

# TO THE YOUNG OBLATES

September 8th, 2000 - Letter - Rome

*Dear young Oblates,*

Greetings from Rome in this year of the Great Jubilee! Jubilee is a time of renewal. Every seven or forty-nine years, or whenever, there is a Holy Year. The people of God stops, as it were, to take stock, to become more aware of its dependence on God, of its mission in the world and of its need to make a fresh start. The Great Jubilee of 2000 is coming to a close as I write this letter, and on January 1st, 2001 the Third Millennium will really begin. Are we Oblates ready to make a fresh start from where we are now and from where our mission is?

Before we close the year 2000, I thought I should address some words specially to you, the young members of the Congregation. It is you above all who are called to walk the new paths which we need to take. Looking at the figures, there are now about 900 of you, counting those in the first five years of ministry and in initial formation, and your numbers have been growing over the last three or four years. So you are a formidable missionary force.

As I start composing these lines I am having a few days of rest at the place of my novitiate. The environment evokes in me the idealism of my own beginnings as an Oblate and makes me aware of the changes that have taken place since. I have also recently been at the meeting of the Superiors General of religious institutes of men who come together twice a year. In several of our more recent sessions we have reflected on "re-founding". The word points in the direction of what the Jubilee intends: a new start, responding to the question of what would the Founder himself would do today, faced with the challenges of today's world. The word "Re-founding" does not say that we are to begin a different congregation; it implies, however, that we are to renew the spirit of our beginnings in us if we want to have an impact in our world. It changes so fast from jubilee to jubilee and without serious renewal we will not be able to keep its pace.

## **1. Awareness of a changing mission**

The last General Chapter was about mission. Its final message starts from an outlook on our present world, "loved by God" (EPM 1). Those whom God loves most are the poor with their many faces. The number of the materially poor is growing dramatically. In the period from 1999 to 2000 alone, the number of those who have to survive on one dollar per day has increased from 1.3 to 1.5 billion people. New kinds of poverty emerge, for instance through migration. So our Oblate mission of bringing Good News to the poor is becoming more urgent than ever. This is one of the changes, and a very striking one. But which form should our mission take in the present times?

### *Changes in the West, the East and the South*

The challenges are different according to the parts of the world where our Oblate mission is present.

The changes in the West are evident. There, the Christian religion has lost most of its power as a public institution. The Church is becoming a minority group. Clergy and religious are less respected in public and even among Christians, and vocations to this way of life are diminishing. On the other hand, events such as the World Youth Days in Paris and Rome, with one and two million youth participating respectively, show that there is an openness to the Gospel. We put different names on the changed reality: secularism, post-modernism, the end of "Christianity". From these changes, let us courageously confront the question: What should the future model of church in the West look

like? I am pleased that in the year 2002 the Oblates will have a congress on mission specially in North America, with the title Missionaries to Secularity. The congress will focus on the first world reality, but some Oblate experts from other parts of the world will be invited since the changes that started in the West affect all of us.

The East has lived its martyrdom under communism almost in silence. Many stories need still to be told, now that the iron curtain is open. A book by a young Ukrainian Oblate about religious persecution in his area has immediately become a bestseller in his country. Being in contact with Oblates in the eastern countries, I realize the tremendous possibilities for the Gospel that are open now, e.g., in the east of Ukraine or in Turkmenistan. At the same time, they too, the people of the East, have to face the challenges of secularity and globalization. It would be good if the Oblate units of the East were no longer to remain unknown. They are now sending out numerous missionaries, but some eastern countries could also receive a few Oblates from other parts of the world. This has started happening in the recent foundation of Romania.

For some time now we have been hearing that, in the South there are new missionary approaches, expressed through basic Christian communities and liberation theologies, popular piety and inculturation, interreligious dialogue and lively liturgies. In many parts the communities of believers are vital and growing and vocations to religious and priestly life are numerous. The paschal mystery is present in our southern missions where the Oblates are suffering from political and criminal violence, even in conditions of outright war. In more recent times, the ways of being Christian in the South are having a growing influence on the Universal Church. In a few years from now, the Catholics of Latin America will numerically constitute 50% of all the Catholics in the world. Our liturgy will be increasingly transformed by multicultural expressions, we will discuss the pluricentrism of the Church, we will dialogue more deeply with the religions to which two thirds of humanity belong.

#### *Two consequences of the change*

Missionaries have always brought a certain model of the Church and of mission with them to areas outside the Old Christianity. In the era since the foundation of the Oblates, the churches in many countries and cultures have been shaped according to the pattern of the West. That the north is doing all the giving and the south all the receiving is no longer the case.<sup>[1]</sup>

#### *The need of finding new resources*

Among the Oblates, fewer and fewer personnel is being transferred from the western countries to the other churches. The East is now sending out missionaries in larger numbers, and so too are the Oblate provinces in the South. Also, fewer and fewer material and financial resources will flow from the former Christianity, and our bursars warn us that there might be a radical shift in five to ten years. Both in the areas of personnel and finances, the changes in mission affect and challenge our lives as Oblates. I am always happy if I find in you, the younger Oblates, an attitude of simplicity and modesty in facing the new missionary situation. Even in our material needs we will have to rely more and more on the cooperation of the local people, of the laity. In Christ, they are our brothers and sisters and mothers (Mc 3,34) and they will not abandon us. I must also say that I would be apprehensive if the attitudes I found were as if a powerful "Christianity" were our model for the future.

#### *The call to "reverse mission"*

Young Oblates in the South quite often ask me: but what is happening to the West? Why are there so

few religious vocations? The subsequent discussion quite often makes them realize that the West might need some help. In this way, too, the decline of Western "Christianity" affects all of us. The vital forces of the younger churches will have to bolster the failing number of the older ones.. They already know what it means to have few priests, to have poor means, to live in a minority situation and so they can contribute by using this experience. Moreover, in the East and the South, new models of discipleship and church are arising, and they can become a means of enrichment for all. Is the West ready to receive Oblate missionaries from elsewhere? When the General Council had its joint session in May with the European major superiors, we listened to the needs of Europe as they were expressed. Some participants from the Southern hemisphere raised the question: have you ever asked us for help? Let all of us listen to this new call that comes to us through the change of missionary patterns.

### *What kind of Church are we to build?*

Every continent, every country, is so different, and we as Oblates must respond to the local needs of the poor. At the same time, as I travel around, I realize that there are a few realities which all of us have in common. The Chapter has pointed out some of these things that concern us all. It has spoken, e.g., about interdependence and globalization, dialogue and integral evangelization, daring for the Gospel and interreligious dialogue. So we have the following questions in common: How to proclaim the Kingdom and its justice? Which language to use in a society educated and transformed by the Media? Which Church must be built at the present time at the service of the Kingdom and as a sign of its presence?

The new model of the Church has still to be worked out. Some foundations of the new Church building are already visible, and we can construct on them. The African Synod of 1992 said that the church we have to build will be like a big family. Recent Vatican documents speak of the communion and the variety of charisms that have to characterize the Church of the future. It will be a big community where different gifts of the Spirit are recognized and life according to different charisms is encouraged by the pastors. It will enable the lay people in their mission to the 21st century's world, which is loved by God.

In this renewed Church, what can be our specific contribution as Oblates? The last General Chapter may well have pointed out the way toward an answer. The Chapter said, after its reflection on our mission: "The missionary task that faces us as we stand on the threshold of a new millennium ... is a task that calls us to our senses, to reflect on who we really are. ... 'If only we could understand who we are,' wrote Eugene de Mazenod" (EPM 23). So let us reflect not only on the changes in the mission field. Maybe there is still a more urgent challenge to respond to: the challenge to truly become who we are. Our missionary impact depends on how much we are aware of our call, our identity.

## **2. Our call as Oblates**

So, how can we Oblates define ourselves within the communion of spiritual forces and groupings that make up the Church of the new century? Within a Church understood as communion we need to be aware of our specific, charismatic identity as religious and as missionaries. Each particular group has to follow its specific call to encounter Christ and to contribute to the building of the Church. If every element were just the same, the new church building would fall flat, or in another image, the body of Christ would lack some vital organs.

*Called as missionaries and religious*

As Oblates we were founded for a specific purpose for which there was a great need back in 1816 in southern France. The Founder perceived this call as coming from the Spirit and led us to live in a determined way to fulfill this mission. The Church recognized the new family under a distinctive Rule. The year 2001 will be 175 years since the Constitutions and Rules of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate were first approved. We have a right to exist only under that Rule, according to our call as missionaries and religious. I always get a bit upset if, asking a young candidate: why do you want to become an Oblate? I get the answer: because I want to become a priest. Probably he does not mean it literally, but there must be something more than wanting to become a priest. Is he aware that he will be sent to the fringes, to difficult missions, even outside his own country? Does he also recognize that we are, as our mission requires (C 12), a society of religious? Did he consider at all the vocation of a Brother? A group of Oblates that makes us aware of our condition as religious are the Brothers. The Chapter has devoted special attention to them. Let us become aware in a new way of our identity as missionaries and religious. Even the sociologists tell us that minorities (like our congregation or the Church) do better if they show clearly their identity, refusing to get simply integrated into the dominant culture. Why are new foundations like Mother Teresa of Calcutta's so prosperous? Because everybody understands that there must be a response to people dying on the streets. Society is crying out for help in this point. Let us not be afraid to be specifically Oblate, like Eugene in Aix. Let us re-found his group of missionary religious in the context of today's global village, listening to and responding to the cry of the poor.

#### *Living in community and working as a team*

"If only we could understand who we are." An important part of our identity is living in community and working as a team. I really desire that the young Oblates would push us in that direction and I perceive that there is a longing for community life out there. I quote from what the young Oblates said before last Chapter: "it is necessary that the community be truly an apostolic body: our life and our work in a team can become a prophetic sign that challenges the individualism reigning in today's world".[2] I also quote from a letter that the General Council received and studied at the beginning of this year from three Oblates, two of them in post-graduate studies: "We envision internationally constituted house communities of five men dedicated to an intense, common missionary thrust to the materially poor in a local area. ... Since our apostolic ministry is participation in the mission of Christ we would dedicate ourselves to an intense, regular prayer life. ... We would commit ourselves to a prolonged oraison each day. ... One day a week would be reserved for prayer and reflection, as well as community recreation".

Vita Consecrata reminds us that as religious we are "experts in communion" (VC 46) and the Holy Father goes on to say in the same document: "The Church entrusts to communities of consecrated life the particular task of spreading the spirituality of communion, first of all in their internal life and then in the ecclesial community, and even beyond its boundaries" (VC 51). Here the different Oblate Lay Associations come into the picture. They share our charism and sometimes they wake us up by asking us who we are. They also reach out to spread this Oblate spirit of family, of communion "in the ecclesial community, and even beyond its boundaries". As sons and daughters of Saint Eugene we have inherited a special love for the Church. How could we, as a community, together become even more skilled experts in communion for the Church and the world?

#### *Internationality*

You, the 900 young Oblates to whom this letter is addressed in the first place come from about 50 countries. Two thirds of you belong to the Regions of Africa, Asia and Latin America; the remaining third is equally split between East and West. These data mean that the Congregation has undergone a great change, given that 70% of the older part, the other 3,770, come from the West. In the future

it will be up to the southern hemisphere and to the East to send out the bulk of the missionaries. Are you ready to be sent *ad extra, ad gentes*? This is what many young Oblates are now asking as their first obedience, and I consider this normal for us. Of the older generation about 30% are working in a country other than their own; among you, the younger members, we have only reached 20% up to now. I would even consider it normal for a missionary congregation like ours, if almost every scholastic or Brother passed at least one year abroad during his formation period, a practice which some provinces have now introduced. It could make us aware that as missionaries we have to reach out, to go to the home of those culturally different, to learn to listen to them and to share our faith with them in their languages.

### **3. Concluding: short-term steps**

Looking at our mission in a changing world, becoming aware of our own missionary identity, how can we get a new start at the beginning of the new millennium, as the Jubilee suggests? I propose for your consideration two concrete areas and a project.

#### *Let us practice mission together*

One means of renewing our mission is that we continuously undertake even small specifically missionary initiatives. According to the spirit of our Founder we must do it together.<sup>[3]</sup> In first formation getting to know the poor more closely, sharing our lives and our faith with them, and then bringing this experience to our prayers and studies is an excellent way of studying theology. (cf. EPM 38). For those in their first years of ministry, special missionary endeavours, e.g. with youth, could help to discover new ways. If young Oblates, during their first five years of ministry, meet regularly, they will be able to give each other human and spiritual support (cf. C 69).<sup>[4]</sup> If together and in dialogue with their superiors they develop some missionary initiatives, even if they are temporary, they will soon create a new dynamic in their provinces and even beyond.

#### *Let us build community*

A very concrete question is the one of community life after first formation. During a recent visit to several provinces I had the impression that the district communities worked quite well. But I could not say the same of the small house communities that I saw. The style was basically that the two or three Oblates who lived in a house prayed Lauds together and had their meals in common. The rest was a lot of activity. I hear of similar concerns with regard to places where larger house communities are in place. Younger Oblates especially seem to need and expect something more than a minimum, namely such things as faith sharing, silent prayer, ongoing reflection on mission and common planning, as well as more leisure time spent together. But the young are not always as outspoken about this as in the letter quoted above. Looking around the Congregation, I find that everyday life in the house communities is among the most important challenges that we have to face today. I have shared this view on several occasions and no one has yet contradicted me. In order to bring more life to our communities, all of us must become their active builders, including, and even in a special way, younger Oblates.

### **4. A project for the whole Congregation**

I am writing this letter to you at a time when the Central Government is launching a major project which is intended to involve the whole Congregation and which should carry us on to the next Chapter in 2004. It was suggested to us by the Chapter letter in these terms: "to evangelize requires a constant re-evaluation of our missionary practices ... let us take the time needed to evaluate and discern ..." (EPM 19); "we pledge ourselves ... to review all of our missionary commitments in the light of our charism" (EPM 41). The General Council felt that this put into words exactly the new start

which the millennium suggests to us. Meanwhile we have spoken about this project with the provincials, worked on it and it has received a tentative name: Discerning Oblate mission - Bringing to life an immense hope. We are planning to propose more or less the same broad outline to all our 75 provinces, delegations and missions, with a lot of leeway to take into account the local situation. Let us entrust this important undertaking to the Holy Spirit, and to you, dear young Oblates. May our Oblate missions fully correspond to God's call as we enter the 21st century! Together, we are being sent to evangelize the poor.

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[1] Statistically, in the whole world more missionaries are now being sent from non-Western churches than from the traditional mission-sending bases in the West. (Mission Frontiers, June 2000, p.23).

[2] Young Oblates in Ministry and in Formation (General Chapter Working Paper), 1998, OMI Doc. N-233, no. 3.

[3] See Fr. B. Dullier's article "The community for St. Eugene de Mazenod," in OMI Documentation Nos. 230 & 231.

[4] Ongoing formation encompasses all aspects of our development. It renews and develops our spiritual life and its inner resources and favours our growth in emotional and affective maturity. It increases our pastoral skills. It enables us to be critically aware of the integration of our life and mission at all stages of our development. C 69.