

TO THE OBLATES OF THE UNITED STATES

October 12th, 1979 - Letter - San Antonio, Texas

Why we came. - Serving minorities. - Promoting the Christian laity. - Spiritual renewal. - Cooperation between Provinces. - Evaluating apostolic works. - Vocations. - Tribute to the Southern Province of the United States.

L.J.C. et M.I.

Tomorrow, most of the General Council members leave the United States to return to their usual work. Before leaving, they have asked me to express their joy and their gratitude to you. Everywhere we were received as brothers. For three weeks the San Jose Retreat House has been our home where we have experienced an extraordinary hospitality. For all this, I say a heartfelt thanks in the name of the General Council.

Why we came

As in the other Regions, we had come, first of all, to listen to you, to try to understand a little better the American reality as it unfolds at the present time, with all the implications it has for your apostolate. What role should be played, what influence should be exercised, in the United States and within the Congregation, by the group that you are: more than 800 Oblates who, while differing in works and activities, are animated by the same spirit of love for Jesus Christ and by the same zeal for the salvation of people, especially the most abandoned. Your "American" experience is, in a way, a unique challenge: how to be missionaries of the poor in one of the most affluent and technologically developed countries?

We had also come to support and encourage you, as well as to be stimulated and encouraged by you. What you are accomplishing in terms of mutual cooperation, of renewal in pastoral and missionary endeavours, of adaptation in religious life; the importance you give to lay Christians and your desire to associate them more closely with your work and your life; your concern for vocations and training Oblate personnel: all that must be continued and developed, and can become a source of inspiration for Oblates everywhere.

Finally, we had come to reaffirm our faith in the Congregation and in the mission confided to her by the Church. Pope Paul VI said to the members of the 1974 General Chapter: "Our world more than ever needs... missionaries who are totally available". Everywhere I have met such men, and I meet them regularly as I visit the Congregation. I think of the Oblates I have just visited in Mexico, Surinam, French Guiana, Puerto Rico... I think of what you are doing here in the United States, and of all those pioneers who have preceded you, like the members of the "Cavalry of Christ" in the Rio Grande Valley... I think of all the Oblates who, in your Region, sincerely and seriously seek new ways to evangelize the poor. All that is a source of hope, and will not fail to bear fruit.

You know to what the Spirit summons us today. These summons were expressed clearly in the San Antonio meeting. The manner in which your Provincials and representatives perceived them, and responded to them, reminded me very much of the Founder's own attitude.

Serving minorities

The title given to our session could have oriented us in a rather different direction, much more intellectual: "Evangelization in the United States' Technological Culture". Very quickly the

“technological culture” disappeared from view to give way to people and, among these, to the most neglected, most abandoned, the poorest in this culture. This led your Provincials and representatives to choose, as a first priority, ministry among minorities, especially Hispanics. I was thinking of Father de Mazenod choosing in Southern France the people who spoke Provençal. As Oblates, we are more at ease with people than with ideas, and among people, with the poor and simple folk rather than with the rich.

That is significant and coincides with our charism in the Church. But, on the other hand, we must be on our guard, for this characteristic attitude can also delude us and weaken our ministry. In order to evangelize the poor, the Congregation also needs men of thought, men who are intellectually specialized, men capable of sociological analysis and theological reflection, men who, because of their competence, are credible in the different milieux where the future of the world of the poor is at stake.

Promoting the Christian laity

Like de Mazenod also, they know that they must not work alone and have felt the need to group men together in order to accomplish their missionary work. In his time, these men were priests, for the ministry was reserved to them; today the field is open to lay people, and therefore your Provincials and representatives have opted, as a second choice, for the development of lay leadership and ministries.

Spiritual renewal

Finally, like the Founder again, they have spontaneously felt the necessity, for someone who wants to be a missionary to the poor, of reform and renewal of life. In a country like the United States, where freedom is a fundamental value, Oblate living should be able to form men who are completely free in regard to consumer goods and fully open to sharing with the poor.

Personally, I am most happy with the orientation taken by the meeting and with the conclusions to which it has come. These conclusions are a source of great hope for the future. The important thing now is that they be put into practice, even though this will mean a little more work for each one! Does the General Council expect even more from the American Region? I would reply, “Yes!”. It is not a matter of taking on anything new, but rather of further developing a number of attitudes that are already present. I would especially indicate three.

Cooperation between Provinces

First, to promote unceasingly cooperation and unity among yourselves, so that the Oblate identity is even more clearly evident within the American Church. Eight hundred men of good will, who share the same ideals, who work together and for the same cause, who mutually support and encourage one another – that constitutes a considerable force within a country. You must be aware of this and go forward with faith and courage.

Beyond the boundaries of Provinces, the identity of the Oblate as a man of the poor, as someone easily approachable and always available to them, as a man who is an incarnation of the love of Christ and of the Church, must become more and more apparent. It is by way of common choice, like those which have come out of this meeting, and by way of the authenticity of your life as religious missionaries to the poor that this identity will become manifest.

Evaluating apostolic works

Secondly, do not be afraid to re-evaluate your apostolic commitments and even certain existing

structures in the light of actual needs and of our vocation in the Church. I was happy to see some of your Provinces making options, establishing priorities. To be sure, this entails abandoning certain works, but also means maintaining and developing others that are more in keeping with our missionary charism. This is the proper line to take: it gives evidence of fidelity to the Founder and of inner freedom. It will lead you, in due course, also to review, prudently and in dialogue, certain structures which perhaps no longer quite correspond to the reality of today.

Vocations

Thirdly, pursue with confidence and tenacity the work undertaken to promote vocations and to assure the quality of first and ongoing formation. For us, this is vital. If there are no new candidates to join us and persevere with us, there is no future for our Congregation. In his day the Founder invited the Fathers and Brothers to pray to the Blessed Virgin for this intention. This we still have to do today; but we have to do more than that: just like the Founder did, we have to work hard for vocations and not be afraid to invite and call. "Come and see!". – "Come and follow me!". Each Oblate should be able to say this. Your Region has already done much to promote vocations and to provide personnel for the foreign missions: Mexico, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Scandinavia, Haiti, Tahiti, Japan, Philippines, South Africa. I can only thank you and encourage you to continue this effort.

Tribute to the Southern Province of the United States

Before closing, allow me to pay tribute to the U.S. Southern Province on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of its foundation. Its past is legendary, with its valorous pioneers and its great Oblates; its present is no less admirable with the growth of its works and its missionary endeavours, especially in Mexico. To Father Augustine Petru, the Provincial, and to all the members of the Province, our warmest congratulations and our best wishes!