

TO THE MEMBERS OF THE OBLATE CONFERENCE OF ASIA-OCEANIA

November 26th, 1976 - Address - Itami, Japan

Some impressions. - Some problems. - Go into the future without fear

J.C. et M.I.

First of all, I want to tell you how happy I was to participate in your meeting and to thank you for your brotherly hospitality.

You yourselves have presented to the Conference members the situation in your Provinces and Delegations. I am on my first visit in Asia as Superior General. Consequently, my knowledge remains limited. However, I do wish to mention certain impressions and then I would be happy to share with you on some particular problems.

Some impressions

An initial fact is easily noted: the Oblates in Asia are still a small group in a vast region of millions and millions of people. That reminds me of the first years of the Congregation in France and in America: small groups of five, ten, fifteen Oblates who progressively exerted a strong influence on many people. It is more by the quality of your presence and of your action, than by your number, that you will succeed in the work of evangelizing. You must look to the future with confidence, insisting on the quality of your men and on the solidarity which binds them together.

A second impression: as a Region, as a group of Provinces and Delegations, one notes a great variety: the variety of numbers, v. g. Sri Lanka with nearly 300 members and Thailand with a dozen; the variety of cultures, v. g. if we compare Japan, the Philippines and Australia. There are challenges to face here. This variety in addition to the distances can provoke an attitude of individualism, of isolationism, and make more difficult the development of the Region as such. In this matter, I was happy to see the cordiality and facility of relationships among yourselves. You must believe firmly in the possibilities of your regional Conference and do all you can to assure its development.

Finally, one last impression. In some aspects, you are ahead of other Regions. You have the advantage of an excellent guide, namely, the "Oblate Missionary Strategy in Asia". I reread this document before coming to Asia. It is, at the same time, inspirational and practical. I encourage you to read these few pages often and to use them as a guide for your activity. At the end of the document it is said: "We face our missionary task in Asia with confidence, enthusiasm and optimism". I hope it is true! In point of fact, it should be true, even if you have, as others do in other places, some problems to face. I will mention three of them, on which, as I said, I would be glad to share.

Some problems

First, there is the matter of some missionaries asking to return to their home Province, mostly because of feelings of personal insecurity. Surely you have to help these men and, as much as possible, reduce the causes of this insecurity. However, the future of your Provinces will be in the local Oblates, and so you have to promote, as much as you can, the local vocations and take special care of these vocations. It is also necessary to promote the ministries of the Christian laity.

A second difficulty concerns your relationships with the Bishops. This is not a general problem but one which seems to exist more particularly in two places. For me, two things are clear: we are men of the Bishops because we are men of the Church, but, on the other hand, we have, as Oblates, a particular vocation or mission in the Church – we are not diocesan priests. The tension sometimes is inevitable and the only practical solution is either to accept a certain compromise or to leave a diocese. The decision of leaving a diocese is rarely the best, especially when we consider the future and when the place is an important and central one.

On this issue, I think we should try to maintain the dialogue, and a cordial one, with the Bishops. Then we must make clear and satisfactory contracts with the Bishops – and in this matter the General Administration is disposed to help. After that, what we need is mutual collaboration for the good of the people and of the Church. Recently, Pope Paul VI invited the Superiors General of Europe to cooperate in this way with the Bishops, because of the decrease in diocesan clergy manpower; but he also asked the Bishops to respect as much as possible the charism of each Institute.

A last question concerns the future of the Oblate Brothers in your Provinces. What will be their role? And is it your intention to promote this vocation among your local people? Generally speaking, Oblate Brothers have been a great help and their presence a grace of God in the Congregation. If we are decided to continue to invite Christian men to join us in the Institute as Brothers, we have to determine better their role and to assure them the professional and spiritual formation they need.

Go into the future without fear

Before concluding, I want to thank you for accepting to serve the Congregation and your Oblate brothers as Provincials. It is not an easy function in today's religious life, but it is a necessary one. Be assured of the confidence, help, and support of the General Administration. I know how dedicated to the Region your General Concillor, Father Dalston Forbes, is. The other Council members are also disposed to help you in any way they can.

I often recall the words the Holy Father addressed to our Chapter: "Our world more than ever needs missionaries who are totally available... Christ will certainly be your support... Go forward without fear". This is what we must do with the help of God's grace and Mary's patronage.