary. To the Founder's mind, Oblates should be "men who want to follow in the footsteps of their divine Master Jesus Christ, to win back the many souls who have thrown off his yoke. "Relationship with Christ, as I recalled in my first letter, is the foundation, the source and center of all our personal life, of our missionary activity and of our community life. Indeed, there is not and cannot be either missionary, community or mission without a personal experience, continuously renewed, of Christ, and his redeeming love for us and for humankind.

## **"In a word, apostolic men"**

The effectiveness of mission and the authenticity of community depend on the quality of missionaries. The interdependence of these three realities form the initial intuition of the Founder, an intuition that he deepened and developed during his whole life. Eugene de Mazenod made a synthesis of the qualities an Oblate should have by evoking the image of the apostolic man. In his very first letter to Father Tempier, he wrote: "Read this letter at the foot of your crucifix with a mind to heed only God... We wish to choose men who have the will and the courage to walk in the footsteps of the Apostles... with no more reward on earth than much sorrow and all else that the Saviour announced to his true disciples" (9th October 1815). When contending with the humility of his future companion he wrote, two months later: "Were it a question of going out to preach more or less well the word of God, mingled with much alloy of self, of going far and wide for the purpose, if you wish, of winning souls for God without taking much trouble to be men of interior life, truly apostolic men, I think it would not be difficult to replace you. But can you believe I want merchandise of that sort? We must be truly saints ourselves" (13th December 1815).

In the first Rule of 1818, the ideal of the apostolic man is outlined very forcefully and precisely in the Founder's original texts. On several occasions he recalls the Apostles' relationship with Christ: "Their founder is Jesus Christ, the very Son of God; their first fathers are the Apostles." "The missionaries ought, as far as the weakness of human nature allows, to imitate in everything the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, the chief founder of the Society, and that of his Apostles, our first fathers."

The theme is still further developed in the famous *Nota Bene* of the 1818 Rule; it became the Preface of the 1825 Rule approved by Pope Leo XII on 17th February 1826. In this Preface the expression "apostolic men" synthesizes the qualities of a missionary: "They are convinced that if priests could be formed, afire with zeal for men's salvation, priests not given to their own interests, solidly grounded in virtue - in a word, apostolic men deeply conscious of the need to reform themselves, who would labour with all the resources at their command to convert others then there would be ample reason to believe that in a short while people who had gone astray might be brought back to their long-unrecognized responsibilities."

For the Founder, to be "apostolic men" was not just an ethical and operational ideal - it was an evangelical ideal, that is to say, inspired by the Gospel and following the same dynamic of Christ in whom the Good News was identifiable with the person. "How, indeed, did our Lord Jesus Christ proceed when he undertook to convert the world?... And how should men who want to follow in the footsteps of their divine Master conduct themselves if they, in turn, are to win back the many souls who have thrown off his yoke?" He answered these two questions by indicating the qualities required of such missionaries. The Preface, therefore, always considered to be the Magna Carta of our Oblate

identity, tells us clearly what kind of missionary we are called to become.

In the course of his life Blessed Eugene constantly returned to this image that was dear to him and which summarizes in his mind the Oblate ideal. For the Founder, being apostolic men always means not only what an Oblate does but above all what he is; it underscores both the missionary and religious dimensions; in a word it describes the unity of life of a person who is to follow Christ in order to be a co-worker in his mission. On the level of activity the expression sustained variations of meaning, not however on the level of being. If "being apostolic men and following in the footsteps of the Apostles" in the realm of activity, during the first twenty-five years, meant to proclaim Christ to those who had forgotten him and, from 1840 on, meant especially to proclaim him for the first time to non-Christians, in the realm of being, the expression always indicated the effort to attain holiness, the practice of the counsels, the loving commitment of following Christ to the point of identifying with him. Thus "being an apostle" is the condition for "acting like the Apostles," to bear fruit, to be authentic cooperators of Christ. For this reason, also, whoever finds himself incapacitated for activity can still be totally a missionary. The apostolic man, as presented to us, therefore includes holiness and mission conceived in the same dynamism of life and as expressions of the same vocation.

On this subject many are the Founder's statements in his correspondence. A quote from what he wrote in his memoirs around the year 1845 will suffice: "I have said that my intention in dedicating myself to the ministry of the missions, to work especially for the instruction and conversion of the most abandoned souls, was to follow the example of the Apostles in their life of devotedness and self-denial. I became convinced that, in order to obtain the same results from our preaching, we had to walk in their footsteps and, as far as we could, practice the same virtues."

### **Qualities of the apostolic man**

The Founder did not write a treatise on the qualities and virtues of an Oblate, even if the first Rules and his occasional letters insist on a few of them. The Preface already quoted indicates a significant trinomen characterizing the apostolic man and can be thus summed up: "zealous priests, disinterested, solidly grounded in virtue, in a word, apostolic men."

*Zealous* - This term indicates that the missionary is totally given to mission, full of dynamism and creativity, courageous in his apostolate and especially in proclaiming the Gospel, burning with fire and divine love for humankind.

In the Preface are found passages which describe such a zeal: "Men... who would labour with all the resources at their command to convert others." - "He sent them forth... to conquer the world." - "They are ready to enter the combat, to fight even unto death." - "It is urgently imperative that we lead the multitude of lost sheep back to the fold, that we teach these degenerate Christians who Jesus Christ is, that we rescue them from Satan's power and show them the way to eternal life. We must spare no effort to extend the Saviour's empire and to destroy the dominion of hell. We must check the manifold evils of sin and establish the honoured observance of every virtue. We must lead men to act like human beings, first of all, and then like Christians, and, finally, we must help them to become saints."

These expressions of zeal contain a notion of conquest, of broad horizons and objectives; they seem to stop at nothing, they express the will to transform the world. Even if, with a certain realism because of their small number, he wrote in this same Rule of 1818: "Their ambition should, in its holy aspirations, embrace the vast expanse of the whole earth." Such a zeal springs from divine charity and must express itself in a limitless charity, as he affirmed when writing on the ministry of

reconciliation: "Let the missionaries always welcome sinners with an inexhaustible charity, give them courage... by showing them an understanding heart; in a word, treat them as they themselves would wish to be treated if they were in their unfortunate condition."

In 1826 he wrote to Father Tempier who, at the time, was working with other Oblates in a difficult mission: "Recommend that they conduct themselves like saints, like real apostles. joining to their preaching an exterior modesty and a great charity for sinners. Let people be able to perceive from their manner that they are not ordinary preachers, that they are truly animated by a zeal which is proper to their holy vocation. Let them not forget themselves if they wish to be truly useful to others" (30th March 1826).

"Zeal toward others," together with "charity amongst yourselves" is part of the Founder's last will and testament; it is the synthesis of his life and teaching. This zeal is born of and feeds on the charity of Christ the Saviour and on love for others. "Our apostolic zeal is sustained by the unreserved gift we make of ourselves in our oblation, an offering constantly renewed by the challenges of our mission" (C 2). It is renewed in the Eucharist (cf C 33), sustained by fraternal charity (cf C 37), and confirmed by the Spirit (cf C 45).

*Disinterested* - This term indicates another aspect of the apostolic man, called to outdo himself by putting Christ at the center of his own life which he consecrates to mission.

Many expressions in the Preface develop the significance of this requirement for the apostolic man: "Deeply conscious of the need to reform themselves..." they should "wholly renounce themselves... living in a state of habitual self-denial and seeking at all times to reach the very summit of perfection. They must work unremittingly to become humble, meek, obedient, lovers of poverty and penance, mortified, free from inordinate attachment to the world or to family, men filled with zeal, ready to sacrifice goods, talents, ease, self, even their life, for the love of Jesus Christ, the service of the Church, and the sanctification of their brethren." The surpassing of oneself is oriented and made real through a triple finality and motivation: the glory of God or the love of Jesus Christ; service, the good or love of the Church; the salvation or sanctification of souls.

We have here a vast program of self-control and asceticism, to live no longer for oneself but for Christ by collaborating in his mission. It is a life that comprises sacrifice and penance, as the Founder never tried to hide from his disciples. He wrote in 1852 to two missionaries in Oregon: "You earnestly requested to be sent to the foreign missions. Surely you did not expect to lead a delicate and easy life. It is known that this sort of mission crucifies human nature, and that there is much to suffer in them. So it should not have astonished you to find many difficulties there; that is precisely what arouses the zeal and the fervor of all those who ask to be preferred for such appointments" (To Brothers Surel and Janin, 11th March 1852). He often expressed his admiration and compassion for his Oblates immersed in mission difficulties.

These virtues describe the way followed by Christ and the Apostles to carry out the salvation of the world. "Since the ministers of the Gospel will never reap abundant fruit from their labours unless they hold in highest esteem, and, so to speak, constantly bear about in their own body the sufferings and death of Jesus, the members of our Society will earnestly strive to keep their passions in check and to deny their self-will in everything; like the Apostle, they will glory in their weaknesses, in insults, persecutions and distress endured for the sake of Christ" (Rule of 1826).

*Solidly grounded in virtue* - This is the third characteristic of the apostolic man indicated by the

Founder; we can see here the constant effort toward holiness to become other Christs.

Even if we this cannot be separated from what has been said about surpassing oneself, we can see in this expression the positive way to holiness. This is mentioned in the Preface with phrases like: "They must strive to be saints. They must walk courageously along the same paths trodden by so many before them: apostolic labourers for the Gospel who, while carrying out the same ministry to which they themselves now feel called, handed on such splendid examples of virtue." and "They must constantly renew themselves in the spirit of their vocation." In the first Rule the Founder indicated the commitment of imitating in all things the examples of Our Lord Jesus Christ, principal founder of our Society, and of the Apostles, our first fathers; he concluded by saying: "However, their chief concern will be, as much when out on missions as when in the house, to make progress in the paths of ecclesiastical and religious perfection... in a word, they will strive to become other Christs, radiating everywhere the fragrance of his lovable virtues" (Rule of 1818).

The practice of the evangelical counsels opened up to him the master way toward holiness. To a priest of the diocese of Digne who wanted to become an Oblate, Father de Mazenod wrote "The missionary, being specifically called to apostolic ministry, should aim at perfection. The Lord destines him to show forth anew, amongst those of his own time, the marvelous things that were done of old by the first preachers of the Gospel. He ought then to walk in their footsteps while being firmly persuaded that the miracles he must do are not the effect of his eloquence but of the grace of the Almighty who will communicate himself through him with all the more abundance if he is more virtuous, more humble, or, to say it all in one word, more holy. So he ought to do everything to arrive at this desirable holiness which is to produce such great effects. What we have found most apt to help us to attain thereto is to come as close as we can to the evangelical counsels, faithfully observed by all those who have been employed by Jesus Christ in the great work of the redemption of souls" (Letter to Viguier, 6th January 1819; cf. "Memoirs of the Founder" in Selected Texts, §16, pp. 39-40).

### **Program of ascesis and mysticism**

For his Oblates the Founder drew up a concise program that called for ascesis and mysticism. He surely insisted on ascesis, that is to say, on the work that each person must do to make himself available to God's grace by the surpassing of oneself, by becoming "disinterested" and developing the virtues opposed to weaknesses. Romano Guardini wrote that we must "convince ourselves that nothing great is accomplished without ascesis" (in *Il Potere*, 1963, p. 151). Without the mastery of self, without daily efforts, without self-discipline, man does not reach maturity and does not accomplish anything worthwhile and great. This is true especially in the spiritual realm and in missionary activity. To become and to be apostolic men, we are in need of a personal discipline, a program that is regularly updated and evaluated. The Constitutions and Rules give us enough indications to organize our lives properly. To avoid deceiving ourselves and lose needed tensions, we must meet regularly with the superior, the community and particularly with the spiritual director, and in apostolic work with our collaborators, lay persons included.

The final objective and source of the apostolic man, however, is of a mystical, an "experiential" nature. One gives his own life for love of Jesus Christ, in response to him who loved us first. As the Founder wrote in the last edition of the Rules: "Whoever wishes to become one of us must have an ardent desire for his own perfection, and be enflamed with love for our Lord Jesus Christ and his Church and a burning zeal for the salvation of souls" (Rule of 1853).

Blessed Eugene experienced the mystical aspect from Good Friday on, but going by his own personal experience he insisted more on the ascetical demands. Daily efforts and triumphing over

trials allowed him to grow in love for Christ and to witness that love. This itinerary is the same one he proposed to his men.

### **A catalytic project**

An ideal holds inasmuch as it is capable of being translated into reality. A rule is valid insofar as it effectively forms authentic men who draw inspiration from it. It is therefore normal to ask ourselves if the ideal of the apostolic man as delineated by the Founder has become a reality in the Congregation. I am convinced that the positive response to this demand is neither rhetorical nor apologetic. The Congregation has given the Church a good number of apostolic men according to the Founder's heart, even if failures were not lacking and still exist.

If we take a look at our history, we realize that many missionary undertakings would not have been possible without apostolic men full of zeal, disinterested, solidly virtuous. The missions of Canada's Northland, of South Africa, Texas, Laos, etc., required unlimited zeal, a boundless capacity to accept immense sacrifices, solid virtues. Among so many missionaries a few exemplary apostolic men stand out. One has only to think of Father Joseph Gérard whose recent beatification helped us to know him better.

Faithfulness and heroism have marked the whole lives of Oblates, even if they did not always end in martyrdom. Nor have Oblates faithful to the shedding of their blood been lacking. Limiting ourselves to the last fifty years I can recall the thirty or more Polish Oblates who were assassinated, among them Father Louis Wrodarczyk in the Ukraine on 8 December 1943; he was crowned with thorns, then crucified. In Spain twenty-four Oblates were shot dead during the Civil War. I personally knew the seven Oblates who shed their blood in Laos. Each one knew the possible dangers threatening him but every single one remained faithfully at his post. Standing out among them is Father Mario Borzaga, the first to be killed in 1960 with his Hmong catechist, in the northern part of Laos. These past few years I was able to observe the same fidelity in Sri Lanka where Father Michael Rodrigo was massacred in 1987. The death of Father Maurice Lefebvre in Bolivia in 1971 testifies to the same faithfulness. There are assuredly many examples of apostolic men in the Congregation.

Difficult missions are not over. I think of Madagascar where, for the major part of the year, Polish Oblates have to walk through an extremely difficult mountainous country to reach the villages opening up to the Gospel. Elsewhere, as in Peru, South Africa and Sri Lanka, difficulties stem from the guerrillas who endanger lives. In many other countries, political instability and the people's misery render missionary presence among the poor difficult and heroic. It is understandable, then, that the visits I make arouse my admiration; they are a stimulus for me to make a still greater gift to the Lord and the Congregation.

Heroism, however, does not come solely from mastering objective social situations. Overcoming personal trials, remaining faithful to religious and christian commitments, giving of oneself constantly in everyday life, accepting failure and suffering, often mold and reveal authentic apostolic men.

I am aware of course that we are at times far from the ideal desired by the Founder. There are instances where zeal is lacking; one Oblate or other appears to me rather like a functionary of the sacred with a much easier life than that of the people he serves. Mediocrity, born of a loss of idealism and a weakening of commitment to grow in the Lord, is a real temptation for us all. So, even today as in the days of the Founder, the major challenge is to fully live the Oblate charism, particularly to commit ourselves without fail to becoming apostolic men, zealous, disinterested, solidly grounded in virtue - in a word to be saints.

## **Apostolic man's formation**

The Founder was always preoccupied with forming authentic apostolic men. That is why he visited houses of formation and kept constantly in touch with formators. The selection he made of Father Tempier for this work and his many letters to formators testify to his concern. Candidates should have the will and courage to walk in the Apostles' footsteps.

The new Constitutions present formation in a Mazenodian perspective and in line with recent documents of the Holy See. The first five articles (CC 45-49) give the major lines of formation, restating the same symbols and values of the Founder: like Jesus with the Apostles, the apostolic man, apostolic formation community, constant efforts, mutual responsibility. The apostolic man to be formed remains the perspective of this whole second part of the Constitutions.

To be missionaries in today's world, the demands made of apostolic men as indicated by Blessed Eugene always remain valid and basic. Formation must consequently give pride of place to Christ, to unity of life, zeal, indifference to worldly concerns, ability to sacrifice, and the will to become saints.

But to be apostolic men in a modern world marked by rapid changes and secularization, other qualities appear to be necessary. I mention but a few:

- Integration of the different aspects of the apostolic man, such as the human dimension including psychological stability, the christian, religious and missionary dimension. Human formation is extremely important for personal stability, for community life and apostolic activity. Human qualities are essential conditions for the apostolic man. We cannot pretend to find harmonious and well-balanced growth unless it be in the identity of one's own vocation - understood that the model of this growth is always Christ, the Incarnate Word, dead and glorified.
- Ability to distinguish between the essential and the accidental, assuming the essential and building on it, preserving adaptability and flexibility for what is secondary. Thus can one achieve inculturation - a universal apostolic requirement.
- Ability to discern and dialogue. Discernment is the fruit of cultural, human, spiritual maturity, a maturity normally found only in men who are interiorly free, open to their times and firmly rooted in Christ and his Church. Dialogue supposes a positive attitude not only toward history and persons but also to the active presence of the Spirit in them. It is born and grows in an authentic love for humankind and its need of salvation.
- Transparency of authentic witnessing at personal and communitarian levels. It is made all the more necessary by the frequent fall of institutional and formal barriers - the religious habit, clerical class - and also due to people's indifference.
- Ability to be in communion with one's brothers in community, with religious and lay collaborators in the mission, with diverse ecclesial charisms - particularly with bishops.
- Missionary creativity to go to those who are distant, to find ways and structures of approach without waiting for them to come to us.
- Universal solidarity and commitment to justice - credible expressions of human sharing and evangelical requisites.

- Perseverance in the gift of self in a changing world that invites to change. It calls for the ability of being equally faithful in suffering, in martyrdom if need be, as the Founder affirmed In the Preface. The greatest challenge for the Oblate in the modern world is to be strong in suffering and constant in difficulties.

“Like pilgrims we walk with Jesus”

The Founder often used a verb that I think is significant for our spirituality. It is the verb walk. In the Preface he speaks of “walking in the steps of the divine Master Jesus Christ.” In his letters he often repeats that one must “walk in the footsteps of the Apostles” (cf to Tempier, 9th October 1815; to Vincens, 12th November 1840; to Semeria, 25th January 1848; to Dorey, 15th October 1848; to Viguier, 6th January 1819; to Mouchette, 5th August 1860), or “walk in the footsteps of Christ and his Apostles” (to Courtes, 4th November 1831).

The new Constitutions make frequent use of this verb-symbol. They speak of following in the footsteps of Christ (cf CC 19, 31) or walking in the footsteps of the Apostles (cf C 45), of following Jesus and his example (cf CC 1, 2, 12, 19, 20, 52). Other similar verbs are accompany (cf CC 51, 55), help to grow (cf CC 46, 47, 50, 56, 59).

The verb walk calls to mind at least six aspects of our spirituality.

- 1.** It indicates above all our rapport with Christ, the fact that we are constantly in his company. A relationship of this kind with Christ is not static but dynamic. Christ precedes us continuously, he opens the way and never lets us rest. He has faith in us while entreating us. We think of the affirmation in the letter to the Hebrews: “Let us not lose sight of Jesus who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection” (Heb 12, 2).
- 2.** It links us to the primitive community of Christ with his Apostles, and with the first Christians who were one in heart and soul. They personified the christian ideal that we want to achieve by sharing the same mission and the same life, by becoming other Christs.
- 3.** It summons up rapport with the Church whose pillars and first fathers were the Apostles. They are the ones who introduce us into the universal and apostolic Church, into a living Church always on the march and in which we must walk and grow (Redemptoris missio, #11).
- 4.** It recalls our communitarian dimension. Together we follow Jesus and together we are sent by him. “The community of the Apostles with Jesus is the model of our life” (C 3). We cannot be apostolic men all by ourselves, like lone rangers, in a solitary way. The Apostles always formed a group, a college, even when scattered in missions. Reciprocal aid and co-responsibility to always become apostolic men (cf CC 29, 39, 48, 49) are earmarks of our life.
- 5.** It indicates that our life must be a constant growth, an ongoing formation, an effort to holiness. No stage whatever (first formation, perpetual oblation, priesthood, retirement age) should make of us people who have arrived, have achieved their ends, are settled and stationary, immobile, incapable of changing place or mentality. The Oblate is a man always en route, available to new calls.
- 6.** It expresses rapport with mission – always a sending off by the Lord and the Church; a mission is always a departure to meet with the alienated, the ‘outsiders’, the poor. It is interesting to note also that the verb send recurs often in the Founder’s letters. “Walking with Christ in the Apostles’ footsteps” indicates the duty and strong desire to join up with other villages, other persons (cf Lk 4,

43), with other cultures, other situations, because "the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." There also follows the tension between internal mission and external mission, between evangelizing the alienated and the non-Christians, who constantly increased in number during the Founder's lifetime and in the Congregation's history.

### **Mary, Apostles' companion and formator**

The New Testament presents Mary to us in a special relationship with the Apostles at decisive instances of their formation. One has only to think of the wedding at Cana (Jo 2, 1 - 11 ), of Calvary (Jo 19, 25-27), of the Cenacle (Acts 1, 12-15). "The goal of the formation process," Constitution 46 states, "is that each of us become an apostolic man, capable of living the Oblate charism. Inspired by the example of Mary, we live in creative and ongoing fidelity our personal commitment to Jesus Christ, while serving the Church and God's Kingdom."

In the early days of the Congregation, the Founder wrote to Father Tempier who was in charge of the scholastics living in our house of Aix: "All their actions ought to be done with the dispositions in which the Apostles were when they were in the Cenacle waiting for the Holy Spirit to come and enflame them with his love and give them the signal to go forth swiftly and conquer the world" (4th November 1817). And at the Cenacle with the Apostles, Mary was there. On the highways and byways of the world the apostolic man will always find in Mary a companion, model and mother, to whom I entrust each one of you and the whole Congregation.