

THE OBLATE COMMUNITY

January 25th, 1990 - Letter to the Oblates in First Formation - Rome

According to the Constitutions it is the Superior General who receives the vows of every Oblate either directly or through a delegate; it is he in council who approves their admission to perpetual vows; it is he personally who gives them their first obedience. This is a sign of the fact that we are all members of the same Congregation, that there are special links with the person who is the "living bond of unity" in the Oblate family (C 112) and who has a special responsibility toward all those who are beginning their life and mission according to the charism of Blessed Eugene de Mazenod (C 49). We make up one Congregation, we share the same charism, we belong to the same community.

This characteristic unity overcomes ethnic and administrative differences among us. It gives us a common spirituality and imbues each of us with an apostolic dynamism similar to that of his brothers. It makes us available to meet the missionary challenges and urgent needs undertaken by the Congregation throughout the world. This unity causes us to breathe and react, as it were, on a Church and world dimension, whatever may be the concrete conditions of our work. Even this letter unites about 600 Oblates in first formation programs who come from at least 40 countries in all the continents. Together with the other 4,600 Oblates do we not constitute a large family?

Young Oblates are searching for community

You have the ideal of community very much at heart. I am aware of it in my meetings with you and when reading your life stories and the desires you express, especially in preparing for final vows. Moreover, in the 1985-86 survey made among young Oblates, 63% emphasized that community life was one of the major strengths of the Institute and included mutual charity, brotherhood, hospitality, unity, community work^[1]. Almost in counterpoint to this, 57% stated that the greatest weakness was the inadequacy of community life because of individualism, the lack of adequate community spirit and expression^[2]. Although 82% stated that the greatest challenge in the years ahead seemed to be the evangelizing of the poor and of young people, 68% held that the answer will come especially from the quality of our evangelical and religious life and, in particular, from the quality of our community life^[3]. I see that these community aspirations of yours are in tune with the present day renewal in the Church and with the initial intuition and charism of the Founder.

In the Catholic Church at the present time, the development of community life is a significant element of renewal. In Latin America the ecclesial base communities have been instrumental in promoting an evangelical renewal, the development of ministries and social commitment. In many African and Asian countries there is a similar phenomenon. In the churches of the West many Christian movements have arisen where the community aspect is strongly emphasized.

Throughout the Church's history, the growth of the community element is a sign of renewal in the christian reality. Jesus gathered the Apostles about him and thus formed a community, a sign of the new chosen people. When the Spirit had been poured out upon them the believers in Christ formed a community of one heart and one mind (Acts 2, 42-47; 4, 32-35; 5, 11-15).

The different forms of christian renewal and the various experiments of religious life down through the centuries took their inspiration from the image of the early christian community. Blessed Eugene was to do likewise.

Oblates, missionaries in community

As if by a strong impulse from without (“forte secousse étrangère”), Eugene de Mazenod did not found a group or team but a community of missionaries. At the beginning there were three insights which obliged the Founder to necessarily make clear choices:

- a. the evangelizing of the poor, especially people living in the countryside who had lost all sense of Christianity and of any connection with the life of the Church;
- b. the quality of the missionaries who had to be apostolic men “who would be willing and courageous enough to walk in the footsteps of the Apostles”^[4], determined to become “really saints themselves”^[5];
- c. the community as a place for growth, as a school of ongoing formation, as a way to holiness, through prayer and study, recollection and mutual fraternal help in an atmosphere of constant charity.

These three choices consciously made by Eugene de Mazenod constitute the supporting pillars of the Oblate charism even in its subsequent development. They are its cornerstones. They are three requirements that make it possible for us to answer challenges as they arise. They fostered the solidity and permanence of the foundation by enabling us to overcome obstacles which caused similar missionary groups to disappear. If we are to be authentic Oblates, men after the heart of the Founder, we must therefore be missionaries, apostles and men of community.

The Founder was always attentive to the way in which his men lived community. He encouraged community spirit and suitable formulae and he reproached shortcomings and failures^[6].

He showed his pleasure when he met with authentic communities. On the occasion of his canonical visit to Notre-Dame de Lumières, on the 10th of October 1840, he wrote: “It seems opportune that we should express the supreme satisfaction we have experienced in visiting this community where peace, charity and the greatest regularity rule supreme. We spent five delightful days in the midst of this portion of our dear religious family. We are convinced that God is here served in the best of ways, that the members love one another as brothers and that their hearts are so united as not to allow of even the slightest discord, that each one lives happily in the most exact practice of the Holy Rules of the Institute, that they have learned how to coordinate the exercise of zeal in the missions and the ministry with mutual support and study in times of solitude which it is possible to have here more than elsewhere; in a word, they appreciate the full value of their vocation and give thanks to the Lord”^[7].

The Founder’s reactions were not always so positive with regard to the way in which community life was lived. His letters often contain chastisement for failures and shortcomings in the community life of our members.

New awareness of community in the Congregation

The community situation in our Congregation is varied both in the way that various groups come together and in the way in which community life is realized. According to the survey made for the Chapter^[8], 76.8% of Oblates live in established communities, 19.2% live and work alone but are in regular contact with community, and 4% live without regular contact. The majority of Provinces acknowledged that between the two Chapters of 1980 and 1986 there had been progress in community life and that mutual acceptance, respect and trust had increased; communication had become easier and more fraternal; there was a greater awareness of belonging and collegiality, and community prayer had become more regular. At the same time there was a desire for progress in the quality of interpersonal relations, in participating in prayer and recreation, in coresponsibility and community planning. The new Constitutions and Rules were credited with being a driving force in this renewal.

In the years following the Chapter, the effort at community renewal has continued. District meetings are more frequent. A number of Provinces have evaluated their community life in Congresses and Provincial Councils; they have organized meetings and courses for animators; they have formulated directories and

guidelines. The General Council has discussed especially District Communities^[9]. The Association for Oblate Studies and Research held its Congress in Ottawa during August 1989 on the theme of community. The forthcoming intercapitular meeting to be held in Rome during May of this year will discuss the same theme.

In the community renewal of the Congregation, it seems to me that certain trends are emerging which are signs of the times and through which the Lord is pointing out the direction we must take.

Community is being lived as a communion of persons rather than as a common dwelling place or a house where the members share a roof, meals and different activities. There is a preference for personal relationship and mutual help rather than for structures and pre-established norms. There is an effort at growing together and not merely at being together. It is the milieu in which the different aspects of our charism and the different requirements of persons are discussed. It is not merely the expression of a few religious exercises but of the totality of life in the following of Jesus Christ as his disciples and as his missionaries. Rather than the place from which the missionary sets out for his mission, it is the reality in which the mission lives, grows and is renewed. The person of each man and the needs of the mission are the elements which determine these concrete forms of community and especially its structures.

Among these trends which I see emerging, there are some values that are special:

- the mission as a common task;
- brotherhood as attention to and openness to fellow Oblates;
- sharing and communion among members;
- coresponsibility in community duties and in promoting mutual growth;
- creativity and adaptability of structures according to the needs of persons and of the mission.

In a word, an effort is being made to integrate both anthropological and theological requirements. The community is not merely a group of friends or a working team. It is an apostolic family, an ecclesial community with Christ, his Apostles and the early christian community as its model.

Above and beyond concrete conditions linked with the time in which we live, I think there is a rediscovery of some of the characteristics of community as desired by the Founder: a family united by brotherly charity. An American Oblate who visited the General House wrote to me on May 18, 1989: "There is a brotherhood among Oblates which is deeper than what words can express. There will always be Oblates as long as there is brotherhood among them like that which I experienced in my lifetime."

Missionary and apostolic community

At the end of the sixties, new community experiments were tainted with an excessive quest for intimacy and were sometimes opposed to the missionary spirit. The 1966 Chapter, by asserting that "community life for us, as Oblates is not alone necessary for mission but is itself mission"^[10], expressed a new awareness and confirmed a long standing tradition.

In 1972 the document prepared by the General Council pointed out why the community can be called mission. The authentic community is an expression of the substance of the Good News that unity among men is already realized, that the new commandment of love is being put into practice, that salvation is being experienced, that Jesus Christ is still bringing disciples together and sending out missionaries on the strength of his resurrection which has already taken place. "It is a sign so that the world may believe (Jn 17, 21)... it is the sign of the disciples" (Jn 13,15)^[11]. In concluding, the document stated: "Every community renewal must be directed toward the mission... that is the principal starting point for a new departure... A true community is a living cell, capable in its turn of forming other communities, in ever increasing circles, both in the Church and in the world"^[12]. Perhaps we are often unable to form christian and human communities through our ministry because we personally lack a genuine experience of

Oblate community.

In relation to the mission, therefore, community life should not be seen as a merely functional element, as a preparation or support. It is missionary because of what it lives and reveals to the world. It is a sign and a sacrament of salvation because of Christ's presence within it^[13].

In recent times there is more frequent mention of apostolic community. Its name indicates its purpose, its composition and its nature. The purpose of the Oblate community is mission, it should realize the experience of the Apostles with Jesus who brings the community members together and sends them out. Thus the apostolic community reminds us of the three initial inspirations chosen by the Founder to which I referred above.

Formation community

There can be no human or christian formation without interpersonal relationships. Without these relationships formation is at a standstill. Furthermore, relationships must be according to the nature of one's own vocation. For this reason the religious needs his natural milieu which is the community if he is to live and grow (C 49). During the period of first formation the community element is of the greatest importance, as is pointed out in our Constitutions and in the formation directory.

What is the situation of our formation communities? I think that these communities are, for the most part, living and in good shape. They are noteworthy for brotherhood and creativity; they are rich in idealism. In my visit to the formation houses of Southern Africa, I saw in those communities the image of what society should be without racial discrimination. In a number of instances your houses have been a stimulus for community renewal in the Provinces. I expect your communities to become increasingly a stimulus toward the renewal of community life in the Provinces and Delegations and consequently throughout the Congregation.

I am aware of the difficulties you meet with for reasons that are either internal or external. The tensions in society, in the Church and in the Congregation are reflected in your communities. One inconvenience encountered in some cases is the lack of trust between those in formation and their formators. Without mutual trust, formation runs the risk of leading nowhere. Another drawback which I have sometimes encountered is the insufficient experience of communion and exchange resulting from communities that are either too big or too small, although the real root of the trouble may be elsewhere.

In first formation you should have concrete experience of the different dimensions of community (human, christian, religious and missionary) as mentioned in the Constitutions. You should acquire sufficient personal self-confidence to overcome loneliness, to be able to live in different types of apostolic community and to be able to build community.

Whose duty is it to form these communities? It is certainly the responsibility of the Major Superiors to set up good formation communities and thereby fulfil the role which is theirs. It is also however the responsibility of all the members, both your formators and yourselves, to develop communities that are schools of communion, of formation and of human, religious and missionary growth. The community must become a permanent need in your lives, even though it will be incarnated in different ways. You must become men of communion who are capable of building and encouraging communities in our midst and in the milieu in which you live, because this is to bring the Good News to a divided and lacerated world. In this way you shall be better able to meet the complex challenges of today's mission.

Charity among yourselves

The last words of our Founder sum up the dynamics of our Oblate life: "Charity among yourselves and, abroad, zeal for souls." Charity is the soul of our being together. This charity comes from God and is the expression of the Trinitarian community. This charity has been handed down to us by Christ and must be

lived as he lived it, that is, to the extent of giving our lives for others. "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15,12). It is in this mutual love that Jesus becomes present (C 37), and becomes the teacher of the community and of each individual in the process of growth.

How is this ideal to be realized in concrete terms? What are the pedagogical instruments for growth in mutual charity? From my own experience as formator and community member, there are some pedagogical instruments which I consider to be important in maintaining mutual love, in fostering unity and consequently in making the Lord present so that the community may accomplish its duty of formation and lead its members toward maturity:

a) Sharing

Sharing of one's own experience, intuitions, difficulties, of one's life, is one way for growing in charity. We must understand one another and help one another because this is our human family and, even more so, because it is the milieu in which we must grow and become holy. The road to holiness and to the mission is, in fact, a road we must travel together because we are called by the same Master. When we accept a new member in the community and in the Congregation we undertake to help him grow and become holy, to be a genuine missionary in word, in action and in his life. We must have the courage to say this explicitly, sharing our gifts, overcoming various complexes and jealousies. Our Constitutions remind us of this and they point out some areas for this sharing (CC 28, 35, 37, 39, 40, 48, 75, 87; R 25).

b) Mutual pardoning

There can be no growth if there is not continuous conversion, made possible by God's grace and fraternal help. We must learn to overlook the mistakes of others and therefore be ready to pardon as Jesus taught his first community to pardon, seventy times seven times. Love believes that the other person can renew himself; it is ready to see a brother in a new light, to give him a hand to climb the difficult path of holiness more easily. This must be done at a personal level, but the community must also find adequate expression for the process (C 33, 39, 40, 47).

c) Confrontation and discernment

Personal confrontation with one's own progress under the guidance of a spiritual director is a component of every spiritual journey. Personal spiritual direction is irreplaceable and must be developed in an atmosphere of charity. Religious tradition is also familiar with forms of community confrontation such as "fraternal correction," "the chapter of faults," review of life, personal reports to the Superior (C 39). Experience has taught me that community confrontation animated by charity, where the overall progress of the group or part thereof is evaluated, is most valuable. Community discernment is necessary to find ways of living together and promoting the mission (CC 26, 51, 53, 55, 66, 72, 81, 105, 111).

d) The daily incarnation of love

The community is built up through the humble exercise of charity by every member. It can be expressed in a thousand ways and it would be impossible to list them all or foresee what form they might take. A smile, a moment to listen to another, a word of encouragement, a break for rest in the company of a confrere, a helping hand, an exchange of spiritual inspiration, pointing out an article worth reading, etc. Man goes to Christ through his brother. Our brother becomes the concrete and immediate "way" to reach God, besides being a point of comparison on the spiritual journey (cf. 1 Jn 4, 12.20; CC 3, 15, 37, 38, 39, 44, 102, 112).

Like Mary

Mary is present in many ways in the community because we are a family bearing her name. She creates the home atmosphere, a spirit of brotherhood, of simplicity. In order to create a community we must follow her attitude, an attitude of openness to receive, of listening, of silence, of contemplation. We must take her with us as John did, because Jesus gave her to us to be our Mother so that we should live in her

presence. We must, like the Apostles, come together with Mary and ask the Spirit for the grace to be transformed by him so that we too may become courageous apostles.

- [1] General Chapter 1986, pre-capitular commission document: "Young Oblates Speak to Us," pp. 5-6.
- [2] *Ibid.*, pp. 8,15-16.
- [3] *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
- [4] "Letter to Fr. Tempier" - October 9, 1815, in *Oblate Writings VI*, p. 7.
- [5] "Letter to Fr. Tempier" - December 13,1815, in *Oblate Writings VI*, pp. 12-13.
- [6] Beaudoin, Yvon, "Community and Mission according to Bishop de Mazenod," in *OMI DOCUMENTATION*, n. 167, September 1989.
- [7] *Codex Historicus of Notre-Dame de Lumières*.
- [8] General Chapter 1986, pre-capitular document: *A Look at the Congregation*, pp. 67-90.
- [9] *OMI COMMUNIQUE*, No. 48/88; No. 49/89, March 1989.
- [10] General Chapter 1986: Document - *Missionaries in Today's World*, No.109.
- [11] *OMI General Council document: Community*, 1972, Nos. 6-9.
- [12] *Ibid.*, n. 23.
- [13] Cf. Constitutions 1, 3, 37. For a presentation of community life according to the Constitutions and Rules, cf. the article which I wrote in *VIE OBLATE LIFE*, 1988, pp. 3-10.