

THE OBLATE: SERVANT OF GOD'S PEOPLE

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Servants of God's People. - Fidelity. - Availability., - Simplicity. - The Pope's encouragement.

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Last August 6, when he was ending his second term, Father Jean-Paul Aubry, Provincial of Manitoba-Keewatin, wrote to me as follows:

*I am grateful to God for having given me strength and light for the task which I fulfilled in the Congregation's name and out of love for her and her mission. It is God, it is Jesus Christ whom I wanted to serve in all this. *Servi inutiles sumus* reminds us not to forget the Master of the vineyard. Besides, he has allowed my illness and prolonged convalescence as a constant reminder of this. I am not bothering myself overly much with wondering what I shall be doing afterwards. God has his calendar, and in his own time he will show his will to me.*

Father died suddenly on August 13. I received his letter in Rome four days later. It is a letter that has made me reflect a great deal.

Servants of God's People

It reminded me of several texts of the Founder. "Oh! How beautiful is St. Paul's statement: *Nos autem servos vestros per Iesum!* If meditated a little, these words forestall all complaining. We will never be tempted to say, 'That is enough!' and even less, 'That is too much!'..." (*Letter to Father Vincens, June 2, 1859*). "Let us not forget those beautiful words of St. Paul: *Nos autem servos vestros per Iesum*. With such an attitude, we can put up with every nuisance and endure all difficulties" (*Diary, September 8, 1838*). "Whoever we may be, we are useless servants in the Father's family household. Our activity, our services have value only inasmuch as we do what the Master asks of us" (*Letter to Father Mille, May 30, 1832*).

It especially reminded me of our vocation in the Church. We are the servants of Jesus Christ; in Jesus and through Jesus, we are servants of God's People.

The many celebrations this year of the second centenary of Eugene de Mazenod's birth, the study sessions held in Ottawa and in Rome on this occasion, the official approval of our Constitutions last July 3 – all so many events which fix our attention on the richness and requirements of this mission!

What does the Church, what does the world expect from the Oblate who is a servant of the Gospel?

Fidelity

First of all, they expect fidelity. In a sense, our mission is greater than we are. The salvation we preach does not originate with us: it comes from God.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, when the appointed time came, was sent by the father and filled with the Spirit "to bring the good news to the poor...". He called men to become disciples to share in his mission... Blessed Eugene de Mazenod heard that call. Burning with love for Jesus and his Church..., he chose to become "the servant and priest of the poor..." (Foreword to the Constitutions).

In us the people see Jesus Christ and they see the Church. They are not looking for a teaching we invent but for that of the Gospel which the Church hands down. St. Paul says that the only thing required of a servant of Christ, of a steward of God's mysteries "is that he be found trustworthy" (*1 Corinthians 4:1-2*).

He especially insists on this in his letters to Timothy. We know how much Bishop de Mazenod pondered these two letters.

Fidelity in regard to doctrine: "To seek out new ways for the Word of God to reach their hearts often calls for daring; to present Gospel demands in all clarity should never intimidate us" (C. 8). Let us do this "in communion with the pastors whom the Lord has given to his people", accepting "loyally, with an enlightened faith, the guidance and teachings of the successors of Peter and the Apostles" (C. 6).

Equal fidelity in regard to our life: "to fight, even unto death, for the greater glory of the most holy and sublime Name" (*Preface of the Constitutions*). The good servant does not abandon the field of combat. He knows in whom he has placed his trust. His perseverance has a prophetic role: it is a "sign of Christ's fidelity to the Father" (C. 29) and an inspiration to faithfulness for those who have their own "struggles and difficulties" to face (R. 13).

Availability

The good servant does not live for himself; he is a man for others. Availability is an essential value in his life. It is usually by a person's availability that we measure the depth of his gift of self. Availability is indispensable for the survival and growth of an apostolic corps such as ours.

At the last Chapter I recalled how necessary this virtue is in regard to accepting the responsibility of authority within the Congregation. This is just as true in regard to the apostolic mission of the Institute. In the Church's eyes, it is first of all the Congregation who commits herself. When the issue concerns works of definite importance, the Bishops ask – and rightly so – that the Congregation make a commitment. «We fulfill our mission in and through the community to which we belong" (C. 37; also C. 11 and R. 1).

This supposes the consultation and participation of all concerning the orientation of our apostolic activities (CC. 26, 72; RR. 1, 18, 19, 83); and afterwards, once the decisions have been made, that all support them loyally (CC. 26, 72), and are completely available to cooperate in implementing them (C. 26; R. 83).

At times I wonder whether, in this area, some who hold positions of responsibility do not underestimate their confreres' capacity for service and availability. They are afraid to ask for a service that is demanding when, in fact, their colleagues were hoping for just such a challenge. There are Oblates who will never give their full measure because the Congregation will never have asked enough of them. We all need to be challenged in order to surpass ourselves. Availability is present, but we need a definite challenge and we need to have confidence placed in us.

Simplicity

Our service would not be Oblate if it were unaccompanied by simplicity. I have often heard the remark made in non-Oblate circles, in a monastery of contemplatives, for example, after a fellow Oblate from the Canadian Far North had spoken about his work: "What he has done is really marvellous; and yet he talks about it as if it were nothing special, as though anyone could have done the same!".

I then spontaneously think of the Gospel text: "When you have done all you have been commanded to do, say, *We are useless servants. We have done no more than our duty*" (Luke 17:10). Then I also think of Blaise Pascal's advice: "Do small things as though they were great because of the majesty of Jesus Christ who does them in us and who lives our life; and do great things as though they were small and easy because of his omnipotence" (*Pensées*, ed. Kaplan, no. 1386).

Many Oblates live their apostolic service in this way. They see their vocation as a call to cooperate totally in the work of Jesus Christ, "in continuing the great task of redeeming mankind" (*Letter to Father Tempter*, August 22, 1817). That is why "we strive to reproduce in ourselves the pattern of his life..., to let him live in

us...; we give ourselves to the Father in obedience even unto death and dedicate ourselves to God's people in unselfish love" (C. 2).

These qualities of the good servant are all present in the new Constitutions and Rules. May they also be present, more and more, in each one of us!

The Pope's encouragement

In concluding, let me sum up Pope John Paul II's message of last September 8 to the Oblates.

It was the Church's gratitude to the Congregation. "I know", the Pope said, "the daring and fruitful work your brothers have accomplished... For this, the Church thanks you".

It was also the Church's encouragement. "I encourage you to carry on, with the zeal of your blessed Founder, Bishop de Mazenod, born two hundred years ago, the evangelization that our times need".

It was finally a prayer and a desire: "Through you, may God's Word reach the farthest ends of the earth and penetrate hearts and minds to their very depths!".

I wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Holy New Year 1983. Everywhere be true witnesses and servants of the Gospel according to the example of Blessed Eugene de Mazenod!