

# TO THE MEMBERS OF THE OBLATE CONFERENCE OF LATIN AMERICA

September 15th, 1979 - Address - Paramaribo, Surinam

*Unique character of Latin America. - Option for the Poor. - Option for fidelity. - Option for hope and in favour of smiling.*

L.J.C. et M.I.

First of all, I want to express my great happiness in meeting with all of you together at this session of CIAL. Father Guilmette, your General Councillor, has his share of responsibility for my being here. He never misses a chance to get us "involved" in Latin America!

## **Unique character of Latin America**

When coming here, I recalled the Joint Session with the General Council at Asuncion in 1974; I also thought of Puebla, of its impact on the Church, and of the very special and unique character of Latin America.

After the Puebla event, Henri Fesquet, Le Monde's special correspondent at the Conference, wrote of this uniqueness, and not without a bit of disappointment:

*We must resign ourselves. Latin America is not France. Here, affective and intellectual behavior differs from theirs. Here, logic and reasoning are indispensable; negative criticism is spontaneous; scepticism is frequent, even voiced protests. In Latin America, on the contrary, one proceeds by impulse and tries to find the good side of things. It's not by mere chance that a smile is a means of privileged communication. Credit is more willingly given to people than to ideas. Hope is hard to kill... (Le Monde, February 14, 1979).*

I have the impression that this is also true of the Oblates at work in Latin America. As they gradually let themselves be permeated by the Latin American reality, they change, they are transformed, they finally reach the point where they constitute a distinctive group that is unique in the Congregation. Another result is that they can bring to our Institute something special and unique. Having themselves been "evangelized" by the South American, they can in turn "evangelize" their brother Oblates and do so not so much by their words as by their example and the witness of their lives.

In what sense? I have given this a lot of thought recently and, as a result, there remain uppermost in my mind three thoughts which I simply share with you. Here is what the Congregation most expects of you missionaries in Latin America.

## **Option for the poor**

This option already exists among you and is a testimony to all Oblates. You go everywhere to the poor and you work for and with them. "Your brothers, your dear brothers, your worthy brothers", as the Founder once said, are the Indians, the campesinos, the miners, the sub-proletarians of shantytowns, the Hmong refugees of French Guiana... You live with them, you give witness to God's love among them, you are Christ's presence to them, you are – it is often repeated – their voice, "the voice of the voiceless", and you help them – with your limitations, sufferings and difficulties – in their efforts to achieve full liberation.

From the bottom of my heart I congratulate and thank you for all this.

### **Option for fidelity**

The option for faithfulness to the Gospel, to the whole Gospel; for faithfulness to the Church, for faithfulness to man, for faithfulness to your vocation as Oblates. In this I think I express an idea of capital importance found in the various messages of the Pope during his visit to Puebla. It is the Gospel in its entirety than can save man. One cannot single out one page and let fall the other.

The Gospel is love for man to the point of giving one's life for him, but it is also the love for God, the Creator and Father of all men.

The Gospel is the People of God, but it is also the ecclesial institution and its *magisterium*.

Man needs food and suffers from injustice: but he also thirsts for God, hungers for his Word and his Body, and awaits the salvation which surpasses the limits of this world.

The Oblate vocation is to proclaim the Gospel to the poor, but it is also to consecrate oneself totally to God in the community of one's brothers, in the joyous acceptance of poverty, chastity and obedience.

This option to faithfulness, to an integral faithfulness, is everywhere difficult, and perhaps more so in Latin America. You are here in a state of constant challenge. The human environment, the social and political conditions which prevail here do not facilitate – far from it – the harmonious integration of these differing elements. Your struggles and your successes, the efforts you make to maintain a dynamic equilibrium of this sort are not without influence on your Oblate brothers throughout the world.

### **Option for hope and in favour of smiling**

The hope of a South American, we have said, is "hard to kill". As Christians and missionaries you must have hearts filled with hope, even sometimes at the risk of being taken for fools. This is the folly of the Gospel. "I know him in whom I have believed" (2 Timothy 1:12); "In him who is the source of my strength, I have strength for everything" (Philippians 4:13).

Your task is enormous, the obstacles are numerous, your means remain poor ones, but God's grace is with you and certainly his Spirit is at work with faith and courage, the work of forming basic communities and preparing Christian leaders, the ministry of priestly, religious and Oblate vocations! All the while, keep smiling and be relaxed. You are the ones who plant and water, but it is the Lord who makes the plant grow.

In conclusion and in the names of Father George, Father Guilmette and all the members of the Central Team, I wish to reiterate the confidence, admiration and friendship of the General Administration. May our Blessed Founder help us all to live in authenticity our vocation of Oblates of Mary Immaculate, missionaries to the poor!