

TO THE SENIOR OBLATES

September 8th, 2001 - Letter - Rome

Dear brother Oblates,

"Now that I am ill, I have accepted God's will and, like the little Saint Teresa, I have become a missionary in the convent, praying... the Lord evangelizes more by what we are than by what we do by giving our work a fecundity which surpasses our understanding." (an Italian Oblate on the eve of his 60th anniversary of priesthood)

I am addressing this letter first of all to you, that portion of our missionary family that is advanced in age. I would like to have a conversation with you about your specific way of being missionaries. Many of you are dedicating yourselves to a wide range of activities: serving as pastors and chaplains, professors and retreat preachers, superiors and treasurers to mention but a few of our ministries. Others have gone into partial or full retirement, as in the case of the confrere quoted above. Other still struggle with ill health and infirmity. All your lives and experience are part of the communion among Oblates. So, my hope is that many others will also read this letter. The Congregation is fundamentally one, we evangelize the poor as one family. So each of us should be concerned not only about his own doings, his own age group, but also about the way others respond to their call.

A good number of our members can be counted among those advanced in age. People today live longer than in former times. If we arbitrarily take 70 years as the threshold to old age, then there are all in all about 1400 elderly Oblates, roughly 30% of our total numbers. Note that we have the same number of men under the age of 43.

Is there any comment to be made on these figures? Should they be different? Of course we would all like to see a flourishing of vocations everywhere. It is one of the signs of vitality. Thanks be to God, since 1992 vocations are increasing steadily, from 570 to 679 Oblates in first formation, that is from 11% of the total to 15%. Certainly a higher percentage would be even better. Yet, even when we consider our high number of older confreres in some parts of the world, I do not think that God is making a mistake when he graces us with a longer life and our communities with many confreres advanced in age. If it is true that a harvest of vocations is a sign of life in some sectors of the Congregation, there is also another vitality hidden in the older Oblates. You, our elderly brothers, play an important part as missionaries and evangelizers. The Congregation is bound to value you highly as a hidden treasure. The Founder would have sold the silverware and the chalices to attend to your needs (cf. letter to Fr. Courtes in 1826, ST 388.)

I usually express my own appreciation of you, our older Oblates, through a little letter that I sign for each jubilarian, following the tradition set by Archbishop Zago. Oftentimes I receive an answer, and in the following paragraphs I will quote from some of those responses so that this address to you becomes more of a conversation. What you write is proof of the great spiritual treasure the Congregation has in you. Perhaps we should not call you elderly but elders following the custom of many aboriginal people who hold in particular esteem the bearers of the wisdom and the values proper to them. Surely from its earliest days the Church has valued the leadership of "presbyters."

Let me spell out for you the sense in which I see in you a treasure and a source of life for our Congregation. Your importance, it seems to me, is threefold: You help us to see our present, our past and our future with Gospel eyes.

1. The present: you show us how us to evangelize more through our being than through our doing

The quotation at the beginning of this address expresses the idea well: "The Lord evangelizes more through what we are than through what we do." If the Lord evangelizes through our being this does not imply that we have to be perfect first. It does imply a humble authenticity, a virtue which young people appreciate in a special way. You, our elders, show yourselves more and more as you really are, even with some of your defects. Older people show us that it is the heart that counts, not a false and only apparent perfection.

Contemplation is at the basis of this evangelizing through what we are. True, many of you have received the grace to lead an active life even beyond the eighties and it is good to remain active in an adapted way as long as ever possible. However, old age offers many a special way to live out what Redemptoris Missio says: "The missionary must be a 'contemplative in action.' . . . the future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation. Unless the missionary is a contemplative he cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way." (91) An Oblate from Belgium writes to me, and it may well become a message for all of us: "After 50 years of priesthood, a man has not finished following Christ in order to know and to love him better. Fortunately, nowadays, I can devote more time to prayer."

Sometimes you express your missionary life, besides in prayer, through little services which we could call sacramental, in the broad sense. They are more in the realm of being than of doing. Taking care of flowers, having time to talk to some lonely person, keeping a corner of the house clean, is more than a useful practical contribution to the running of a community: it becomes a sacrament of God's loving presence among us.

2. The past: You are the guardians of our history and keep us in contact with our roots

Part of our collective memory as Oblates has been put down in writing. But what is that compared to the witness to the past that you can give in person, the stories that you can tell out of your experience? I was glad, years ago, to meet an old priest who in his youth had met another old priest who had been ordained by the Founder. We need your memories to get in touch with our roots. Therefore we have included the celebration of our memory in the Immense Hope project. Please tell us your stories in person, but I also encourage you to write down or to put on tape your part of Oblate history.

There is another treasure hidden in the one who has a rich past behind him. When we are younger we tend to take persons and things for granted, as something to which we are entitled. Many of our elders have, instead, become very grateful persons. Gratitude means to acknowledge that all has been a generous gift from God and that most of it came through people who have lived before us. Your letters often reflect this way of relating to your own history. One Oblate writes on the occasion of his golden jubilee of priesthood: "In those fifty years, how many have been the occasions for giving thanks to the Lord for all those he has placed along my path and who have helped me to be of service." People like him teach those of us who are younger that the most important things in our lives have been given to us. Only this realization will give us the humility to become servants of others in their own process of growing, from their own roots.

3. You point to the future, reminding us how central the Paschal mystery is

It would be a mistake to idealize too much the "golden age." You do not always live light and happy days and, for some of you, your many years may have become a heavy burden. But in this way too,

your mission is important for us and for the world since it speaks to us about something central to our faith: the mystery of Easter and the future transformation of all things. Two years ago, when I took part in the Synod for Europe, a good number of the participants expressed their concern that in Europe we do not talk anymore about the end of our lives and about what happens thereafter. The eschatological perspective seems forgotten. It is you who can remind the people of this modern age and time, and also us Oblates, to get ready for that baptism through which all of us must pass.

I found the Paschal way of approaching death poetically expressed in some verses by Brother Willi Günschmann from the French province who died in 1992. He writes, though we do not know in which context:

“Last night, Lord I was afraid. You knocked so loudly I thought death had come. And yet ... You came as a friend to remind me that life does not last forever ... Am I asleep, am I dreaming? A mysterious curtain arises. Am I alive... am I dying? I no longer know. Once again, light came, in the early morning, I fell asleep at last. What remains of your visit, Lord? All is engraved on my heart, never shall I forget it, I shall remember it forever.”

Yet another Brother wrote to me recently in a simpler way: “I’ve turned myself over to the Father. May she who is the Mother of us all and St. Joseph help me to reach one day the place where so many of us are already gathered. Let us pray for each other then we will reach that goal.”

We tend to forget about “the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” But, as St. Paul states clearly, if death and resurrection are not our horizon, then our faith makes no sense. We missionaries would not receive the spiritual strength to become saints without having previously been reborn from the Paschal mysteries. You are there to remind us of that as you prepare yourselves for the great journey. In his booklet “Reste avec nous car le soir vient:” Cardinal Godfried Danneels writes “The closer we approach death, the more we must dream of a new birth.”

Dear elders, you are an important part of our missionary Congregation, just as important as the younger members to whom I addressed a letter a year ago. Thank you for what you are, for your evangelizing by your very presence. If you live your mission to the full, the work of all the Oblates will bear rich fruit and the poor will be evangelized in unexpected ways.

I can find no better way to conclude my chat with you than with the words of Fr. Fernand Jetté as he describes how he saw his own old age. After a few lines, the text becomes an invocation to the Mother of all Oblates. She will always be close to us whatever shape our mission may take.

“I have lived all my life in the company of Mary. She has sustained me, encouraged me, helped me. It is to her that I entrust the time I have left to live.

Help me, Mary, to thank the Lord for all the good he has worked in me and through me.

Preserve me from an old age of selfishness, sadness, a burden to myself and to others.

Preserve me from useless regrets, troublesome memories, anguish and doubt.

Help me each day to offer to God my physical and moral suffering, uniting them to those of Christ for the salvation of the world, the good of the Church, the developpement of my religious family.

Keep me to the end in love, in trust and in joy!” (1986, Notes and testament)

United with you in the same Oblate mission, I greet you in Christ and Mary Immaculate.