

THE OBLATE MISSION

December 8th, 1988 - Letter to the Oblates in First Formation - Rome

The OBLATE MISSION is a reality we have much at heart. It is an essential and predominant aspect of our identity. Oblate mission was the theme of the 1966 Chapter, and the latter stressed six areas or priorities in regard to carrying out this mission in today's world. As the objective of its Congregation-wide animation, the General Council has adopted the revitalization of the Oblate missionary identity.

As I go about visiting the Congregation, I am always struck by the dynamism and creativity I find in the Oblates' missionary involvements. The variety and originality of our missionary activity is impressive. It is difficult to make known the apostolic richness of Oblates at work in so many situations in some sixty countries over the different continents.

Some common traits and lived priorities emerge from this variety, however. Among these traits I note our closeness to the people, preference for the poor, concrete response to urgent needs. Since direct evangelization is a necessity in so many situations, it is not only receiving new interest, but is also given concrete expressions: through a new flourishing of parish missions, especially in some European countries; through retreat and renewal centres, especially in North America; through missionary action teams, especially in Canada; through regular visits and accompaniment of dispersed Christian communities, especially in Latin America and in Africa. Evangelization and the various forms of apostolate are more and more characterized by an integral approach which takes into account all personal and social needs and the collaboration of the laity. Our missionary dynamism manifests itself more strongly and clearly in the new foundations that the Congregation has made in these latter years and which, as I hope, the Congregation will continue to take on in response to the greatest and most urgent needs of the Church, in accordance with the characteristics of our charism.

We were founded and have grown for the mission

We were born for the mission and we exist for the mission. The Founder was impelled to begin the community of Aix in order to evangelize the inhabitants of his area, especially the ordinary people. He requested Rome's approval in order to assure the Congregation's existence and its missionary activity.

Our growth, too, is due to the mission. With our going to Canada in 1841 and especially with our missionary commitments among the Indians, there quickly followed an explosion of vocations and enthusiasm, accompanied by a meaningful image that adhered to the Oblate work. Thus began a missionary epic in different parts of the world: from Sri Lanka to South Africa, from Oregon to Texas. The Founder's vision took on new depth: evangelization was conceived not only as proclaiming Jesus Christ in order to reawaken the faith, correct mores and renew religious practice, but also as introducing people to Christ and to the Church in the way the Apostles did at the beginning of the Christian era. Oblates are *viri apostolici* not only inasmuch as they follow Christ and generously give themselves, but also inasmuch as they are doing the same things that the Apostles did, namely, going out into the whole world in order to evangelize people. The desire for universality that the Founder had nourished as a young man and had expressed in the first Rules was now being realized.

The Oblate is the missionary of the poor, missionary to people. He is open to every human person in need, welcomes the latter's aspirations, accompanies him on his journey, reveals to him who Christ is. He is open to the whole world, listening to its appeals and anxieties, sustaining the

Congregation's commitments, making himself everywhere available. The Congregation's future will depend on the quality of our life, on our courage and our availability to respond to the challenges and needs of the Church wherever the Spirit will invite us to witness to the Gospel.

Characteristics of the Oblate mission

The Founder's missionary ideal originated in his personal experience of Christ the Saviour and in his compassionate love for the poor, the abandoned and rejected. For the Founder mission means working together with Christ who remains the main agent in the saving of all men. To achieve this, the Oblate has to be in unison with his Master, has to be identified with him. The Oblate has to be an apostolic man, the companion of Christ, a co-worker with him. At the same time, however, the Oblate must identify himself with the people, understand their needs and aspirations to the point of taking upon himself their sins, just as the Founder did in the first missions, to everyone's amazement.

All of us in the Congregation are missionaries and that for our whole lifetime. We live in solidarity with the mission entrusted to the Congregation and carried out by her. The Oblate mission everywhere belongs to us. Each one of us affects it by mode of being even prior to any kind of activity.

We are brothers and priests in the missionary family. The same mission carried out in a multiplicity of ways strives to give witness to Christ, to make him known and loved, to cooperate in the coming of his Kingdom. The principal place and priority of proclamation (cf. CC. 5, 7) derives from our clerical character which qualifies the activity of the entire Congregation and not only that of those who are called to share in the gift of the priesthood (cf. C 66). In fact "we fulfill our mission in and through the community to which we belong (C. 37). "Community life is not only necessary for the mission, it is itself mission and at the same time it is a qualitative sign of the mission of the whole Church" (MTW, 109). The community, in fact, is a credible and comprehensible sign of what we are proclaiming: the risen Christ in our midst (cf. CC. 3, 37), the beginning of God's Kingdom and of the new mankind (C. 11).

Mission in our life

The mission is not something foreign to your life, or something you can expect only in the future and for which you are preparing. It is a part of each one of you. You will become aware of this once you are able to carry out and incarnate what you bear within your soul. Many of you heard the call or were confirmed in it thanks to a missionary experience or because of contact with a true missionary or through the discovery of the great missionary needs. I have seen so many young Oblates grow and mature in their vocation thanks to an apostolic involvement whereby they became sure that they were really called to this kind of life. That is why missionary experience is seen as part of the formation process (cf. MTW, 161; R. 54) and so, a prolonged pastoral activity even during first formation is becoming ever more frequent and fruitful.

You are preparing yourselves above all for this mission. The 1986 Chapter recalled Constitution 50: "The purpose of initial formation is to develop gradually those whom Jesus calls to total discipleship in the Congregation, until they are mature religious, capable of carrying on the Oblate mission" (MTW, 156). In this article on first formation, the Constitutions remind us of our charism in the following of Christ: taking their inspiration from the Preface, they underline our twofold commitment to become saints and to be missionaries. I would like to speak to you now about preparing for the Oblate mission.

Capable of carrying on the Oblate mission

It seems to me that first formation ought first of all to be a help in acquiring a missionary heart and mentality. In the first Rule, that of 1818, the Founder wrote: "... Even though, because of their present small number and the more urgent needs of the people around them, they have to limit the scope of their zeal, for the time being, to the poor of our countryside, their ambition should, in its holy aspirations, embrace the vast expanse of the whole earth" (CC & RR, p. 14). In short, a heart as large as the world. What is asked for is a missionary mentality that seeks to understand the poor and those who are far away, that is open to new ways of making Christ known.

I am always moved when I recall my last visit to Father Leo Deschâtelets. He was ill and, from his bed, he was watching a television program. In our conversation, after he had manifested his interest in my missionary work in Laos and my teaching of missiology in Ottawa, he began to speak of how one could evangelize the people he was seeing on television and how this could be done by using that very means. One could feel a missionary heart beating within him. In bidding me farewell, he assured me that he was offering up his whole life for the Oblate mission all over the world.

Then we need to acquire a missionary spirituality that is rooted in Christ, whom we experience in prayer, the Word of God and community life, but also recognize in persons and events (cf. CC. 33, 56; R. 65). The Chapter says: "Our spirituality is founded upon the contemplation of Christ who was available to respond to the needs of those he met and who also spent many silent hours praying in the presence of his Father" (MTW, 141).

A missionary heart, mentality and spirituality are furthered by the discovery of the missionary needs in the world, by interest in and knowledge of the Oblates' missionary commitments, as well as by your own missionary experiences, closeness to the poor, simple lifestyle, and the authenticity of the witness of what you are living. Rule 60 states: "From a personal and coherent faith vision, scholastics will be able to present Christ's Gospel in such a way that it reaches and touches the hearts of their contemporaries."

A person becomes capable of taking on the Oblate mission through the formation of one's personal character and apprenticeship in community. Rule 53 singles out some important aspects in the formation of character in view of the mission: a realistic assessment of oneself, a sense of responsibility, maturity in relationships, leadership qualities, a sense of daring and creativity, ability to face renunciation with love, peace and joy. This character formation goes hand in hand with initiation into community life, an element on which you are particularly keen and which the Constitutions and the last Chapter have greatly stressed. As you will have probably experienced, true community life is already mission and witness. We need especially to become accustomed to the apostolic dimension of community: this helps us to face our missionary activities realistically, to program and assess them (cf. MTW, 158, 161).

Finally, our studies are to be oriented to the mission that is focused on Christ (cf. C. 66; R. 59). A solid preparation is more than ever necessary in our complex world and in the pioneering activities proper to missionaries. Besides "a solid theological and philosophical formation," the Chapter recommends certain special sectors, such as the Church's social doctrine, reflection upon a secularized society, initiation to the means of communications, the study of languages, analysis of the Church's situation, the study of the theology of the laity, ecumenism, the great religions (MTW, 159).

So many things are being asked of you and perhaps you cannot do them all as you would like to. The important thing is to achieve a solid foundation, a taste and desire as well as a methodology to

continue delving deeply into the different aspects of the mission that will be entrusted to you. Your formation, in fact, does not cease with your first obedience but ought to continue throughout your whole life. And so it is important to learn how to reflect, assess and study if you are to respond to the missionary challenges that await you. "For this reason, during the years of initial formation, formators will show young Oblates how to learn from life experience and help them develop a positive attitude toward continuing their formation once they are engaged in the ministry" (R. 68).

In the process of making the Oblate life your own, each one of you will be able gradually to discover the signs of a more specific call and thus form a personal missionary project which you will verify with your formators and submit to the Superior General when you ask for your first obedience. Being attentive to missionary needs, even those which go beyond the confines of our countries, and the availability to respond thereto are signs of authenticity.

According to the example of so many Oblates

In regard to the mission, models and witnesses abound in the Congregation. The beatification has led us to discover Father Gerard about whom I spoke in two letters addressed to the Congregation and to which I refer you. Authentic missionaries are not lacking among the Oblates! Make it a point to get to know them, meet them, listen to them. You will learn a lot from them, now and throughout your whole life.

May Mary, about whom I spoke to you in last year's letter, obtain for you and the entire Congregation an abundance of the Holy Spirit's graces, so that he may transform us and give us the missionary dynamism of Pentecost. I wish you a good scholastic year and, above all, good formative and missionary progress. What counts is that we never call a halt in our life. For, as pilgrims, we are walking with Jesus in faith, hope and love. I too am walking with you, following Christ as Mary Immaculate did.