

TO THE OBLATES OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

January 31st, 1976 - Letter - Roma, Lesotho

The Oblates' work in the past. - New needs. - Daring. - Sharing. - Hope.

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During the past few weeks the members of the General Council and I have had the pleasure of visiting with you. We were warmly received everywhere. We came as brothers, with a twofold desire: to bring you signs of our confidence and support, and to get to know you better – in a sense, to let ourselves be evangelized by you.

During the course of this visit, we took part in your Interprovincial Conference from January 21 to 28, during which our brothers, the Oblate Bishops of Southern Africa, also joined us for one day.

Our stay is now coming to an end. Before leaving, however, I wish to thank you in the name of the General Council for your brotherly welcome. Special thanks, also, to the Province of Lesotho for allowing us to hold our plenary session in their Provincial House.

The Oblates' work in the past

The Oblates have accomplished, and continue doing, marvellous work in Southern Africa. They implanted the Church here by the witness of holy men like Father Gerard, by preaching God's Word, by organizing divine worship and the many works of human development, education especially. You should be proud of the past and continue its work.

New needs

But now new needs are making themselves felt. For several days the Central Team listened to the Provincials and delegates of the Region as they attempted to formulate resolutions in response to what they see as the most urgent needs. We took part in their deliberations. Wholeheartedly we approve the resolutions adopted. Together with the ongoing formation program planned to begin this year, and the perennial concern about local vocations, those resolutions are essentially related to the priorities reached by the Interprovincial Conference in April 1975. They provide some clear orientations of Oblate policy in Southern Africa.

The present session along with our own visits in the Provinces have helped to pinpoint some of the needs which we as Oblates must answer. There is the need for greater energy in working to promote social justice, a need for greater commitment to serving an emerging working class, a need further to develop and diversify the ministries of the Christian laity, a need for greater inter-Oblate sharing and for better dialogue with the Bishops, a need for Christian communities that are more deeply evangelical and better inserted into their milieu... You must answer all these needs courageously and boldly, according to the spirit our Founder has given us.

It is to the poor, above all, that you must go, more and more so all the time – more and more confident of your brothers' backing and in communion with them. The Church must evangelize. "It is the Church who has the task of evangelizing" (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 16). The more united you are among yourselves in genuine communities, and united with those responsible for the Church, the more our apostolate of evangelization will bear lasting fruit.

During the present visit we heard a triple call: a call for more boldness, a call for greater sharing and,

finally, a call to deeper hope.

Daring

A call for more boldness, for greater willingness to leave the beaten path in order to answer the new needs of the poor. Today the Christian conscience has become much more sensitive to our collective sins – sins such as exploitation, social injustice, contempt for the rights of man. It is a sign of the times, and for us Oblates it becomes a call from God to new forms of evangelization. It is up to us to respond thereto, not as political leaders but as missionaries of the poor, in the name of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sharing

A call for greater sharing at all levels: at the prayer level, at the level of financial support, on the plane of apostolic action. Nowhere in any of your Provinces must a single Oblate feel alone or abandoned by his brothers. Progressively the point must be reached where all gifts received are put in common so that equitable sharing becomes a reality. Among yourselves you must arrive at genuinely evangelized communities which, in turn, become evangelizing communities (cf. *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 13).

Hope

Finally, a call to deeper hope. Even if, humanly speaking, the future may seem bleak at times and difficulties painful, especially difficulties of change and profound evolution, you cannot allow yourselves to despair. You must keep pushing ahead, remaining strong in your faith, as did the first Oblates who came to Southern Africa. They persisted despite the worst obstacles. All of us are members of that same family, we are animated by the same spirit. May Blessed Eugene de Mazenod always be your guide and your support!