

THE OBLATE AND THE POOR

December 10th, 1982 - Letter - Cotabato, Philippines

"I have no father!". - What the poor expect from us. - Witness of the Oblates in Asia-Oceania.

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Before leaving the Philippines, I very much want to pay tribute to all the Oblates of the Asia-Oceania Region. I also want to share my impressions with you.

For me, these impressions are like a prolonged meditation, the theme of which was given me in two statements I heard the day after my arrival in Manila. It was November 18. A Father had taken me on a visit to a very poor school. Thanks to the generosity of benefactors, he is covering the expenses of several students who would otherwise receive no schooling.

"I have no father!"

At the end of the visit, I was introduced to a young teacher in her early twenties who lived in the area. She wanted me to greet and bless a member of her family who was paralysed due to an accident. This was in a zone occupied by squatters. She led me between houses, over wet ground, and sometimes we stepped from stone to stone so as not to sink into the mud.

Thinking the paralyzed man to be her father, I asked her, "How long has your father been paralyzed?". "No", she replied, "Not my father. It's my young brother. I have no father!". I then learned that her father had abandoned the family several years earlier, leaving her mother, with eight young children. As we were coming close to their place, she felt the need to tell me, "You know, Father, we live in a hovel!". It was true.

These two statements, "I have no father!" and, "We live in a hovel" have been with me constantly these last three weeks. I feel the full force inherent in them. In Asia, just as in other parts of the world, thousands upon thousands of people are daily experiencing the misery of extreme material poverty and all the moral suffering that springs there from.

What the poor expect from us

What do these poor people expect from the priest and the Oblate?

They certainly expect us to show them much esteem, respect and love. They must feel that they have value in our eyes and merit our full attention. This is the starting point if we are to help them gain confidence in themselves and become aware of their dignity. The attitude of Father de Mazenod speaking to the poor of Aix-en-Provence was the same: "My brothers, my dear brothers, my worthy brothers...".

They also expect the priest and the Oblate to bring God to them, to reveal to them their own greatness in the light of faith. "Come and learn from us", the Founder said further, "who you are in the eyes of faith... You are God's children, the brothers of Jesus Christ, you are gods in a certain sense...". And if they are Christians, they expect the priest to give them Jesus Christ by bringing them the Eucharist. They have a right to the sacraments of the Church.

They also expect us to help them break out from their misery, and this by every means, by "all the

works of zeal which priestly charity can inspire" (*Preface of the Constitutions*). This means good works of charity, of education, of medical assistance, of development; this also means the promotion of justice, giving them help and support, as priests and religious, in their efforts to achieve more human living conditions.

They also expect fidelity to our vocation. The reason for the trust they place in us, for their attachment to us, is, first of all, our priesthood, our religious life, and the witness of goodness and virtue given by our predecessors. In us they see something greater than we are. It is always a deep inner tragedy for them when they notice that we are no longer faithful to the grace that was in us and which formed a part of their own wealth.

The witness of the Oblates in Asia-Oceania

Our confreres of Asia-Oceania are giving us admirable examples in all these areas, often in very difficult living conditions. This is true of the Philippines, where we spent three wonderful weeks; and it is equally true of the other countries of the Region which we had the joy of visiting.

Let us also remember the most isolated Oblate in Asia, the only one who remains in Laos and whom, unfortunately, we were not able to visit. Last year this Oblate wrote to me:

Let these few lines be the sign of our deep union in the Lord and his Immaculate Mother, she who has done so much for our Congregation and for me, her poor child.

Thank you, to you and to all my Oblate Fathers and Brothers for your affectionate support: it remains like a buoy of help to a little Oblate who is trying to keep his balance at the end of his perch. May Mary keep you and guide you, and may she be my Star and my Joy too! (December 8, 1981).

In spite of the precarious situation of some of them, the Provinces and Delegations of Asia-Oceania are a source of joy and great hope for the Congregation. They give testimony to the Gospel. The Spirit, in return, is instilling in some young people of these lands the desire to join us. I thank the Lord for this, and I pray him to strengthen these Oblate communities, to give them growth, to keep them in their attitude of serenity, love for the poor, and confidence.

Through their witness, may they strengthen all of us in our missionary vocation!