

THE PRIESTLY CHARACTER OF THE CONGREGATION

January 25th, 1992 - Letter to the Oblates in First Formation - Rome

This letter of communion comes to you at an important moment in the Congregation's journey. For it is presently preparing for the General Chapter. Every Chapter leaves its mark on the Congregation's life. If we are properly prepared and open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, a Chapter is a moment of grace, unity, and religious apostolic renewal for the worldwide Oblate community.

A number of reasons have influenced me to choose the topic of this letter. The 1990 Synod of Bishops on the formation of priests for today's Church and world and the post-synodal Exhortation of John Paul II are the general ecclesial context. It is the Oblate charism, however, and the manner of living it that suggest and prompt this reflection on an aspect that is important for every Oblate's life.

Some sectors of the Congregation know only the Oblate priest, so much so that our community is referred to in an erroneous way. In other sectors we find a tendency to deny our priestly character, and this in the name of our evangelizing mission or because all our members are equal. In other instances we have lost the sense of evangelization as the proclaiming of Jesus Christ and the forming of Christian communities and that precisely because this aspect of our vocation has remained obscure.

In point of fact, the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate founded by Eugene de Mazenod includes priests and Brothers and is by its very nature priestly and clerical.

The Preface to the Constitutions and Rules recalls the fact that the apostolic men called to respond together with Eugene de Mazenod to the missionary challenges facing the Church were priests. "The sight of these evils has so touched the heart of certain priests, zealous for the glory of God, men with an ardent love for the Church, that they are willing to give their lives, if need be, for the salvation of souls. 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..., 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."

In the new Constitutions, the Holy See wanted the priestly character of the Congregation to be mentioned in the very first article, even though this was expressed in equivalent terms in Constitution 7.

This dimension of our charism is not something that is secondary, something linked to the founding of the Institute and to the passing needs of that time: it is something that is of the essence and therefore a permanent aspect of our vocation. This dimension affects all our members, be they priests or Brothers; it qualifies the purpose and missionary priority of the Institute; and it has its repercussions on the latter's structures and even more on its spirituality.

Our charism is modelled on Eugene de Mazenod's experience

The Oblate charism is a gift that the Spirit has transmitted through a concrete person, Eugene de Mazenod. The Lord prepared this gift through the Founder's personal experience, one that was marked by his vocation to the priesthood^[1].

After hearing in his childhood the call to the priesthood, Eugene in his youth followed other ideals, a refusal that he thereafter looked upon as a state of sin^[2]. His conversion experience of Good Friday

in 1807 bore its full fruit in his choosing the priesthood at a time when the Church was being persecuted and abandoned. While a seminarian in Paris, he wrote to his mother on June 29, 1808: "What the Lord wants me to do is that I renounce the world... that I most especially dedicate myself to his service in order to strive to reawaken the faith that is dying out among the poor; in a word, that I am disposed to carry out all the orders he may wish to give me for his glory and the salvation of souls whom he has redeemed with his precious blood."^[3] The formation he received at Saint Sulpice deeply marked Eugene's life and spirituality^[4], and that in continuity with the Good Friday experience wherein he had discovered the crucified Christ as his Saviour and the Saviour of all mankind.

The first years of his ministry were dedicated to young people for whom he founded an Association, to workers in the city and to prisoners: preaching and Christian formation in their regard was his primary concern. The evangelization needs of the rural population, the limits of individual pastoral activity, and the search for a holy, exemplary priestly life impelled him to found a community of priests who were true missionaries and committed to their own sanctification.

The Rules drawn up in 1818 as well as those approved by Leo XII in 1826 and revised in 1853, reflect the priestly ideal and apostolic experience of Eugene and his companions. The Preface and some of the more significant texts are quoted in the new Constitutions. They speak of zealous priests who are sent out to conquer the world, who are ready to sacrifice everything "for the love of Jesus Christ, the service of the Church, and the sanctification of their brethren ..."; priests who are committed "to all the works of zeal which priestly charity can inspire, above all to the work of the missions"; "holy priests who, filled with the Holy Spirit and striving to walk in the footsteps of the divine Shepherd, feed with watchful and constant care the sheep that have been led back to him."^[5]

This ideal, put into practice by the Founder and by so many Oblates, has called forth apostolic initiatives and commitment to holiness. Side by side with Oblates known throughout the Congregation for their zeal, such as Fathers Gerard and Albini for example, each one of us knows other fellow Oblates who are truly animated by priestly charity in evangelizing and serving the poorest of the poor. I think one could comment on the Constitutions and Rules not only by means of selected texts from the Founder, but by means of the life lived by so many Oblates in every part of the world.

The evangelizing purpose that flows from our priestly character

Evangelizing the poor (C 1), proclaiming the Good News to those who have not yet heard it or to those who are beyond the reach of ecclesial structures (C 5), the evangelizing creativity of awakening or reawakening the faith, making known who Christ is especially through proclaiming God's Word which finds its fullness in the celebration of the sacraments and in serving one's neighbour (C 7), are equivalent deions of the priestly purpose that is part and parcel of the Oblate charism.

The Church's mission is carried on in many manners and ways, as the missionary encyclical of John Paul II reminds us^[6]. All Christians are co-responsible for the mission and make their contribution according to each one's state and charism^[7]. The missionary priority assigned to our Congregation is priestly, precisely because it is oriented to proclaiming the Good News and to establishing Christian communities. As Oblates our particular and primary - though not exclusive - contribution to the Church's mission is "principally the evangelization of the poor."

Since the 1966 Chapter, the Constitutions and Rules distinguish ministries from purpose. The purpose of evangelizing the poor can be achieved through different ministries according to places

and needs. The evangelizing purpose is no longer identified with the ministry of parish missions, as it was in the first Rule, even though a significant historical value is attached to it (cf. R 2). Thus there is unity in the purpose of the various forms of the apostolic activity that we carry on in areas of a Christian tradition or in mission territories (cf. C 5).

The priority given by our Oblate tradition and our present Constitutions to proclamation is in line with the missionary mandate reaffirmed in the encyclical *Redemptoris missio* and constitutes the great ecclesial challenge in a pluralistic world, often indifferent and to a great part non-Christian.

“Proclamation is the permanent priority of mission. The Church cannot elude Christ’s explicit mandate, nor deprive men and women of the “Good News” about their being loved and saved by God. Evangelization will always contain – as the foundation, centre and at the same time the summit of its dynamism – a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ ... salvation is offered to all men, as a gift of God’s grace and mercy. All forms of missionary activity are directed to this proclamation, which reveals and gives access to the mystery hidden for ages and made known in Christ (cf. Eph. 3:3-9; Col. 1:25-29), the mystery which lies at the heart of the Church’s mission and life, as the hinge on which all evangelization turns.

In the complex reality of mission, initial proclamation has a central and irreplaceable role, since it introduces man into the mystery of the love of God, who invites him to enter into a personal relationship with himself in Christ and opens the way to conversion. Faith is born of preaching, and every ecclesial community draws its origin and life from the personal response of each believer to that preaching. Just as the whole economy of salvation has its centre in Christ, so too all missionary activity is directed to the proclamation of his mystery”^[8].

There is a deep syntonetic resonance between our Constitutions and Rules and the missionary encyclical in regard to the priority of proclamation or evangelization^[9]. For us the priority of proclamation is a consequence that flows from the priestly character of the Congregation, according to the manner and example of the Apostles whom the original Rule presents as our first fathers. Through the activity of the Spirit and its acceptance in faith, the Word constitutes Christian communities and attains its fullness in the celebration of the Eucharist. Establishing and caring for Christian communities are not opposed to evangelization but are a consequence thereof. As missionaries, however, we must make these communities missionaries in turn in regard to the persons and culture of the environment in which they live^[10].

The very organizational structure of the Congregation is influenced by its clerical character but those in charge are to be priests. This is obligatory for major superiors whereas on the local level someone who is not ordained may be a superior with the permission of the Holy See.

A charism with a priestly spirituality

The priestly character of the Congregation also affects our Oblate spirituality. Christ is perceived as Saviour, as he who out of love has redeemed us and the whole of mankind by his blood. He is not only the object of our ministry but also the model of its execution.

The Eucharist is the very centre of our personal and community existence. In Christ present in the Eucharist, Oblates find the source of their unity and communion, even when circumstances of their missionary commitment keep them at a distance from each other. Constitution 33 well expresses the centrality of the Eucharist as the source and summit of the Church’s life: “We will live such lives as to be able worthily to celebrate it every day. As we participate in its celebration with all our being, we

offer ourselves with Jesus the Saviour; we are renewed in the mystery of our cooperation with him, drawing the bonds of our apostolic community ever closer and opening the horizons of our zeal to all the world.”

What the Founder lived during his entire lifetime is what he wrote on the occasion of his ordination in 1812: “Please God that my whole life be dedicated to this sublime ministry. I will convert a greater number of souls through my diligence at the altar than with all the preaching that I might do.”

For many Oblates the Eucharist is not only the source of their life but also their only form of ministry. In the Sahara and in other places where there is no Christian community, they find in the celebration of the Eucharist the ultimate motive for their presence and the strength of a gratuitous witness. We can ask ourselves the same questions as did Brother Gabriel Tessier, forty years a missionary in Cameroon, (he died on April 23, 1991) who wrote in his notes: “Does the Mass make me a sower of joy, a bridge between God and my brothers? Does my life at every moment reflect faith, hope and trust in God? May the Mass make me a builder of hope amid those around me, may my life as a Christian and a religious make me a living Gospel, a bearer of the Good News.”

All of our prayer is marked by our missionary being; that is why “we come before him bearing with us the daily pressures of our anxiety for those to whom he sends us” (C 32). Because of this apostolic spirituality, our prayer contemplates the Lord not only in himself but also in his mystery of love and of salvation for persons, cultures, and religions, whereby it adapts itself to different spiritual traditions and makes them into an Areopagus of evangelization^[11]. The very events of our lives and ministry itself are avenues of encounter with the Lord (cf. CC 3 1 ,33,56).

Praying the divine Office is not only a duty that the Church lays upon her ministers and a way of continuing the tradition of the monastic Orders, but also a way of carrying out our Oblate mission^[12].

Ministry in regard to priests

The Founder’s ideal and the goal of our founding was to provide the Church with priests who evangelize and who are holy; this is rather strongly expressed in the Preface, the result of a Gospel reading of the situation and the response to be given thereto. Oblates are called to be these evangelizing and holy priests. If we are not, that would mean that we are unfaithful to the charism of our vocation in the Church.

The Founder quickly became aware that the Congregation had to try and transmit such a priestly ideal to those outside her ranks by means of giving example, promoting welcome and animation and taking on seminary formation. Thus formation of the clergy became one of the Congregation’s ends. This too remains for us a challenge and a criterion for evaluating our “performance”. Are we an example, an attractive and constructive force for a clergy that evangelizes and is holy? An answer requires more finesse than simply counting the number of seminarians whom we animate and the number of Oblates involved in the clergy formation. Such self-examination is ever more necessary today in a crisis situation that affects us at least as much as it does other priests.

Ministry promoting the formation of the clergy does not start with a special obedience or once we are involved in ministry. Eugene de Mazenod wanted scholastics to be an example to the seminarians with whom they were studying or were in contact. Today such opportunities of contact are even more frequent, for most of you are taking your studies together with other seminarians. We do not need to adopt the attitude of being others’ teachers; nevertheless our authentic witness can affect others. Furthermore, such a duty begins within our Oblate communities in regard to our fellow

brothers, for whom we are responsible by virtue of our religious commitment and a specific vow (cf. C 29).

Witness

Father Deschatelets, Superior General from 1947 to 1972, underlined in his Circular Letter no. 191 of 1951 the characteristic traits of the Oblate vocation and its originality. He wrote:

“First and foremost, we are priests... Priests among so many other priests, but priests with a special inspiration which gives a particular outline to the priesthood of an Oblate. We are made priests so that we may restore to the priesthood all its glory, all its prestige, and, by the example of our lives, carry along with us all those who, like ourselves, are signed with the sacred character of Holy Orders. In laying the foundations of his Institute, our Founder did indeed plan to work for the conversion of the masses, but he also had in mind the reform and sanctification of the clergy. It was for this reason that, from the very beginning, he demanded that his disciples follow so high, so perfect a standard of priestly life...

We know that emphatic insistence upon the necessity of sanctity in the priest is no new thing within the Church. On this, as on many other points, Father de Mazenod is in perfect accord with all the great apostles of the priesthood... Let us try, dear Oblates, to grasp the full import of our Founder’s message. Let us be the priests in the very front rank of the Church’s priests. Let us not be mere mediocrities, priests whom our Founder described as ‘common goods of little value’; he did not want such men as his associates. That we may attain the standard he desired, let our spiritual life be firmly based upon the richest elements of a priestly life which draws forth from the sacrament of Orders a most intense vitality...

...Priestly charity should saturate our lives, it should be the motive of all our actions, it should be the very air we breathe... Even our religious mentality itself is conditioned by priestly charity to such an extent that the Oblate who would subordinate sacerdotal grace to the grace of his religious vocation would falsify the basic orientation of his Oblate life. The Oblate is, and ought to remain both priest and religious. Neither status can be separated from the other if he wishes to remain a true Oblate of Mary Immaculate.’...

The Oblate may not be as other priests, he must be the model priest. The grace of his special vocation sweeps him upwards to the very heights, it calls on him to set the standard and to assist in the formation of a worthy priesthood.... The Preface is indeed a synthesis of the Rule. Moreover, it reminds us in terms which admit no ambiguity of our obligation to priestly holiness - verbo et exemplo - so that whenever the priesthood falls into a feeble state, we may be able to restore it.”^[13]

A charism shared by priests and Brothers

Our priestly purpose and spirituality have never excluded the presence of Brothers in the Congregation and the full sharing of the same charism; I would even say that the Brothers help the Congregation better to live this dimension also of its vocation.

The modality of relationships between priests and Brothers and the forms of ministry carried out by the latter have varied according to times and places. The name was changed from Lay Brother to Coadjutor Brother. The Brother’s activity was often seen as a support to that of the priest; rather, it is complementary.

It would certainly be impossible to grasp the organization and development of our missions ad

gentes without the presence and work of the Brothers. The Oblate presence among the Amerindians of Canada, among the Africans of Lesotho and of Namibia would have been substantially different if they had not been there. The ecclesial and even the civil structures of various countries are the result of the Brothers' activity. Their influence, however, has been more radical than the fruit of their labours. They have wielded an influence through their being and example and not only through their work. They have transmitted important Gospel values, such as the meaning of work in societies that despised the same, the worship of God in the ordinary things of life, the gratuitousness of religious life, the sense of prayer, simplicity and closeness to the people.

What is even more impressive to me is the fact that the Brothers have been very much aware of the priestly character of the Oblate charism. I have met Brothers who have deeply affected my Oblate life and that of others in formation houses or in our apostolic communities. Some Brothers who are more known in the Congregation are noteworthy for their contribution to the vocation and perseverance of priests, their sense of the priesthood, their spirituality.

Brother Anthony Kowalczyk, whose cause for beatification is introduced in Rome, has always been referred to as a pillar in the apostolic school of Edmonton and in the Provinces of Western Canada. Many attribute the growth and fidelity in their priestly vocation to the influence of this Servant of God, to his prayer, word and example. Several have testified that they overcame trials and temptations thanks to his word and prayer, not only during the period of their first formation but also when they were already engaged in ministry.

In regard to Brother Ernest Gauthier, the doorkeeper at the University Seminary in Ottawa, a number of people have stated that they had recourse to him in their difficulties and that his influence was more decisive for them than that of the professors and formators they had been assigned. These and other Brothers did not claim for themselves roles that pertain to others; rather they fully lived out their own specific Oblate vocation.

The presence of Brothers in a clerical Congregation reminds us that our specific mission is entrusted to the community before it is to persons. To carry out its mission a community needs different and complementary contributions. Their presence reminds us that the mission depends on our being first of all, more than on what we do. The quality of our life wields its influence not only through example but also by means of our collaboration in the saving work of Christ.

Complementarity in the same charism

"We come together in apostolic communities of priests and Brothers, united to God by the vows of religion" (C 1). Not only the religious life but all the elements of our charism are shared by the Brothers and priests who incarnate two vocations within one and the same charism. In this full sharing of the charism by two distinct vocations, there are complementary ways of living it. I will treat of only two values more pertinent to our topic, namely, our priestly and our marian character.

The double manner of participating in the one and only priesthood of Christ makes the presence of priests and Brothers complementary. The ministerial priesthood reminds us that the Church is a gift of God, that the sacraments are not realities that the community gives to itself but which it receives from Christ's mercy. The common priesthood allows us to receive the sacraments and makes the whole of one's life a worship of God, a witness to people. Basically speaking, the common priesthood reminds us and brings it about that all our ordinary life is transformed by God and becomes a cult addressed to him and a witness and service to our neighbor.

Hence, there is complementarity between the two forms of sharing Christ's one and only priesthood even within a clerical Congregation. The priests consecrate the Eucharist and administer the sacraments; the Brothers are a reminder that the whole of life ought to be a worship acceptable to God, the eucharist of all that is created and of our whole existence. While the ministerial priesthood underlines God's gift, the common priesthood requires response and acceptance of this gift on our part. And all of us come together in the one and only eucharistic sacrifice so that our whole life may be acceptable to God and of benefit to his Church.

The role of Mary illustrates in another way the place of the Brother within the Congregation. All of us ought to have a tender devotion towards our Mother and to find in her the model of our consecrated life. The Brother in the community, however, represents Mary in a special way. Mary is not a ministerial priest. And yet she gave birth to Jesus the priest, educated Jesus for his mission, and accompanied him especially in the supreme act of salvation by means of the cross: *stabat*, John says. And she accompanied the Apostles, from Cana where they began to recognize Christ's divinity to the Cenacle where she was present while they were waiting for the Holy Spirit and at the outset of the mission.

In a clerical Congregation the Brother takes Mary's place: he is a presence of Mary, a discreet role and presence, important and necessary. Concretely this often takes on the form of simple services, such as Mary provided at Nazareth; on other occasions it means taking part in community and apostolic activities; always it is a following of Christ and a cooperating in his mission by means of one's being even unto the cross and apparent defeat like on Calvary; more often it means taking part in prayer as in the Cenacle.

The Brother is a great gift to the Congregation, a marian presence in view of achieving the same common mission of evangelizing the poor. Can we conceive the mission of Jesus without Mary? Can we think of the Oblate mission without the Brothers?

I believe Blessed Eugene would agree with these reflections of mine: he sensed the beauty of the religious vocation thanks to a Brother with whom he lived during his first years as a priest. This contact with a Brother was not irrelevant to our founding.

Living the priesthood within the charism

If all Oblates are called to live the priestly character of the Congregation, this is true for the person who has the specific vocation and the ministerial priesthood. Every Oblate must exercise and live his priesthood within the Oblate charism. The Oblate priest is not a diocesan priest. He is to live out his missionary quality in whatever ministry assigned to him: he is to give priority to evangelizing the poor, those who are far away, those who are beyond the reach of Church structures or who have never been Christian (C 5). He is to develop apostolic creativity and courage (C 8) and effect an integral evangelization that promotes all the aspects of the person and of society (C 9). He is to be engaged in establishing Christian communities that are missionary in their own milieu and open to the world at large. For this too he is to be a man of community and communion with the Congregation which lives out the mission in so many contexts.

In the graced moment in which the Church and the world live today, missionary challenges are not lacking. Today we need to commit ourselves to evangelizing Christian communities that are to live and radiate their own faith in a new context. Above all we need to commit ourselves to a new evangelization of those who are no longer Christian and to be available and active in evangelizing those who have never been Christian. This triple commitment addressed to the entire Church^[14] is a

renewing challenge to our Congregation whose end is the evangelization of the poor.

If every priest today is invited to discover the missionary dimension of his vocation, this is all the more true for us Oblates. The Congregation does not prepare an Oblate to carry out a personal mission and to be loaned to a local Church. He carries out his apostolate as an Oblate who integrates the various aspects of our charism. "Oblates are committed to missionary work as members of the Congregation and of their respective Provinces" (R I). Our charism ought to imbue the Congregation's priests with a particular style and dynamism.

Common and differentiated formation

The Constitutions and Rules have a section that is rather elaborate on formation after the novitiate: it is divided into three parts, one that is general, one for those going on to the priesthood and another for those oriented to the life of a Brother (cf. CC 65-67). The period in temporary vows is to be seen as a time of initial formation for all. Practices and places of formation vary according to Provinces and countries. In an ever growing number of cases formation is in common even though programs may be distinct. This can be beneficial for the future life in common and for an adapted insertion into the Church of today when theological formation is being given to more and more laity. However, there must also be a specific formation both for those who are preparing to be priests and for those who are preparing themselves as Brothers. Besides being a means of making it a reality, commitment to an adequate formation is a sign of the authenticity of one's vocation.

In both vocations an eventual change of choice is foreseen: a person who had intended the priesthood may discern a call to the brotherhood, and someone who wanted to consecrate himself as a brother may discern a call to the priesthood. This openness to making a change prior to perpetual vows reflects the present situation which foresees a common novitiate for the two states of life, during which the common aspects of the charism and the dimensions of religious life are stressed. This is also due to the fact that today a choice is made more gradually and a greater discernment is required. Perpetual oblation ought to mark the conclusion of one's choice, an option that should never be made lightly.

A prayer as a wish and a greeting

In the "Oblate Prayer" book we find, after the midday examen, two or three prayers (depending on the language editions): one focuses on our ministerial priesthood and the other on fraternal charity. May these prayers be lived realities for each one of us. The one which speaks of the priestly character is also my wish for you:

*O Lord, our High Priest and Victim,
You refresh with your own Body and Blood
those who are consecrated to you and your service.
Grant that we who share in your priesthood
may walk worthy of the vocation to which we are called,
and may ever nourish your people
both by word and by example.*

[1] TOURIGNY, I.: "Le charisme sacerdotal du Bx Eugene de Mazenod", in *Vie Oblate Life*, 36 (1977), pp. 151-172.

[2] BEAUDOIN, Y.: Introduction to Bx Eugene de Mazenod. *Ecrits spirituels* 4, 1794-1 X 11. Rome, 1991, pp. XVI-XXVI.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[4] MORABITO, J.: "Je serai prêtre". Eugène de Mazenod de Venise à Saint-Sulpice(1794-1811) Ottawa, 1954.

[5] Preface of the Constitutions and text on p. 74.

[6] Cf. *Redemptoris missio*, 41-60.

[7] *Ibid.* 61-86.

[8] *Ibid.*, 44.

[9] *Ibid.*, 2, 20, 23, 31, 34, 44, 58.

[10] *Ibid.*, 20, 26, 27, 48, 29, 51, 53.

[11] *Ibid.*, 38.

[12] Cf. C 53; *Redemptoris missio*, 20; SCHAFF, N.: "La Psalmodie de l'Office divin en commun" in *Études Oblates*, 1950, pp. 115-128.

[13] DESCHATELETS, L.: "Our vocation and our life of intimate union with Mary Immaculate" .

Administrative circular 191: English translation published as separate booklet: for the texts quoted here cf. pp. 8-9, 19, 19-20, 14, 15.

[14] Cf. *Redemptoris missio*, 32-34.