

FERNAND JETTE, *o.m.i.*
Superior General

THE MISSIONARY
OBLATE OF MARY IMMACULATE

Addresses and Written Texts, 1975-1985



General House
ROME
1985

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FOREWORD

Last year the Information Service presented the Oblates with the « Letters » of the Superior General; this year the General Secretariate is offering them his main addresses and speeches.

This volume is more ample than the last. Its content is more developed and, in a sense, more substantial. A choice had to be made in the subject matter and, in some instances, texts were grouped together so as to arrive at a better balance and a greater overall unity. Minor corrections and changes have also been made. The text has been revised by the author himself. Hopefully the reader will kindly pardon the few inevitable repetitions.

Most of the documents published here have already appeared in print elsewhere. For each we indicate the occasion for which it was written and the source from which it was taken. The order followed is not chronological but rather one that is suggested by the Constitutions and Rules. The first part considers the Oblate charism: our mission and our religious life, the second treats of certain Oblate ministries and the third deals with the formation of Oblates and animation. The book concludes with some reflections on the Congregation's current existence and its future.

The Superior General's reports to the General Chapters are not contained in this work; their complete text is published in the *Acta Administrationis Generalis*.

Our thanks to Father Aloysius Kedl, O.M.I., who kindly prepared this English edition from the original French.

Part ONE

THE OBLATE CHARISM

I

BLESSED EUGENE DE MAZENOD, OUR FOUNDER (1)

*Biographical sketch. - Why become a priest? -
From the priesthood to the parish missions. -
From parish missions to the mission « ad gentes ».*

The year 1982 marks the second centenary of the birth of Charles Joseph Eugene de Mazenod. He was born at Aix-en-Provence on August 1, 1782. He was to experience quite a turbulent existence, a life which not only resulted in holiness but also included the achievement of two great works: the restoration of the diocese of Marseilles where, as Timon-David put it, « everything needed to be redone », and the founding of the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

In this talk I will deal mainly with the missionary spirit which animated Father de Mazenod and manifested itself especially in the founding and governing of his religious family. There was an apostolic passion at the very core of his

(1) Conference given November 10, 1981, at the Centre d'Etudes Saint-Louis-de-France, Rome; published in *Vie Oblate Life*, vol. 43 (1984), pp. 3-22.

existence, a passion based on love for Christ, love for the Church, and love for people, above all for the poor.

Along with this passion, there was also a fiery temperament, quite disconcerting at times, but which, together with God's grace, explains his life. In this regard, the expressions used on the occasion of his beatification to describe him are quite significant: « an impetuous saint »; « a man with a heart as large as the world »; « a friend of the poor »; « a prophet of fire in a sky of mistral wind »; « a storm bishop »... Pope Paul VI, for his part, defined him as « a man passionately in love with Christ and unconditionally committed to the Church. » And this is exactly what he was.

Biographical sketch

In October 1808, Eugene de Mazenod, a young aristocrat from Provence now twenty-six years old, entered the seminary of Saint-Sulpice in order to become « the priest of the poor ». He had returned to France some six years earlier, after having endured a long exile with his family in Italy during the time of the Revolution. In Italy he had spent part of his childhood and all of his adolescence, from eight and a half to twenty years of age.

In 1812 he returned as a young priest to Aix, his native city. At his own request, he received

from the diocesan authorities the status of not being attached to any parish so that he could dedicate himself to those people whom he considered to be the most neglected and abandoned.

Three years later, at the end of 1815, deeply moved by the de-christianized state of the diocese, he began to gather a few companions around himself. His aim: to revive the faith through parish missions, especially in the rural areas which were more neglected than were the cities. He had in mind only a small apostolic community of secular priests.

In 1818 — he was then thirty-six years old — circumstances led him to give his community a religious structure with Rules and vows.

A little later the young Congregation was shaken by serious trials coming from without and within. That is why in 1825 the Founder, then forty-three years old, decided to go to Rome and seek papal approbation. On February 17, 1826, Pope Leo XII did indeed approve the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. It had only twenty-two members at that time.

During a period of tension between the French Government and the Holy See, Father de Mazenod, who had always refused the episcopacy up to then, accepted it in 1832 out of devotedness to the Church and without the knowledge of the French Government. He was now fifty years of age.

The three years that followed were a real Calvary for him. The French Government reacted vehemently against his episcopal appointment and ended up by depriving him of his citizenship. At this point it seemed that the Pope himself had abandoned him. He was re-instated at the end of 1835, and his aged uncle, the bishop of Marseilles, resigned in order to leave the post to him.

As bishop of Marseilles, he continued to direct his Congregation which was growing very slowly. In 1840, after twenty-five years of existence, it barely numbered more than forty members.

When Bishop de Mazenod died some twenty years later at seventy-nine years of age, this number had increased nearly tenfold: there were now over four hundred members. What had happened? In 1841 the visit of the young Bishop Bourget of Montreal had opened up the Congregation to the world. This visit was the providential occasion for a series of decisions, each one more daring than the preceding, which explain how, at their Founder's demise, the Oblates were in Eastern and Western Canada as well as in its Far North, in the east of the United States and on the Pacific Coast (Oregon and British Columbia); they were in Texas and had penetrated into Mexico; they were also in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) and in South Africa. From parish missions they had gone on to the missions « ad

gentes », a transformation that had literally exploded the little Congregation.

In line with the theme I have chosen, I will try to answer the following three questions:

1. Why did Eugene de Mazenod at twenty-six years of age decide to become a priest?
2. How was he soon induced to found a religious Congregation dedicated to evangelizing the people who were most neglected, especially those in the rural areas?
3. Finally, what moved his tiny Congregation to extend itself to the most distant missions?

First, however, I would like to point out two traits that are typical of Father de Mazenod's human and spiritual personality. They are the unifying element of his whole life.

1. *His concern to seek nothing else but God's will.* We find in him a contrast between his fiery temperament — that which has been referred to as the gusting mistral wind in him — and his slowness and hesitation when confronted with the need of taking important decisions. He seeks to discover God's will through prayer, consultation, and reflection; at a deeper level, there is also the activity of the Holy Spirit. When, for instance, it was a matter of deciding his vocation and, later on, of laying the foundations for his little community, he was finally moved, in spite of all his hesitations, as though by an « outside impulse ». Once he had discovered

God's will, however, there was nothing that could stop him. « I am so resolved to do his will, » he wrote to Forbin-Janson, « that, were it known to me, I would leave tomorrow for the moon if I had to. » (2)

2. *His realism.* Eugene de Mazenod was a realist. His was a realism enlightened by faith. He did not start from a priori principles or from abstract plans. He had a sense for the meaning of concrete situations and persons. His faith discerned the Lord's call in and through these concrete situations, in and through these needs of persons, these needs of the Church in a given place and at a given time. Thus, we find him making decisions that are apparently contradictory if we judge them abstractly, but which in fact responded well to the needs of the Church in circumstances that differed.

I. WHY, AT TWENTY-SIX, DID HE DECIDE TO BECOME A PRIEST?

Eugene de Mazenod's vocation first manifested itself when he was between twelve and fifteen years of age. It suffered an eclipse thereafter. Then, when he was twenty-four, it came to the fore again and became luminously clear and definite.

(2) Mazenod to Forbin-Janson, October 28, 1814.

In Eugene's family, which traditionally was Catholic, there were some antecedents of priestly vocation. His great-uncle, Canon Charles André had been Vicar General to Bishop Belzunce of Marseilles, and his uncle, Canon Charles Fortuné was Vicar General at Aix. Both these venerable churchmen accompanied the family into exile. They did not, however, seem to have had any direct influence on Eugene's vocation.

Because of the Revolution, Eugene and his family emigrated to Italy in 1791. His studies, begun under the Doctrinaires at Aix, were continued at the College of the Nobility in Turin. He received his first holy communion here.

The French revolutionary armies crossed the boundary and continued their advance: this forced the emigrés to flee from one city to the next.

First, the family stayed in Venice for three years. Eugène was now twelve years old. Here, under the influence of a saintly young priest, Don Bartolo Zinelli, Eugene first felt the desire to become a priest. Later, in his *Mémoires*, the Bishop of Marseilles was to say that his priestly vocation dated from this period. One day his great-uncle, Canon Charles André pointed out to him that, were he to become a priest, the de Mazenod family name would become extinct, for he was the only boy in the family. Eugene replied that it would be a great honour if the family line were to end with a priest.

They had to leave Venice however, and so he next stayed in Naples with his father and two uncles. Here he experienced a year of poverty and boredom. Then came three years in Palermo where, at seventeen years of age, Eugene was taken into the family of the Duke of Canizarro. Now it was the court life of Queen Maria-Caroline, with its wordliness and pleasures. Eugene's aristocratic atavism was aroused. In spite of persistent and encouraging letters from Don Bartolo, who died in 1802, his desire for the priesthood gradually faded and disappeared.

Even though, due to the influence of the Duchess of Canizarro, Eugene remained a good Christian, he was no longer thinking of becoming a priest. When he returned to France in 1802, he was twenty years of age and his concerns lay in quite other directions. First, he tried to reunite his parents. They had been physically separated ever since Madame de Mazenod returned to France from Venice in order to save the family property. This gradually became a psychological separation and then a juridical one. He was above all concerned with acquiring a position in life for himself, as well as finding one for his father and uncles who were still in exile in Palermo. All opportunities seemed closed to him, however. He himself remained set in his *ancien régime* mentality and, disappointed by the environment of Aix and by his mother's family milieu, he was considering

returning to Sicily and enrolling in the Queen's Palatine Guard. He had to give up this idea, however, for the French Government was no longer granting any passports. We come thus to the end of 1806, when he was twenty-four years of age.

It is at this time that the desire for the priesthood reawakened in him. In a letter to his mother of April 4, 1809, he explained that his decision to enter the seminary was not a rash act, but rather something he had been seriously pondering for the last three years. It would seem that all the setbacks and disappointments he had experienced since his return to France had also plunged him into a psychological and spiritual crisis, a crisis we find difficult to analyze because we lack clear sources. Wordly pleasures and distractions had lost their attraction and he felt their emptiness: he was gradually becoming more a man of piety and giving himself to works of charity.

All these things, however, were only a preparation. It would seem that the decisive moment of his conversion, and also of his vocation, was the interior upheaval he experienced on Good Friday of 1807 during the liturgy of the adoration of the Cross. He intensely experienced the love of Christ who had shed his Blood for him. He could not restrain his tears. He was overwhelmed by a feeling of deep confidence in God's mercy

and by a burning desire to make reparation by a *total and definitive gift* of himself.

But was the priesthood really God's will for him or only a generous gesture he was ready to make on his own? He prayed over this. He consulted a Sulpician, Father Duclaux in Paris, and Father Magy in Marseilles. The latter told him, « Your vocation is as bright and clear as high noon on a beautiful day. » Still he hesitated. God intervened: it was then that he experienced this « outside impulse » — a true motion of the Holy Spirit — which finally determined him to go to Saint Sulpice in October 1808.

The religious situation of his time

Was the experience of his own misery and of Christ's love for him the only main motivating reason for his vocation? No. It was accompanied by another experience, equally overwhelming, which he expressed in flaming speech at the time he founded his Institute: « The Church, that glorious inheritance purchased by Christ the Saviour at the cost of his own blood, has in our days been cruelly ravaged » (Preface to the Constitutions and Rules). The plight of the Church in the aftermath of the French Revolution and then under Napoleon's regime affected him deeply. He saw this Church humiliated and abandoned, but also as redeemed by Christ's own blood.

He wrote to his mother on October 11, 1809: « Why would you want me to delay still more before committing myself, before dedicating to the Spouse of Jesus Christ — to that Spouse whom He formed by the shedding of all his Blood — every moment of my life, a life given to me only so that I may put it at the service of God's greatest glory? Ah, my dear Mama! If you would only allow yourself to be deeply imbued with this great truth — and it is a first truth — namely, the souls redeemed by the Blood of the God-Man are so valuable that were all the people of the past, present and future to apply all their talents, energies and lives to saving only one, such time and effort would be admirably well spent. »

Five years later he wrote to his father on December 7, 1814: « I dedicated myself to the service of the Church because she was being persecuted, because she was abandoned... Such were the motives which made me decide: there are no others. In view of the character it has pleased God's will to endow me with, there couldn't even have been any others. »

What had he seen? « A contagion that has infected all age groups », especially the young who have grown up during the Revolution and who do not know if there is a God. He noted that at Paris, in the colleges where youth was being formed, with a few exceptions, « each one was

worse than the other » (3). Religious ignorance and immorality are such, he writes again, « that there is every reason to fear we may be falling back into a barbarism that is worse than that which held sway in the sixth century: in that unhappy era people at least believed in God. » (4)

Over this sombre tableau the upheaval of that Good Friday superimposed the image of Christ the Saviour. It is with the eyes of Jesus Christ crucified that he now sees the Church in her abandoned condition, abandoned even by those whom she has consecrated for her own service, her own ministers, « the majority of whom — I am quoting now from the original text of the Constitutions — even aggravate these evils by their own disgraceful conduct » (Preface). Eugene's judgments on the priests of his time are many and severe: in them he sees the principal cause of the evils which were afflicting the Church.

Was his assessment too severe? The fact is that there was in the beginning of the 19th century a serious crisis among the clergy in France.

There was a crisis of numbers to begin with. The number of priests, both religious and diocesan, estimated as being some 60,000 at the outbreak of the Revolution, had fallen to some 30,000 when Eugene entered the seminary twenty

(3) Mazenod to his Father, August 16, 1805.

(4) Mazenod to his Father, May 24, 1805.

years later. This is a 50% decline. Of these 30,000 priests, only some 950 were below the age of forty.

The crisis was not only one of number and age, it was above all one of quality. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy had been introduced. Historians estimate at 30,000 — that is, more or less half the clergy — as the number of priests who took the oath and thus incurred the excommunication published by Pius VI. Others were forced to flee, or were imprisoned, or paid with their lives for their fidelity to the Church, or continued exercising their ministry in a clandestine way. It is obvious that there were few ordinations in such a situation. Thus, in the beginning of the 19th century, the clergy in France was up in average age and largely made up of priests who had taken the oath and of former exiles. Of these, a goodly number did not understand the radical change in mentality that had taken place. Furthermore, many saw the priesthood only as a « function » in the Church and not as a total gift of one's person to Jesus Christ and to his people.

Why was Christ's message no longer reaching those for whom it was meant? Father de Mazenod was seeking to find the reasons for this situation. He wrote:

We can break it down to three main headings: 1) the weakening, not to say the total loss, of faith; 2) the people's ignorance; 3) the laziness, indifference, and corruption of priests. This third

cause must be considered as the main one, the root of the other two.

It is true that for a century now forces have been at work to undermine by all kinds of infernal means the foundations of religion in people's hearts and minds. It is also true that the Revolution made an enormous contribution to further this enterprise of iniquity. Nevertheless, if the clergy had constantly been what it should never have ceased to be, religion would have held its own: not only would it have resisted this terrible onslaught, but it would have triumphed over all these attacks and would have emerged from the battle all the more beautiful and glorious. (1818 Constitutions and Rules).

What did our Lord do?

What the Church needed most was a return to her very source. « How indeed, » he asks, « did our Lord Jesus Christ proceed when he undertook to convert the world? He chose a number of apostles and disciples whom he himself trained in piety, and he filled them with his Spirit, and... he sent them forth (to preach). » The Church needs men like the Apostles. This is what Eugene de Mazenod had come to understand, and he wanted to be one of these priests, like the Apostles, totally given to Jesus Christ in order to proclaim him and bring him to those who no longer knew him. (Preface to the Constitutions and Rules).

For him, the Church's lamentable condition was not an abstraction: it was a concrete pain-

ful fact that even those who bore the name of Jesus Christ, the « Christians », no longer knew who Jesus Christ is, and this through the fault and neglect of priests, namely, of those whose mission it is to teach Christ to people. And so Eugene would be a priest, a priest of Jesus Christ; and, as priest of Jesus Christ, he would be « the priest and servant of the poor ».

This is what decided him to enter the seminary when he was twenty-six years old. For him — and these are his own expressions — it was a matter of « walking in the footsteps of Jesus Christ », of « reproducing Christ in a living way within his own self », of « becoming another Jesus Christ ».

But Christ and the Church are both one and the same. His sense of the Church was developing at this same time, especially because of the contagious example of Monsieur Emery, the Superior General of Saint Sulpice, who made Eugene his collaborator in his courageous resistance of Napoleon's pretensions.

Through this perspective of the Church, persecuted by the secular power and abandoned by some of her own ministers, he deepened his perception of the mystery of Jesus Christ crucified. In reading the text of his Rule, we find him completely imbued with texts from St. Paul which he had meditated at length. « To preach Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ crucified, not with the prestige of oratory but through the mani-

festation of the Spirit » — this means, he explains, first of all meditating Christ's mystery and then living it. This is what it means to become, according to another favourite expression of his, a true « co-worker with the Saviour ».

At the very end of his seminary days he would have two opportunities to show his fidelity to the Church. First, by accepting to remain one more year at the seminary as a replacement for the staff members who had been expelled by Napoleon. Here he met an urgent need of the Church.

He also showed his fidelity to the Church by refusing to be ordained by Cardinal Maury who was loyal to Napoleon. He waited until December 21, 1811, to receive the priesthood from Bishop Demandolx, a man from Provence like himself, but, above all, the lawful bishop of Amiens.

II. FROM THE PRIESTHOOD TO THE PARISH MISSIONS

In October 1812, Eugene, who was now a priest and thirty years old, returned to Aix. Great desires animated him but he had no definite, well thought-out plans. As we have already mentioned, he was not a theoretician but a realist who took decisions according to the needs and possibilities wherein he discovered and recognized God's will. Only one point was firm in his outlook: he wanted to go to the poorest,

but he did not yet know in what manner this could best be done. Little by little the Lord would have him find the way.

A free apostolate in favour of the most abandoned

The young priest had noticed that the pastoral practice and parish structures of the Church after the Concordat were especially oriented towards preserving the faith among those who still believed; the rest, however, remained outside. That is why, immediately upon his return, he requested the diocesan authorities not to be placed in a parish but to be allowed to remain free to give himself completely to those who were not being reached by these structures. Bishop Jauffret of Metz and Vicar Capitular of Aix, granted him this request all the more willingly because he did not know to what parish he could assign this young priest.

After he had made a retreat, he was named director at the seminary. His preference, however, lay with the domestic hired help, the artisans, the little people who were, practically speaking, being kept away both because of the time of the religious services and because of the language used therein. It was to these, therefore, that he would go. His first apostolic initiative had its debut in Lent of 1813 in the church of St. Mary Magdalene: it consisted of a series of sermons given at an early morning hour,

geared to the level of his audience and in their language. Here is the substance of what he told them:

Come now and learn from us what you are in the eyes of faith. You, the poor of Jesus Christ, the afflicted and the wretched, the sick and suffering and covered with sores, etc., whom misery overwhelms; my brethren, my dear brethren, my dear respectable brethren, listen to me! You are the children of God, the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, the co-heirs of his eternal Kingdom, the cherished portion of his inheritance; you are, in the words of Saint Peter, the holy nation, you are kings, you are priests, you are in some way, gods: *Dii estis et filii Excelsi omnes.*

This created astonishment, and some were even somewhat scandalized, but the large church of the Magdelene remained full during the whole of Lent.

At this same time he discovered another category of persons who, spiritually speaking, were poor, namely, the youth. The parishes had nothing to offer the young. Since the Concordat, religion was included in the college curricula. If we are to believe Eugene, however, the religious and moral level in these colleges was very low. If France was to be made Christian again, one would have to start with the youth. To this end, it was not enough to teach religion to the young in school: youth must also receive a Christian formation. So Eugene began to group young people around himself. He made no distinction of social class among them: spiritually

speaking, they were all poor because they were deprived of Jesus Christ. They were attracted by his human personality and faith: in a few months there were over 300 members in his « Association of Christian Youth ».

Another category of abandoned people were the prisoners, both the great criminals and the petty delinquents. A person condemned to death could go to confession but he could not receive holy communion because, as it was said, « He is not worthy! » Eugene went to these people and revealed the Church's love for them.

The more he went on, the more the field of his activities widened: there were the sick, the dying, the country people whose religious ignorance was even greater than that which existed in the cities.

A community of missionary priests

In 1814, the barracks at Aix began to fill up with Austrian prisoners. It was the retreat from Russia. An epidemic of typhoid broke out and their chaplain died from it. Here was a new category of abandoned people. Father de Mazenod offered to serve them. He too was struck down by the disease, received Viaticum, and prepared himself for death. He recovered, however, a fact he attributed to the prayers of the young people in the Association. The convalescence which followed was a time conducive to

prayer and reflection. We know Eugene's thoughts from his letters to his friend, Forbin-Janson.

There was first the temptation to choose a less fragmented and a more contemplative life. Seeing the enormous needs of the poor all around him, however, he felt that God wanted him to be at their service. He was also aware how limited the activity of one man alone was, no matter how generous he might be. At this time, Forbin-Janson was trying to revive the Missionaries of France of Father de Rauzan to rechristianize the country. Eugene, concerned about the needs proper to his own milieu, did not join him. He was, however, thinking of something similar for Provence. Still, he was hesitating. Would that really be God's will? Finally, towards the autumn of 1815 — and it is he himself who indicates this — he felt moved by a new « outside impulse » and thus made his decision: he would bring together a few priests who would work with him in rechristianizing the rural areas.

Immediately he began looking for companions. He was demanding, for it was not numbers he wanted, but quality. We know his intent from his letters to Father Tempier who was his first companion and confidant. I quote:

We wish to choose men who will have the will and the courage to walk in the footsteps of the Apostles...

Were it a question of going out to preach more or less well the word of God, mingled with much

alloy of self, of going far and wide for the purpose, if you wish, of winning souls for God, without taking much trouble to be men of interior life, truly apostolic men, I think it would not be difficult to replace you. But can you believe I want merchandise of that sort? We must be truly saints ourselves... (5)

At the beginning of 1816, four priests, his first four companions, joined him in the old carmelite monastery of Aix, and on February 11, the Vicars Capitular approved this tiny community. After a retreat of ten days, the new missionaries began at Grans the first of a long series of parish missions. Thereafter, some students of theology came to increase the numbers of the little Society of the Missionaries of Provence.

A religious Congregation

At this point, Father de Mazenod had in mind only a community of diocesan priests gathered together in one house from which they would evangelize the archdiocese of Aix. Two and a half years later, in the summer of 1818, an unexpected proposal led him to change this project. The bishop of Digne had asked him to divide his group and send some of his men to rechristianize the small villages tucked away in

(5) Mazenod to Tempier, October 9 and December 13, 1815.

the Alps. They were to do there what they were doing in the rural areas of Aix, and the bishop was offering them the shrine of Notre-Dame du Laus.

Was this a sign of God's will? Father de Mazenod prayed and consulted his companions. Finally, the offer was accepted and this entailed a considerable change within the Institute. As he writes in his *Mémoires*, he called its members into an extraordinary council: they needed to understand that, because of this second foundation, more developed Constitutions were needed, which would coordinate everything so that there would be but one same will and spirit of behaviour. « All were of this view; and they asked me to concern myself seriously and promptly with drawing up the constitution and the rule that would have to be adopted. » (6)

He then retired into seclusion and composed a text of Constitution and Rules which included the vows of chastity and obedience. The vow of poverty came only three years later. The text was accepted in General Chapter, and on November 1, 1818, the missionaries bound themselves by vow and thus became a religious community.

Father de Mazenod had also specified the objectives of his apostolic zeal and enshrined

(6) Quoted by RAMBERT, *Vie de Mgr de Mazenod*, vol. I, p. 282.

them in these Constitutions: first, to evangelize the poor, especially in the rural areas; also, to revive the spirit of the ancient religious Orders suppressed by the Revolution; and to reform the clergy.

In this perspective he included the ministries which he had already exercised: directing youth, ministry to prisoners and to the dying. Later on, encouraged by Pope Leo XII, he added the direction of major seminaries.

As a matter of fact, the Oblates would devote themselves above all to the preaching of parish missions. They remained open, however, « to all the works which priestly charity can inspire » (Preface to the Constitutions and Rules). They also nourish a very special devotion to the Immaculate Virgin Mary, whom they always consider as their Mother.

On February 17, 1826, the Institute, which then numbered only twenty-two members, was approved by Pope Leo XII under the name of the Oblate Missionaries of the most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary. In 1840, it consisted of six missionary communities plus those of the major seminaries at Marseilles and Ajaccio. Its field of activity remained limited to the south-east of France and to Corsica.

III. FROM PARISH MISSIONS TO THE MISSIONS « AD GENTES »

As already mentioned in the beginning, the transition from parish missions to the missions « ad gentes » occurred in 1841. It was occasioned by Bishop Bourget's visit to Marseille in search of missionaries for his diocese of Montreal.

Opening to the mission « ad gentes »

This transition to the foreign missions was part of Father de Mazenod's original intuition, namely, that of being co-workers with Christ the Saviour. It was already present in what we might almost call a prophetic way in the first edition of the Constitutions and Rules of 1818: « They are called to be the Saviour's co-workers, the co-redeemers of mankind; and even though, because of their present small number and the more urgent needs of the people around them, they have to limit the scope of their zeal, for the time being, to the poor of the countryside and others, *their ambition should, in its holy aspirations, embrace the vast expanse of the whole earth.* »

Why did he wait until 1841? Certainly because of their small number and also because of the urgent needs among the people of Provence; but also because the call to the foreign missions had not as yet clearly manifested itself.

The contrast between Father de Mazenod and Father de Forbin-Janson is enlightening in this regard. A deep friendship united these two men from their seminary days onwards. Strongly oriented towards the foreign missions, Forbin-Janson had organized a missionary circle at the seminary. Eugene de Mazenod belonged to it. In his *Mémoires*, Bishop de Mazenod writes: « We differed on an essential point, however. His zeal moved him to be concerned with the infidels, and my own concern was solely centered on the deplorable condition of our degenerate Christians. Since I could not bring him over to my point of view, which I considered to be the more correct one, we went our separate ways on leaving the seminary, still very good friends but both quite determined to follow a different career. » (7)

In Rome some years later, Forbin-Janson submitted his desire to evangelize China to Pope Pius VII. The answer he received from the Pope was that it was more urgent to rechristianize France. Out of obedience, Forbin-Janson returned to France and, together with Jean-Baptiste Rauzan, undertook to revive the Missionaries of France who had been suppressed by Napoleon. The Pope's reply to his friend confirmed Father de Mazenod in his own conviction that the most

(7) Quoted by RAMBERT, *Vie de Mgr de Mazenod*, vol. I, p. 162.

urgent need at that time was re-christianizing his own country.

Little by little, however, the call to the mission « ad gentes » was to become more and more insistent both within and outside the Congregation. This began from within in 1826 when the Founder's companions were beginning to remonstrate with him on this point: Father Albini, who became the apostle of Corsica, Father Hippolyte Guibert, the future Cardinal archbishop of Paris, Father Pascal Ricard, Father Jean-Joseph Touche... all would be ready to go!

Five years later, in 1831, the General Chapter officially gave expression to this feeling:

A proposal was studied requesting that the General Chapter express to the Most Reverend Father General the desire entertained by the members of the Society, namely, *that some of our members be sent to the foreign missions as soon as he will judge the occasion to be favorable*. Informed of the dispositions of a great many in the Society who long for the time when they will be able to carry afar the knowledge and love of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Chapter thought it good to associate itself with their holy intent and to be their advocate, and this all the more so because it considers this proposal extremely important for the glory of God and for the good of the Society... The proposal was carried unanimously.

One year later, in 1832, Father de Mazenod offered his Oblates to the Sacred Congregation *de Propaganda Fide* for a mission in Algeria. This project did not succeed, as the French Government was against it. The Founder was to

wait for another ten years before the Lord would, by means of a clear sign, indicate to him where He wanted the Oblates to be.

The missionary expansion

This providential sign — as we have already mentioned — was Bishop Bourget passing through Marseilles. Appointed bishop of Montreal in 1840, he found the clergy at his disposal numerically insufficient. Forbin-Janson, who was preaching in Canada that same year, assured him he had only to go to France and he would find the priests he needed. On his way to Rome in 1841, Bishop Bourget stopped in Paris. He was sympathetically received; he was promised prayers, but no priests. Disappointed, Bishop Bourget continued his journey. To take the boat, he had to pass through Marseilles. He knew neither Bishop de Mazenod nor the Oblates. From their very first meeting, the two bishops understood each other perfectly. The Congregation was consulted. All the Oblates were in favour of this foundation, and on October 16, 1841, four priests and two brothers set sail for Montreal. This was the first real missionary departure, even though an establishment in the British Isles was being considered in that same year.

Overflowing with joy and full of solicitude, Bishop de Mazenod wrote to those who were leaving:

Remember all the advice I have given you. Take care of yourselves. When you go on board or after you have embarked, take care not to slip and fall into the sea; when disembarking in heavy seas, you can miss the boat and drown yourself. When you have your sea legs, show yourselves worthy of your mission during the crossing, be serious and apostolic in your demeanour. Be mindful on arriving that all eyes will be upon you and that you will be judged first by appearances...

Let people see in you men marching to the conquest of souls, whose rectitude can be counted upon for the edification of the clergy and of the people of this vast diocese and of all these lands. Once you are settled, promptly align yourselves with the Rule. Let it not be said that the Sulpicians and the Jesuits are better at this than you. Be of one mind; put up with each other. Even though something be not to your liking, take care not to grumble. Communicate the observations you believe useful, but mildly, not contentiously or bitterly. If they are not adopted, keep your peace and do not swerve from obedience. Never make personal remarks, never be touchy, let there be candor, frankness, simplicity, mildness and especially charity, *omnia nostra in charitate fiunt*. In case of need, communicate with me confidentially but only after ruminating the matter at the foot of the crucifix, without prejudice, without exaggeration. We are all members of one body, let each strive by every means and by making sacrifices, if he must, for the well-being of this body and the growth of all its potentialities. I do not know why I remind you of these things. I am quite aware of the fine spirit which animates you. It is just that I enjoy conversing with you about what we hold in common...

The more you are holy, exemplary, regular, the more good will abound. You are expected to implant the Congregation in these vast regions, for Montreal is perhaps only the gateway leading our

family to the conquest of souls in several countries. When you have reached the scene, you will sound out the terrain. The first thing is to get properly settled where we are called. If God blesses us, then we will see...

May the aroma of your virtues attract Canadian clergy to you, whether from Montreal or Quebec, no matter, or rather, may Quebec also furnish her contingent and thus attract you into this diocese. But I anticipate the future by that thought. I am not a prophet yet I have always been a man of desires and some of them have been heard and fulfilled. May those I address to God for you, my dear children, draw upon you every heavenly blessing... (8)

Three years later came the request of Bishop Provencher of St. Boniface, an immense diocese comprising more than half of Canada: to the Rockies in the West and to the Arctic in the North. In the West were the great prairies, the uncontested domain of the Indian tribes; in the North there was the polar ice, the country of the Inuit (or the Eskimos). There were only five priests for this entire territory. Bishop de Mazenod accepted this challenge and sent in the Oblates. Today it is rather difficult to get some idea of the living conditions of the missionaries at that time: the distances, the isolation, the climate, the scattered nomadic tribes.

There were two new foundations in 1847. In January it was Oregon on the Pacific coast of the United States. The Superior General felt he

(8) Mazenod to Honorat, October 9, 1841.

could not refuse the request addressed to him by Bishop Magloire Blanchet of Walla Walla, even if he could send out only one sick Father, three scholastics and a brother.

In the summer of that same year, the Cardinal Prefect of *de Propaganda Fide* directed the new Bishop Bettachini of Jaffna in Sri Lanka to Bishop de Mazenod. His diocese was in an especially difficult situation with an urgent need for priests. Bishop de Mazenod immediately gave him four Oblates, three Italians and one Irishman.

In 1848 came the foundation in Algeria which did not last, however.

In 1849 came the rather strange escapade of Father Telmon, an Oblate from the Canadian missions, to Texas. In response to an appeal from Bishop Odin of Galveston, whose already immense diocese had been extended to the new boundary of Mexico, Father Telmon, on his own, took two Fathers, a scholastic and a brother from Canada and led them to the Mexican border. He thus put his immediate superior and Bishop de Mazenod before a *fait accompli*. In his *Diary*, the Bishop of Marseilles does not fail to register his surprise and dissatisfaction. (9)

This escapade did not last. The group did begin working, but the Texas of 1849 had nothing in common with the Texas of today. The

(9) Mazenod *Diary*, November 19, 1849.

two Fathers could not stand the murderous climate and returned to Canada, and they were followed by Father Telmon and the scholastic three months later. Shortly afterwards, Father Telmon returned to France, his health completely ruined. Bishop Odin, who had just lost twenty-three of his thirty-five priests, most of them because of health, left for Europe immediately. He went to Marseilles. Because it was an impossible mission, Bishop de Mazenod now gave him six Oblates, the largest single group he had as yet assigned to a given mission. Bishop de Mazenod was already looking beyond the boundary of the Rio Grande to Mexico and its need for missionaries.

Finally, in 1851 came the appeal of *de Propaganda Fide* in favour of « the land of Natal », that is, most of the territory that is today South Africa. Bishop de Mazenod accepted it, since those to whom the territory had been offered could not do so.

We have, then, in a period of ten years, a whole series of foundations in every direction and, humanly speaking, in the case of nearly all of them, each one more imprudent than the other. Natural wisdom would have suggested establishing oneself and taking solid root in France before sending missionaries abroad. Apostolic daring won out over natural wisdom. « We must do everything, we must dare everything to extend the Saviour's empire, » Father de Maze-

nod had written. We could even say that he preferred the most difficult areas, places to which others would not go, and this in spite of the numerical and qualitative poverty of his men. For it must be admitted that all were far from being giants and saints. But it was a matter of proclaiming Jesus Christ to those who did not know him and who had no one to proclaim him to them; it was a matter of making the Church present in areas where she did not as yet exist. No considerations of human wisdom could halt the faith of Bishop de Mazenod, who was aware of the weak means at his disposal but was also filled with confidence in God's grace. « I would like to be able to provide (missionaries) for all the missions of the world! » he wrote in his *Diary* on November 10, 1849.

After the fact we can see that it was this extreme daring which gained his Congregation a rapid and very extensive development. Very quickly his missionaries also became true founders of Churches.

Bishop de Mazenod was not content simply to send out his missionaries. He also knew how to support them, encourage them, correct them, challenge them to forge ahead. In regard to the foundation in Bytown (Ottawa) in 1844, he wrote to Father Honorat:

You certainly need to be enterprising if you are called to the conquest of souls. I was fuming at finding myself 2000 leagues from you and unable to make my voice reach you in less than two

months. And yet your letter of February 2 arrived today, March 1. God grant that you may have at last received mine which not only approved this great project but applauded it with delight. This was not something tentative to be tried. You had to go there with the firm resolve to overcome all obstacles, go there to stay, take root there! How could you hesitate? What more beautiful mission than this! Ministry in the lumber camps, missions to the Savages, establishment in a city which is wholly of the future. But it is the beautiful dream coming true and you would have let it escape! The thought makes me shiver! Take all your courage in your hands once more and establish yourself there properly. Urge each one to do this duty. It is only thus that you will bring upon yourselves the blessings of God... (10)

We remain dumbfounded at the amount he corresponded by letter with his missionaries. Besides, every evening, often quite late, he rejoined them all through prolonged prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. « I remind you of this, » he wrote to one of them, « so that you may be present with me at this rendez-vous. The only means of bridging distances is to be together at the same moment in the presence of the Lord. It is like finding each other side by side, so to speak. We do not see each other, but we hear each other, we are conscious of each other, we become united in the same centre. » (11)

Such was Bishop de Mazenod. « I live only

(10) Mazenod to Honorat, March 1, 1844.

(11) Mazenod to L'Hermitte, January 10, 1852. Also cf. Mazenod to Lacombe, March 6, 1857.

from my heart, » he said one day. It was a heart that had become quite sensitive, alert to all human miseries, after having itself experienced Christ's love, a heart that was very enterprising, ready to dare everything to ease these miseries, especially the great misery of being ignorant of Jesus Christ.

II

THE OBLATE CHARISM (1)

The origins of the Oblate charism. - Its nature and its institutionalization. - Its current status and its future.

To begin with, I want to tell you how happy I am to be with you here at the shrine of our Lady of the Cape. This place is very dear to me, and absence brings it into my thoughts all the more frequently.

You have asked me to speak to you about the Oblate charism, to tell you how I see it in the Congregation's life of yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

But first, an observation. The word *charism* is currently much used. Indeed, its very popularity is a sign of the times: it shows the deep need for a return to the inner spirit, to the inspiration that arises from within, works through structures and goes beyond them. Seen thus it is a sign of health.

In the present talk I will retain the tradi-

(1) Conference given to a meeting of Oblates at Cap-de-la-Madeleine, Canada, on April 30, 1975; published in *L'esprit des fondateurs et notre renouveau religieux*, CRC, Ottawa, 1976, pp. 117-136.

tional meaning of the word *charism*: a free gift of the Spirit, a grace granted to someone for the good of others, for the common good of the Church. It is not in the line of personal holiness, even though by nature it calls for such holiness and helps it to blossom; instead it is in the line of the Church's mission and is under its discernment.

It was in this sense that Father Jerome Nadal, in a reflection on the founding of the Society of Jesus, wrote during the 16th century:

When our Lord wants to help his Church, he uses the following means: he calls forth a man to whom he gives a special grace and strength to serve him in a special way... This grace is an efficacious grace wherefrom this man personally benefits and helps others to share in it. In a way this grace becomes that of the entire Institute: when these men group themselves together, a body is formed, a congregation with this particular grace as its very own. (2)

In effect, God, who acts upon the Founder, also moves others interiorly to join up with him, to commit themselves together with him to that special mission, the need for which they all perceive.

The Rule comes later, and the institutions and structures take form in the measure in which the work, a result of the charism, develops.

I will say no more now on the charism con-

(2) Quoted by J. F. GILMONT, *Paternité et Médiation du Fondateur d'Ordre*, in R.A.M., 1964, pp. 404-405.

sidered in itself, but shall rather go on to a direct treatment of the Oblate charism. I intend to deal with three points:

- I - The origins of the Oblate charism.
- II - The Oblate charism's nature and institutionalization.
- III - Its present situation and outlook for the future.

I. THE ORIGINS OF THE OBLATE CHARISM

Father de Mazenod is at the origin of the Oblate charism, with his temperament, his way of seeing things and reacting to them, with his internal evolution and external history. That entire composite was under the action of the Spirit, clearly perceived sometimes but usually lived without being perceived.

Born on August 1, 1782, at Aix-en-Provence, Eugene de Mazenod sprang from a noble and thoroughly royalist family. Because of the Revolution and its consequences, he had to go into exile in Italy with his family in 1791, returning to France again only in 1802. In 1807, at the age of 25, he received a special grace, an « outside impulse » as he called it. It converted him totally to Christ. The following year he entered the seminary and was ordained a priest in 1811. « It isn't the subdiaconate that commits me to the ecclesiastical state, » he wrote to his mother on

November 29, 1803. « It is my full, entire, voluntary and well premeditated act of will... God is calling me to the ecclesiastical state. I want to be an ecclesiastic and I want to be that very much. And please note I do not want to be an ecclesiastic only for a week, six months, a year, even ten years; I want to be one for my whole life. »

Immediately after ordination he put himself at the service of the poor and of the youth at Aix. In 1815 another strong « outside impulse » prompted him to join with some companions in setting up a small community of missionary preachers to the poor. That was the foundation of the Missionaries of Provence in Aix's former Carmelite monastery. With papal approval in 1826 his little community became the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. When the Founder was promoted to the see of Marseilles in 1837, the Congregation opened up toward the foreign mission field: America, Asia, Africa... It was now committed to a worldwide expansion.

On May 20, 1861, the eve before his death, Father de Mazenod left his religious family this spiritual testament: « Among yourselves always practice charity... charity... charity; and outside, zeal for the salvation of souls. »

The idea of the Oblates as an apostolic man existed in the mind and heart of this priest before it ever become a concrete reality, and before

it took expression through the *Rule*. The fact that it took one specific form rather than another when it became a concrete actuality can be explained in large part by Father de Mazenod's double experience: his inner spiritual experience and his external experience of the Church's life during the era in which he lived.

Father de Mazenod loved the Church passionately because, first of all, in his own life he had encountered Christ and had come to know experientially the value of Christ's blood. You do not begin by loving an institution. No. First of all you love a person. And if anyone loves an institution as much as the Founder loved the Church it is because of the person seen in the institution. The very first words of the Preface to the Constitutions already put us on the track: *Ecclesia, praeclara Christi Salvatoris hereditas, quam acquisivit sanguine suo* — « The Church, the glorious inheritance which Christ the Saviour purchased at the cost of his own blood. »

When the Founder looked at the Church he saw her in terms of the blood of Christ. That blood — the full cost of that blood — was something he had come to know in his own life at the period of his conversion. A special grace, the grace of Good Friday, 1807, seems to have marked him from that moment. « Can I ever forget the bitter tears which the sight of the cross caused me to shed on Good Friday? » he wrote. « Oh! they were tears from the heart!

Nothing could stop them. They were so abundant as to make it impossible for me to hide them from the others who were assisting at those moving ceremonies. » (3)

A mystic grace? Perhaps. The Founder wasn't explicit enough to satisfy our curiosity. It is clear, nonetheless, that he had a personal encounter with Christ as Saviour at that moment. He then became aware of the supreme ingratitude « which consists in offending the God whose blood had been shed for him. » At the same time, « a sense of deep confidence in God's mercy and a burning desire to atone by *a complete offering* » (4) was born in his soul. The overriding fact here is his personal experience of the redemptive mystery, his personal encounter with Christ the Saviour. The Church didn't enter the picture yet. She would, though, and soon. Little by little, especially through the ministry, it is the Church which appears to take the first place. Thanks to such an intimate experience the Founder thus became capable of grasping the true worth of a soul and the necessity of giving himself entirely to the Church in order to save souls. Here you have the element that took him far beyond himself, *unico Dei et Ecclesiae servi-*

(3) Quoted by J. PIELORZ, *La vie spirituelle de Mgr de Mazenod 1782-1812*, Ottawa, 1956, p. 130.

(4) Cf. E. LAMIRANDE, « Le Sang du Sauveur », in *Etudes Oblates*, 1959, p. 364.

tio » (5). Numerous texts bear witness to that personal experience.

He wrote to his mother on October 11, 1809:

Ah, my dear Mama! If you would only allow yourself to be deeply imbued with this great truth — and it is a first truth — namely, *the souls redeemed by the blood of the God-man are so valuable* that were all the people of the past, present and future to apply all their talents, energies and lives to saving only one, such time and effort would be admirably well spent. Why would you want me to delay still more before committing myself, before dedicating to the Spouse of Jesus Christ — to that Spouse whom *the divine Master formed by the shedding of all his blood* — every moment of my life, a life given to me only so that I may put it at the service of God's greater glory?

The same thought remained with him at the seminary. « Oh! if we could only form a proper notion of the value of a soul, of *a soul ransomed by all the blood of the God-Man*,... perhaps then we would stir from our lethargy and put forth every effort, even to give our very lives, if necessary. »

On August 9, 1844, he wrote to Bishop Bourget that the Oblates' establishment in Canada owed it to itself to achieve the glory of God « and the good of so many souls redeemed by the blood of his divine Son. » Sixteen years later, on September 3, 1860, he reminded one of the missionaries in Africa, Father Le Bihan, « This

(5) 1928 Constitutions and Rules, art. 697.

is the way our family of soldiers fulfills its apostolic mission by going out to preach the Good News throughout the world and by fighting everywhere against the powers of Hell *in order to snatch from them the souls which belong to Jesus Christ who shed his blood for them.*

«*The Church is the prize won by the blood of Jesus Christ... To love the Church is to love Jesus Christ and vice versa,*» he affirmed as bishop of Marseilles in his pastoral letter of February 16 of the same year.

Such expressions repeated so often in the Founder's writings show how deep and full of vitality was the experience which marked his entire being. Anyone who has not personally experienced in his own life what it means to have been loved by Christ and to have cost Him the price of his blood can never entirely grasp the full meaning of the Oblate vocation.

For the Oblate this point is basic. He must be an « apostolic man » in the Church, the one charged with teaching others who Jesus Christ is. But he isn't an apostolic man, indeed, he cannot be one, unless he has first of all encountered Christ personally in his own life, and personally known Christ's love for him. Father de Mazenod's initial experience consisted in precisely that.

The experience rendered him capable of reading the signs of his times in a Christian, Gospel way. And here we see the Founder's external

experience, his encounter with the poor of Provence and, by the providential bent of his episcopacy in Marseilles, his gradually encountering the poor of the entire world, those in Canada, England, Ceylon, Natal.

Faced with those signs of the times and the needs of the poor he could not remain passive. By temperament he was a man of action, given to taking the initiative (6), to leading others, to letting himself be led by a deep sense of pater-nity. It is indeed difficult to present him in any other guise than that of Founder! Even at the seminary he had already initiated a small group aimed at making reparation for the pre-lenten excesses of others. He noted:

The good Lord gave me the idea which succeeded as I hoped it would. In the seminary they do not suspect the little mortifications which our small Society has imposed on itself; indeed, the Society's members themselves do not know it is I who launched them. I have noticed that a great many good things remain undone for want of someone to suggest doing them. A great number of Christians are well disposed to do all kinds of good works, works which they perhaps will never do unless they come in contact with someone who, although often infinitely less perfect than they, invites them to take action — someone who, to achieve this, needs to do little more than make the suggestion. (7)

(6) Which did not keep him from being hesitant at times, as Forbin-Janson complains. Cf. J. LEFLON, *Eugene de Mazenod*, vol. II, p. 32, New York, 1961.

(7) Mazenod to his Mother, February 13, 1809.

Such a spirit of initiative was characteristic of the Founder. It became increasingly evident over the years. Thus, at the root of our religious family there was in Bishop de Mazenod's soul a personal and decisive experience of the redemptive mystery. That experience fell on a rich and active temperament and thus provoked in Eugene de Mazenod a need to take the forefront, to do something.

What was he to do? Events and his own external experience would tell him that.

Upon leaving the seminary, Father de Mazenod saw all around him the troubles besetting the Church in France. Even closer to home there were those of the Church in Aix. The Preface of our *Rules* describes them: a « cruel desolation », many apostates from Christianity, the faith that lay in a coma in the hearts of the greater number of believers, the religious and moral conditions of life worse than those of the earlier pagans; on the part of many priests, moreover, there was blameworthy conduct together with a serious negligence of their duties of state. This was the overall picture as the Founder perceived it. Being the kind of person who could not remain indifferent in the face of such evils he decided to do something, and to do it along the lines indicated by Pius VII to Forbin-Janson: *Maxime ad domesticos fidei!* What were needed, in France especially, were missions for the people and retreats for the

clergy. (8) Acknowledging that the work was too much for one man and wanting to succeed therein, he decided to bring together a group of companions and unite them into a Society.

What he wanted to do, therefore, was quite simple: to regenerate, as he put it, « the people caught up in crass ignorance of all that pertains to their salvation ». (9) To accomplish that end two tasks were essential: preach the Word of God to the poor and devote oneself to reforming the clergy. At the same time, in view of the evils of the time, his Society would try to supply as much as possible for the absence of the ancient Orders and to busy itself with the religious education of the young.

Whom did he take as companions? Fervent priests, prepared to give their all without reserve, priests who were « zealous for the glory of God, men with an ardent love for the Church..., men filled with zeal, ready to give their lives, if need be, for the salvation of souls..., in a word, apostolic men ». (10) We have a commentary on this text in a letter to Father Tempier, dated December 13, 1815:

Be as humble as you wish but know, just the same, that you are necessary for this mission work. I speak to you before God and openly from my heart. Were it a question of going out to preach more or less well the word of God, mingled

(8) Mazenod to Tempier, October 9, 1918.

(9) Preface to the Constitutions and Rules.

(10) Ibid.

with much alloy of self, of going far and wide for the purpose, if you wish, of winning souls for God, without taking much trouble to be men of interior life, truly apostolic men, I think it would not be difficult to replace you. But can you believe I want merchandise of that sort?

We must be truly saints ourselves. In saying that, we include all that can possibly be said.

Thus, Father de Mazenod was looking for men of abnegation, interior men, men who were truly apostolic. He dreamt of establishing an elite corps of clergy at the service of the Church. On August 22, 1817, he wrote the following, again to Father Tempier:

This spirit of being wholly devoted to the glory of God, the service of the Church and the salvation of souls, is the spirit that is proper to our Congregation, a small one, to be sure, but which will always be powerful as long as she is holy... Each Society in the Church has a spirit which is its own, which is inspired by God according to the circumstances and needs of the times wherein it pleases God to raise these supporting bodies, or rather it would be better to say these elite bodies which precede the main army on the march, which excel it in bravery, and which thus obtain the more brilliant victories.

The kind of elite corps envisaged by the Founder must in some way reproduce the apostolic college: « Their founder is Jesus Christ, the very Son of God; their first fathers are the Apostles. They are called to be the Saviour's co-workers, the co-redeemers of mankind... » (11)

(11) 1818 Constitutions, Honorat Manuscript, p. 5

Thus Father de Mazenod wanted to act in the way Christ did: he gathered a few disciples around himself, formed them in piety, filled them with his spirit and then sent them into the arena to fight the good fight, to « spare no effort to extend the Saviour's empire and to destroy the dominion of hell. » (12)

Let us now pause for a moment to ask ourselves what constitutes the Oblate charism.

II. THE NATURE OF THE OBLATE CHARISM AND ITS INSTITUTIONALIZATION

In the light of the foregoing the Oblate charism is, first of all, a view, a love and faith filled view, of the world and of the Church, a view which lets us see things that others miss and to hear appeals to which others are oblivious.

As an Oblate I look at people and am struck by their sufferings, their poverty: material poverty, exploitation of some by others, social rejection, a state of human decline, being marginalized... I perceive such suffering profoundly and suffer from it as though it were my own. And beyond it and through it I perceive another kind of suffering infinitely more serious: ignorance of Jesus Christ. How many people there

(12) Preface to the Constitutions and Rules.

are, among the poor especially, who do not know Jesus Christ, who cannot believe in his love, because there is no one there to show them the way!

It is in such a perspective that the Oblate sees people and sees the Church, which has the commission to gather all people in Jesus Christ. It is thus, too, that he sees priests who are the ministers of Jesus Christ in the work of gathering and saving.

Such a vision of faith — his view of the Church and the world — cannot leave him indifferent. It triggers in him an efficacious will to give himself totally in order thereby to dare all, to undertake anything so as to free men from their suffering and to show them who Christ is and the meaning of their own dignity in Jesus Christ.

Come now and learn from us what you are in the eyes of faith. You, the poor of Jesus Christ, the afflicted and wretched, the sick and suffering and covered with sores, etc., whom misery overwhelms, my brethren, my dear brethren, my dear *respectable* brethren, listen to me. You are the children of God, the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, the co-heirs of his eternal Kingdom...

O Christians, recognize your dignity! (13)

As early as 1813, when he was a young priest of 31, the Founder was preaching this to the peasants, household servants and poor people

(13) Notes on Lenten instructions, March 1813, written in the provençale dialect.

of Provence. At that point he already sought to shout it to the four corners of the earth.

The Oblate charism lies there, in that faith-filled view of the world of the poor and in that efficacious will to try anything for the salvation of the poor and the extension of Christ's Kingdom.

Little by little that charism in the Founder was to become more sharply outlined and to take on a more concrete form. Three dates stand out especially in this process: 1818, the year when the Rules were written; 1826, when they were officially approved by the Church; 1841, when the Congregation in actual fact opened itself up to the whole world by accepting missions abroad.

An important point should be noted: an Institute's charism cannot simply be reduced to its spirit or mission. It also includes its way of life in its essential elements. *Priests* — who can be joined by Brothers — *Missionaries, Religious*, that is how the Founder finally wanted the Oblates to be.

Even if at the beginning he only considered a society of missionary priests, even ruling out the idea of the religious life as such, very soon he began to move toward a commitment by religious vows, for he quickly became aware that the kind of apostolic men he sought could only be religious.

During the century following the Founder's death (1861-1961), the Congregation grew and

expanded. From 415 Oblates in 1861 it grew to 1525 in 1900, to 4500 in 1930 and to 7438 in 1961. The charism was apparently doing well in the institution and functioned easily within its structures, even though some tension was felt between the needs of the mission and those of religious regularity. Such tension was considered normal.

Towards the 1960s and already noticeable in the 1959 Chapter, attitudes were becoming more demanding and critical. We were heading toward a revision of the Constitutions which in 1966 resulted in their complete reformulation. The intent in this revision was to lighten the structures and bring out the spirit and charism in the light of Vatican II. I believe that substantially the attempt has succeeded. There are some, however, who think that perhaps in matters of style and text too much was drawn from Vatican II and too little from the Founder. They probably have a point. It will be up to the 1980 Chapter to settle the matter.

III. THE OBLATE CHARISM: PRESENT SITUATION AND OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

The present problem, nonetheless, runs much deeper than a simple question of Constitutions. It touches religious life in its very being and is not something exclusive to the Oblates. It is a challenge that goes to the very roots of the

religious life, a challenge coming, first of all, from outside and resulting from a change in our whole civilization.

Its effects on an Institute such as ours are the following: 1) numerical decrease of personnel: we have gone down from 7438 in 1961 to 6428 in 1975 (a drop of 1010, including 884 scholastics); 2) fairly numerous departures (about 50 laicizations annually over the past 4-5 years); 3) malaise and insecurity among many who persevere.

Thus, it is difficult to live through the present period. For our Oblate charism, it is both a time of purification and a challenge. It obliges us to go beyond the social and human level of the Oblate vocation and to consider it truly at the faith level where personal options must be taken. This is a grace.

It seems to me that a major challenge — one that goes to the very heart of our Oblate mission — consists in *finding an effective answer in the evangelical order to the appeals of the poor today*. These poor live in the Third World, true, but they are also numerous, and very much so, in all the other countries where we work. Their poverty takes on many forms from the extreme physical destitution of those who die of hunger in our Bangladesh missions to the tranquil atheism and social rejection found among certain groups of people in our large parishes.

Today, as before, we must go to those « who are far away », far away from the faith or from religious practice, far away from the respect and love and understanding of their fellow man, their brother, far away from the social status and living conditions to which every human being has a right. It is to these people that we must go.

And to tell them what? That they are loved by God, that they are our brothers and that we want to help them liberate themselves from their miseries so as to know with us the meaning of true salvation in Christ.

Are we still capable of telling them that? Can we say it effectively, in a manner in which we will be understood by today's poor, be they workers, marginalized people, youthful protestors or peoples of the Third World? Do we have a different answer for their sufferings, an answer which would be acceptable, an answer other than the one which consists solely in political liberation or social development?

This is the first challenge to be met.

There is a second challenge, however, no less important than the first. It especially concerns our own personal consecration as religious and priests. It is the challenge *to re-establish confidence in certain fundamental values of our lives as priests and religious in the context of today's world*. It means believing in prayer, in free and silent prayer, enough to con-

secrete prolonged periods to it daily. (14) It means believing in the vows of religion and in fraternal community enough to be radically committed to them with the necessary discipline that this entails. It means believing in the activities proper to priests and in the efficacy of the sacraments enough to accord them, both in our own esteem and as far as possible in our actions the priority they deserve. Today's world challenges us on each of these points. It expects more from us than theoretical answers and statements of belief that these are matters of value «in themselves». No, the world wants a practical answer. It wants us to show clearly that these are truly values «for us» and consequently we fully commit ourselves to them. Such a course of action presupposes that over and above these values, and through them, we have met a key living Person, Jesus Christ and that we have based and centered our entire life on him.

Considered in this sense, this second challenge becomes even more important than the first. The Gospel authenticity of our response to the poor of our day depends on the quality of our friendship with Jesus Christ. The missionary activity of an institute is worth what its members are worth. Our Founder had understood this well. Indeed, at the beginning espe-

(14) 1966 Constitutions and Rules, art. 59.

cially, he proved very demanding on this point. As he put it:

It is important to lay solid foundations... We wish to choose men who have the will and courage to walk in the footsteps of the apostles. (15) For him this was something which « the people's needs » demanded. (16)

For some years now I have noticed that, in the Congregation, there exists among a number of our men the fear of being considered marginal Oblates and an insecurity engendered thereby. To me, the striking thing is that this fear can be found in widely differing groups: among young Oblates involved in new and untried works as well as among the older men in traditional ministries. Another striking aspect is that reference is made chiefly to the work itself and never, or almost never, to the interior disposition of the person and to the mission received. There is a fear of being considered marginal, of being tagged a second-class Oblate for continuing to work in the parish framework, for still « sacramentalizing ». On the other hand, there is the same fear of being considered marginal for living in an ordinary house of the working district, or for being a worker-priest. Before the 1972 Chapter that fear was perhaps more prevalent among those in the more avant-garde forms of ministry. The vote on the Missionary Outlook

(15) Mazenod to Tempier, October 9, 1815.

(16) Mazenod to Tempier, December 13, 1815.

document, while tending to reassure them, had, I believe, the opposite effect on the other group. Then came the 1974 Chapter. It is still difficult to make a clear assessment, but some tend to feel that the balance has shifted in the opposite direction.

Personally, I see the question in an altogether different perspective, and here I believe I am being faithful to the Founder's spirit. Our external work has its importance; in the Church we are missionaries to the poor and today we should be reassessing our apostolic commitments in the light of the vocation which is ours. This is an obligation for each individual and, first of all, for all who are charged with leadership in the Institute at whatever level.

An Oblate's authenticity, however, or his marginality, cannot arise primarily from that area, that is, from the external work. It will come from within, first of all, from the interior disposition of the apostolic man. For me the authentic Oblate is one who has truly left all to follow Jesus Christ, the Oblate who works seriously at becoming a saint and who at all times carries within his very being the concern for evangelizing the poor.

These are the dispositions which the Founder explicitly describes in the Preface to the Rule and throughout all his correspondence:

They must wholly renounce themselves, striving solely for the glory of God, the good of the Church, and the growth and salvation of souls.

They must constantly renew themselves in the spirit of their vocation, living in a state of habitual self-denial and seeking at all times to reach the very summit of perfection. They must work unremittingly to become humble, meek, obedient, lovers of poverty and penance, mortified, free from inordinate attachment to the world or to family, men filled with zeal, ready to sacrifice goods, talents, ease, self, even their life, for the love of Jesus Christ, the service of the Church, and the sanctification of their brethren. (17)

As for apostolic activity, we must go to the poor, go to them in order to reveal to them Jesus Christ and salvation in Jesus Christ, and we « certainly need to be enterprising » when we « are called to the conquest of souls ». (18)

But for the Oblate, the Founder always considered this apostolic commitment and spirit of initiative to be founded on the mission received, and, accordingly, in relation to an interior disposition of obedience. I quote only a single text which says it all and clearly brings out its author's temperament. Bishop de Mazenod wrote the following to Father Pelissier on May 30, 1839:

It would have been a fatal delusion to believe you didn't have to do all that depended on you for the proper instruction of the young and the care of the parish — in a word, for those things expected of a good pastor — on the pretext that you are a missionary. Be yourself convinced of it, my dear son, and repeat it loudly to all who

(17) Preface to the Constitutions and Rules.

(18) Mazenod to Honorat, March 1, 1844.

might be tempted to avail themselves of that pretext in order to shirk giving themselves zealously to the functions, whatever they may be, with which they have been charged. Nothing is contrary to our Institute except whatever offends God. Everthing else is submitted to obedience. In regard to the ministry no one, no matter who he might be, has the right in the Congregation to argue on what is determined by the superiors according to the needs of the Congregation or the Church. This principle is incontestable.

The Oblate charism is made up of all these dispositions. It is not dead. It shall not die.

As I already said, we do have real difficulties. We share them with other religious families and with the Church in general. Yet, alongside those difficulties new realities are quietly coming into being: new works and new forms of ministry, new links with Christian laity and new sources of vocations. Last year, for example, India gave us its first six Oblates, and in Bangladesh there are already two or three serious aspirants. Some Oblate Provinces, Poland, for example, and Italy, are also experiencing a veritable renewal in their recruitment.

There are still young men of 25 or 26 who feel attracted by the Founder and discover in him their aspirations. Just lately, one such young man wrote me the following in his letter of first obedience:

My discovery of the Founder began at novitiate. Prior to that I had always had a passion to bring Christ to the very poorest of men, to announce

his love for everyone. Indeed that passion was so deep that it seemed impossible to restrict it within the confines of a parish, for example — even while admitting the great worth of a parish. That is why I decided to leave the diocesan seminary in order to enter a missionary Institute. At the same time I felt attracted by a kind of life given totally to God. Hence my choice of a religious Institute.

In the Founder I discovered a man who had lived my own ideal, and in the Oblate vocation I found a concrete way of incarnating all the demands God had put into my soul. In Eugene de Mazenod I see a man who served humanity in an integral way by showing who Christ really is; a man who served humanity by putting himself at the service of the Church. The Church is the sacrament of salvation. In and with the Church he became a cooperator with Christ the Saviour. It was the Church which called him to collaborate in its work by showing him its urgent needs. In Eugene I see the man who answered the Church's call, not as a loner, but in community — in a religious community.

Because my vocation was prompted by this vision of the Church and the world, I have never thought in terms of a specific field of action. I have been struck by the absence of Christ in modern society. Everywhere I seem to see his wounds: in my own country, in the West, in mission lands. Like the Founder I should like to go wherever the needs of the Church are greatest, wherever the Church should be building or rebuilding anew. And I should like to go there in community.

Besides such signs of hope I perceive great good will in the Congregation as a whole. Among a very great number of Oblates, moreover, there is a deep desire for life and fidelity. The recent

General Chapters, for example — those of 1972 and 1974 — showed that beyond the differences of outlook which are certainly real enough, two fundamental characteristics of Oblate life can be said to enjoy unanimity: the necessity to go to the poor and, in certain cases, to return to the poor; and the necessity of a Gospel commitment which is more radical, on personal and communitarian levels. Such aspirations exist; Oblates feel them deeply. The problem is to know how they are to be incarnated in our modern-day lives, what forms they will take in that context. In all this the answers vary greatly.

Hope exists. Nonetheless, it is clear that the path into the future will be difficult. Personally, I consider that a simple and deeply realistic attitude is very important in order to make headway along that path. It means beginning, right now, wherever we may be working, to go to the poor, to do so simply, with perseverance, without being sidetracked by the ordinary character of the enterprise or by the absence of external brilliance, without being discouraged by the lack of interest or by the slowness to respond on the part of the very people we are trying to help. All of that is necessary groundwork. Deep transformations in works stem from there.

It also means not waiting until structures or the Constitutions are perfect before setting out to live the radicalism of the Gospel. When men change and become more evangelical the struc-

tures themselves become simplified and begin to resemble the Gospel more.

If I were asked outright what can be done to revitalize the Oblate charism today, I would answer thus: reevaluate our Oblate commitments, yes, encourage and support new undertakings along the lines of evangelizing the poor, yes — but above all else, look at the quality of the men themselves, as the Founder did, and work at their interior growth. The charism of a worldwide missionary Institute such as ours will live in the measure that its men are very much alive spiritually and are striving to be saints.

« We must be truly saints ourselves, » Father de Mazenod declared at the Congregation's outset. « In saying that, we include all that can possibly be said. » (19) If he returned today, he would not say anything else. Perhaps, however, he would exhort us to go more often to the Blessed Virgin, our Patroness and Mother, much as he himself did during the most trying hours. She is at the heart of the Oblate charism, but in a discreet, tactful way, as someone who inspires and sustains, who encourages and accompanies.

(19) Mazenod to Tempier, December 13, 1815.

III

THE OBLATE, AN APOSTOLIC MAN AND A RELIGIOUS (1)

Evangelizing in the past. - Looking at today's world. - Evangelizing today. - Our religious life. Our vows. - Community.

If Father de Mazenod were to return to us today, what would he expect of us? I pondered this question while I was preparing the reflections that follow. Our Founder knew what he wanted, and he wanted this with all his heart and soul. To be a genuine Oblate, as he saw it, two realities became quickly inseparable — and indispensable: the religious life and the apostolic commitment.

I. THE OBLATE, AN APOSTOLIC MAN

Saint Paul said: « Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel! » (2) The Oblate, too, lives

(1) The first portion of this text was given at a congress of United States Central Province, at Belleville, Illinois, on July 19, 1978; it was published in *Vie Oblate Life*, 1979, pp. 27-37. The second part was given at a congress of the Vice-Province of Zaire, at Ifwanzondo, on September 11, 1981; it was published in *Vie Oblate Life*, 1982, pp. 105-113.

(2) 1 Corinthians 9:16.

only to preach the Gospel: « *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me!* » Father de Mazenod wanted us to evangelize the poor.

What was the Oblate's source of strength in the past?

The Founder's outstanding characteristics are these: a strong and integrated personality which had undergone an experience of Jesus Christ in his personal life, and of Christ's love for people. Hence, his « conversion » and his radical choice of Jesus Christ. He committed himself to follow Christ like the first Apostles did; his heart opened up to the appeals of the Church — which is one reality in and with Christ; in particular he became sensitive to the suffering of the poor and of the most abandoned: prisoners, artisans, servants, peasants, youth, and also priests in difficulty. He wanted to help all these people by proclaiming the Lord's Gospel to them, by teaching them their dignity as sons and daughters of God. Very early he became aware that if his response and commitment was to be lasting and effective, it must be communitarian and sanctioned by vows. So it would be an apostolic religious body, « an elite corps », which he would put at the service of the Gospel, to preach parish missions, to work with youth and to train priests, to go to the missions abroad, and to be

ready for every good work which priestly charity might inspire.

In his mind, the glory of God, the service of the Church, the salvation of souls, the evangelization of the poor spontaneously came together as one. The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Mercy, is also at hand, constantly present, but in a discreet way as someone who supports, encourages and accompanies.

All these characteristics are found to exist, in one way or another, in the first generation of Oblates. To be members of the Institute, the Founder sought men who, humanly speaking, were consistent and stable, who were capable of committing themselves totally to the following of Jesus Christ. He did not want men who gave themselves only by half measures.

He wanted also men who were open to the appeals of the poor, internally free, detached from their families, from money, from their own opinions, from their personal comfort and, even to a certain degree, externally free from structures of the Church which would bind them indefinitely or in too exclusive a way to a single work or a single diocese. He wanted his men to have the mobility and availability of a missionary: to be ready to leave everything at short notice to respond to the Church's urgent needs as indicated by the Institute.

And here we have another characteristic of his: « esprit de corps », the sense of communi-

ty, both in daily life and in apostolic action. The Oblate is never alone, even if he happens to be living in actual isolation: his Oblate brothers remain always united to him. The same is true for his work: he is never alone to perform it, is the Congregation which accomplishes it through him; he has been « missioned » by the Congregation to do it. There is no Oblate if there is no mission.

Finally, the Founder wanted men who, like himself, were men of dreams and great desires, men who were bold and eager and capable of undertaking anything to extend the Kingdom of Jesus Christ and capable of bringing their enterprise to a successful conclusion.

These characteristics explain in large part the Congregation's success in the past. It very quickly spread across the world; it attracted many vocations and developed rapidly; it accomplished a marvellous work of evangelization. On April 19, 1978, Pope Paul VI recalled this to the Provincials gathered in Rome: « Through you and through so many of your members the missionary spirit of the Blessed Bishop de Mazenod has, so to speak, filled the universe! »

He added, however, — and this leads us to our second point — « The style of the missions at home or the missions that are far off and more difficult has changed... » Four years earlier, he spoke to the Capitulars in the same vein:

« Today the mode of your apostolic endeavours may most likely prove to be more difficult. » (3)

In fact, this is the experience of all of us.

Looking at today's world

Evangelizing the poor in today's world has become more difficult for the Oblates than in the past. Why?

In the first place, the world which we evangelize has greatly changed. This is true in practically every country, even in those which seemed sheltered from change. The social, economic, political « revolution » has penetrated everywhere and influenced everything.

In the past we could carry on our activity in a climate of tranquillity, quite independently, without any preoccupation aside from the material and spiritual help to be given locally to the people immediately in our care. The broader concerns of social justice, of liberation from oppressive structures hardly entered into our ordinary outlook or did so very little. We were far from the ecumenical spirit and the desire to dialogue with Islam and Buddhism. Moreover, countries, as a rule, were glad to welcome us.

Today, it is impossible to ignore these new dimensions in our apostolic activity, especially for us who are missionaries to the poor and who

(3) December 4, 1974.

want to be present wherever the future of the poor is being decided. The poor no longer ask us to work for them as much as to work with them, to help them change the conditions in which they live. Furthermore, we are now less welcome. Many countries like India, Bangladesh, South Africa, not to mention the communist countries, refuse to give visas to missionaries or grant them only with great difficulty.

Missionary activity has therefore taken on dimensions which it did not have before. Our first aim is still to evangelize the poor, which must lead to the explicit proclaiming of Jesus Christ and to the celebration of the sacraments; this aim, however, must be achieved in a new world which is sometimes atheistic, often very secularized, which has a sensitivity, language, means of expression, requirements that are no longer those of twenty or thirty years ago.

Next, in regard to the Church herself, her theology, liturgy, pastoral practice has greatly changed. Such change was needed if the Church wanted to respond to today's needs.

In her contacts with other religions — contacts she seeks to increase — the Church is showing herself more open, more gracious, ready to acknowledge and even to promote all the authentic values that these religions contain.

As she faces this world with its human richness and its ambiguities, the Church has changed from an attitude of distrust and flight to an atti-

tude of openness and love. « God so loved that world that he gave his only Son to save it. » (4) She will continue to condemn sin, but will exhort us more to go out to people, to become incarnate in the world in order to save it. Her concept of evangelization is more comprehensive: it includes human progress, development, the integral liberation of man.

In this new world, the world of the year 2000 which is being born, we, like the Founder in other times, are called to evangelize the poor.

Evangelizing today

To evangelize as an Oblate today means two things: to be capable of hearing the appeals of the poor of today, and, secondly, to respond to these appeals as an authentic witness to Jesus Christ in their midst.

1. *Being capable of hearing the appeals of the poor of today.* — Father de Mazenod deeply felt the needs of his time, he was attentive to the cry of the poor. For us, too, this is the starting point: to keep our eyes wide open to people's needs, their problems, their searching..., to understand in depth the actual tendencies and demands of the modern world... (5)

These demands may be the same as those

(4) John 3:16-17.

(5) Apostolic exhortation *Evangelica testificatio*, nos. 51-52.

of the past, but they are expressed otherwise and in an entirely different context. In former days it was the craftsman; today it is the worker, a union member, often far to the left, very critical of the capitalist society and of the Church. Those who today are the poorest and the most distressed are the refugees, the emigrant, lost together with his family in a strange world which very often exploits him unscrupulously — there are millions such in the world today. The most abandoned, the most despised today is the drug addict, the young delinquent who does not manage to get established in life. Further removed is probably the atheist, firmly fixed in his disbelief, or the believers without religion or church who are becoming ever more numerous in the affluent countries of the West.

Do we still hear an appeal from all these people, as well as from the non-Christians in the world? An appeal for justice and for sharing, an appeal for an existence that is more human and less stifling, an appeal to go beyond oneself and for love, an appeal for salvation and fullness of life in Jesus Christ. « I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly, » Jesus said. (6) The Congregation exists first of all for these poor people: it is primarily to them that the Founder wishes to send us.

To evangelize today means, first of all, that we are capable of hearing these appeals.

(6) John 10:10.

The Congregation is certainly still hearing them. It has shown this in the new Constitutions; it also expressed this most clearly in the 1972 Chapter.

With renewed zeal we will seek out, befriend and respect as brothers the abandoned poor with their many faces — the weak, the unemployed, the illiterate, victims of alcohol or drugs, the sick, the marginal masses in less developed countries, immigrants and minority groups in all countries, who are excluded from the benefits of development.

We will never forget that the worst form of poverty is not to know Christ. And that today two-thirds of the world's population still awaits first proclamation of the Good News of Salvation. (7)

2. *To respond to these appeals as an authentic witness to Jesus Christ among the poor.* Here we touch again the Institute's double character: it is religious and missionary. We must witness to Jesus Christ not only by our word and our activity, but also by the religious authenticity of our being.

We accomplish and do good according to the measure of what we are. « We must be truly saints ourselves, » the Founder wrote to Tempier. « In saying that, we include all that can possibly be said. » (8)

To the witness of our being, however, we

(7) 1972 General Chapter, *Missionary Outlook*, no. 15, a, b.

(8) Mazenod to Tempier, December 13, 1815.

must join that of the word and of our activity.

The Oblate must proclaim Jesus Christ by his actions, his good works, his charity, his work for development. Jesus healed the sick and comforted human misery; he defended the weak and the oppressed. An Oblate must do likewise, and has in fact done so since the beginning. The Founder visited the prisoners, helped the poor, cared for the plague-stricken. Very often the history of our missions in Africa, Asia, America is the history also of our works of development: the establishment of schools, hospitals, credit unions. Ministry for justice finds its place here; it is an integral part of our mission.

In these development works, however, we should as much as possible involve the Christian laity. « It is not right, » the Apostles said, « that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables... But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. » (9) This referred especially to the Apostles' function within the liturgical assemblies, but it does indicate a value judgment and expresses a specificity in the services, a specificity of which the Founder, who wants us to walk in the Apostles' footsteps, was well aware. As he wrote in the Preface to the *Constitutions*, the Oblate pledges himself « to all the works of zeal which priestly charity can inspire — above all, to the work of

(9) Acts 6:2-4.

the missions, which is the main reason of their Institute. » By word, to preach Jesus Christ to the poor, to proclaim the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ: so long as an Oblate has not done this, his evangelization work is incomplete.

In this regard, in many places a particular difficulty exists which may become a source of discouragement for us. In *Evangelii nuntiandi* Pope Paul VI mentions this difficulty. « Modern man is sated by talk, he is obviously often tired of listening and, what is worse, impervious to words. » (10) Consequently, we could be tempted to give up the ministry of the Word, we would not dare to speak of Jesus Christ anymore, we would be satisfied with being silent witness by our works and our lives. Our vocation demands more than that.

We still must have the courage to speak, to speak out and denounce injustice and sin, yes, but also to speak out in proclaiming Jesus Christ. « For we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard, » Peter and John affirmed before the Sanhedrin. (11) Preaching, the verbal proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ is indispensable to evangelization. It is also at the heart of our Oblate vocation within the Church. So we must look for new ways, try to discover the most effective ways, learn to use the most

(10) Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 42.

(11) Acts 4:20.

appropriate techniques to teach people today, to teach the poor person lost in the crowd who Jesus Christ is. This is what it means for an Oblate to evangelize the poor today.

II. THE OBLATE A RELIGIOUS

In the preceding section I said that we were not Oblates if we were not totally committed to evangelizing people, especially the poor. Now I want to complete the tableau by saying that we are not Oblates if we are not committed to community and totally consecrated to God by the vows of religion. This is what our Blessed Founder wanted.

Our religious life

From the very outset in 1815, the Founder made clear to his first companions, especially to Father Tempier, the aim he wanted to achieve: to preach missions, to tell people who Jesus Christ is and what their own dignity in Jesus Christ is, and to do this not just in any sort of way but by themselves being « men of interior life, truly apostolic men » (12), « men who will have the courage to walk in the footsteps of the apostles. » (13) At this time he was not thinking

(12) Mazenod to Tempier, December 13, 1815.

(13) Mazenod to Tempier, October 9, 1815.

of asking his men to undertake a commitment by vows. Rather, they were to live the common life and the spirit of the vows, to live the Gospel in a radical way under a rule that would be based on the inspiration of Saint Ignatius, Saint Charles Borromeo, Saint Philip Neri, Saint Vincent de Paul and Blessed Liguori. (14)

What he wanted to do was plain enough: to bring people back to the faith by means of preaching missions, to furnish the rural areas « with fervent missionaries » (15); and, to achieve this, to form a group of priests who would pledge themselves to live a life that was more demanding than that of the ordinary priest, a life « of abnegation, renunciation, forgetfulness of self, poverty, fatigue, etc. ». (16)

« We must be truly saints ourselves, » he said. « In saying that, we include all that can possibly be said. » (17) Right from the start he had wanted the religious life for the Oblates as a *school of holiness*, because « the needs of the people », the needs of the missionary enterprise required it. (18)

The end of this Society is not only to work for the salvation of one's neighbour by dedicating itself to the ministry of preaching; its chief aim also includes providing its members with the

(14) Mazenod to Tempier, October 9, 1815.

(15) Mazenod to Tempier, October 9, 1815.

(16) Mazenod to Tempier, December 13, 1815.

(17) Mazenod to Tempier, December 13, 1815.

(18) Mazenod to Tempier, December 13, 1815.

means necessary to practice the virtues of religion to which they are so strongly attracted that the greater number of them would consecrate themselves for life to their observance in some religious Order, did they not nurture the hope of finding in the Missionaries' community more or less the same advantages as in the religious state to which they wanted to pledge themselves. (19)

As a matter of fact, vows followed rather quickly thereafter: Father de Mazenod and Father Tempier made theirs during the night of Holy Thursday, April 11, 1816, the rest at the General Chapter of 1821. When our Rules were approved on February 17, 1826, we became truly *religious*.

We could sum up as follows: from the very outset the Founder wanted the Gospel radicalism that is proper to the religious life for the Oblates; he introduced its concrete expression by the vows of obedience, poverty and perseverance — that of chastity was already included in the priesthood — during the course of the first five years, from 1816 to 1821.

During the course of Oblate history, this religious element became stronger, even though through certain tensions at times and in a constant search for balance and unity. In the end, it obtained what is perhaps its most perfect and eloquent expression at the last General Chapter, that of 1980, in the approving of the new Con-

(19) Request for authorization addressed to the Vicars General of Aix, January 25, 1816.

stitutions. Included and integrated under the heading « The Oblate Charism » are the two elements which together constitute the Oblate life: our mission and our religious apostolic life.

The essence of the religious life for us is the *sequela Christi*, the commitment to follow Christ absolutely in our life and our activity.

How should men who want to follow in the footsteps of their divine Master Jesus Christ conduct themselves if they, in their turn, are to win back the many souls who have thrown off his yoke? They must strive to be saints... They must wholly renounce themselves... They must constantly renew themselves in the spirit of their vocation, living in a state of habitual self-denial and seeking at all times to reach the very summit of perfection. They must work unremittingly to become humble, meek, obedient, lovers of poverty and penance, mortified, free from inordinate attachment to the world or to family, men filled with zeal, ready to sacrifice goods, talents, ease, self, even their life, for the love of Jesus Christ, the service of the Church, and the sanctification of their brethren. And thus, filled with unbounded confidence in God, they are ready to enter the combat, to fight, even unto death, for the greater glory of his most holy and sublime Name. (20)

In becoming a religious a person publicly commits himself before the Church to live his baptismal consecration in an *absolute way* and, in order to achieve this, with God's grace he freely chooses certain more radical means that the Christian life does not impose. On the Gospel

(20) Preface to the Constitutions and Rules.

level, the religious life pertains to the order of baptism, of sharing God's life, of Christian charity and holiness. Within this order it manifests a real intransigence. If you want to be perfect, the Lord said, if you want to love God and your neighbour with a love that is perfect, leave everything and come follow me!

We know the parable of the man who has discovered a treasure hidden in a field. He pays out his entire fortune to buy that field. His neighbour, who is unaware of the treasure that is there, simply sees him as someone who is naive or a fool.

The religious is in the same situation. If he leaves everything in his desire for the Lord, it is because he has mysteriously discovered *the Lord's presence* hidden in the poverty to which he commits himself; because he is certain one day to find the Lord therein; and because he loves the Lord enough to undertake this risk. If these dispositions, which constitute the life of the theological virtues and which suppose that a person already possesses a certain experience of Jesus Christ, are not present in a sufficiently intense degree, religious commitment is unthinkable: it would be pure folly and infantile foolishness. « Let him who can grasp this do so! » Jesus said in reference to virginal chastity. This is true for the whole of religious commitment.

A consecrated person leaves everything behind in order to be totally the Lord's. Such a person

internally detaches himself from everything that is not God and in fact leaves everything that he can behind.

The vows of religion

Here is where the vows come into the picture. They signify and make real the total gift of self to the Lord; they constitute a sacrifice to the Lord, made freely and out of love, of the most important goods a human being possesses: his material goods, the goods of his body and heart, the good of his own freedom. This is done with a special will to be faithful, which is signified by our fourth vow, that of perseverance, through which we publicly witness our deep attachment to our religious family and our definitive commitment to its mission.

By their essence our vows are born of love and are ordained to love, to a love without reserve for God and for all people. They tend to the fullness of this love through an interior liberation and the total detachment from oneself. They belong to the beatitude of poverty.

The renunciation proper to these vows takes effect in us gradually, according to the pace in which we grow. It first takes root in our will and little by little penetrates our sensitivities and our passions. Its purpose is to transform our being, to make of it a new being, a Gospel being that is in conformity with the Lord's.

The vow of *chastity* takes its inspiration from the attitude of the Lord Jesus who chose to live this chastity and recommends it to us. (21) It also takes its inspiration from an attitude of solidarity with all people: it invites the one who has vowed chastity to bear this renunciation in a spirit of brotherhood as a help to his brothers and sisters here below to sanctify their conjugal love if they are married, and their solitude if they are single.

Far from hardening the consecrated person's heart, this vow promotes the growth of a frank and pure affection that is deeply human and universal in its welcome.

This vow is a witness to all people that the risen Lord exists and is present among us; it is a testimony to the primacy of his Kingdom. Jesus said: « And there are some who renounce marriage in view of the Kingdom of heaven. Let him who can grasp this do so! » (22)

To be able to give such a witness, the religious must really be called by the Lord, lucid in his commitment and generous in the daily sacrifices it demands. « An adult is worth what his heart is worth; that is, this deep, secret centre of his being wherein the *yes* and the *no* which determine his life are spoken. The adult person finds in the heart the unity of his personality, the bond of all his powers (intelligence, will, affec-

(21) Matthew 19:12.

(22) Matthew 19:12.

tivity), the source of all his commitments. The quality of his chastity corresponds to the quality of his *heart*. That is why to the question: "How can and ought a religious live his chastity", we could reply in one word: "By the conversion and purification of his heart". » (23)

The vow of *poverty* also takes its inspiration from the attitude of the Lord Jesus who chose, freely and out of love, to live as a poor man, without earthly wealth or human fame. It, too, derives inspiration from solidarity with all people. It should be animated by a deep sympathy for the most poor who live in suffering and insecurity, and by a sincere desire to induce the rich to detachment from their goods and to an effective determination to sharing with the poor.

To people this vow recalls the Fatherhood of God and the total confidence we place in him; it also reminds them of the charity that unites us among ourselves and moves us to have everything in common.

In order to give such a witness, we must live this vow in a context of real deprivation, of true community sharing, of joy and with an inner freedom which rejects all anxiety and trusts in God's Providence.

My God, Father de Foucauld writes, I do not know if it is possible for certain souls to see you poor and yet willingly remain rich; to see them-

(23) COMITE D'ETUDES DOCTRINALES DE LILLE, *Célibat et Sacerdoce*, Cerf. 1961, p. 66.

selves so much greater than their Master, their Beloved, and not to want to resemble you in everything as much as possible, and especially in your humiliations. I concede that they love you, my God, and yet I think something is lacking in their love. In any case, I cannot conceive of a love that does not include a driving need to conform, to resemble, and especially to share all the sufferings, difficulties and hardships of life... (24)

The vow of *obedience* likewise takes its inspiration from the attitude of Christ who voluntarily became obedient, even to death on the cross, to the Father's will (25), and by such suffering learned what it meant to be obedient. (26) It also derives inspiration from solidarity with all people, inviting them thereby to sanctify their own freedom.

It is gradually integrated into our being. Like faith and in the domain of faith, religious obedience is first a mystery of death before it becomes a mystery of life. To have us fully enter into God's plan, it begins by having us freely enter into the night, a painful night, if you wish, but a night which can be passionately desired and loved by a person who offers himself totally to his Lord. (27) This is an obedience which far surpasses a mere reasonable submission made

(24) C. DE FOUCAULT, *Ecrits spirituels*, 1923, pp. 106-107.

(25) John 4:34, 5:30; Philippians 2:8 Hebrews 10:7.

(26) Hebrews 5:8.

(27) Cf. M. GIULIANI, S.J., « Nuit et lumière de l'obéissance » in *Christus*, no. 7, juillet 1955.

in view of a common good that is humanly verifiable.

The refusal to obey, more or less admitted, under the most reasonable pretexts, Father Voillaume writes, is often the last refuge of attachment to self. Since Christ cannot possess us without possessing us *completely*, every renunciation which would exclude the most spiritual part of ourselves would, in the final analysis, be useless. Only someone who has indeed given his mind to God by faith and his will by obedience and love truly belongs to God. All who have not reached this kind of renunciation only belong to God in hope, or partially only. (28)

In people's eyes this vow gives special witness to the mystery of the world's salvation accomplished by the sacrifice of the cross, « a stumbling block to Jews and an absurdity to Gentiles, » Saint Paul says, « but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. » (29)

To give such a witness, we must live this vow as an adult, in voluntary adherence, in spiritual freedom, in trust, peace and joy.

Community

Finally, our Founder wanted us to live these vows — this gift from the Lord for the service

(28) R. VOILLAUME, *Lettres aux Fraternités*, t. II, pp. 120-121.

(29) 1 Corinthians 1:23-24.

of people — *in community*. He had in mind the first apostolic team, the Twelve grouped around Jesus. These were men who had left everything to respond to Christ's call and who made up a community with each other and with Christ.

The Founder considered this kind of community essential for the two aspects of our life, both as a support and stimulus in our efforts to become saints and as a means of stability and effectiveness in our missionary activities.

He had no intention to group together apostolic free lancers who would go on living alone and working on their own. He wanted to establish a real corps — an « elite corps », as he put it — a community of priests and brothers capable of living together at close quarters in the same house and working together in the Lord's vineyard. To this end he very much insisted on the two virtues that are basic for any authentic community life: fraternal charity and obedience. It is worth the trouble to read his correspondence with the first Oblates who had been sent to Canada: they reveal how much he insisted on the point that we must know how to support and help each other, and not downgrade and destroy each other.

After the Founder, Superiors General like Fathers Fabre and Labouré insisted greatly on this family spirit and this « esprit de corps ».

Here, for example, are some texts from Father Fabre in 1871: « Let us never lose sight of

the fact that our works are never meant to be personal works. We do them as religious, and therefore it is in the name of the community and for the community that we ought to do them... Within a Congregation the greatest danger can come from too great a spirit of individualism. As a religious should not be considering himself only, so a house should not limit itself only to its interests: a house is part of a province, and a province is part of the Congregation, and within the Congregation there has to be a centre from which the activity and life of the entire corps springs forth. All the parts ought to nourish this centre so that it, in its turn, may nourish the parts with the life it is meant to communicate to them. These are the attitudes we should foster amongst ourselves. If this reciprocal give and take should ever cease, the Congregation will cease to exist. There might be individual life and activity, but there would not be that community spirit of action and interest which is proper to a Congregation. » (30)

And from Father Labouré in 1932: « In our case, the Oblate spirit does not express itself only externally through the union of our forces and wills in the apostolic field; it expresses itself further by the need we feel to know each other better and to remain intimately united in

(30) *Circulaires administratives*, no. 22, t. I, pp. 203, 211-212.

the bonds of the same charity. It is evident to anyone who has travelled that everywhere, whatever their nationality, the Oblates are Oblates, the loving and devoted sons of Bishop de Mazenod... In the past as in the present our family has consisted of men coming *ex omni tribu, et lingua, et populo, et natione*; and yet the work of evangelization has always been accomplished with success, because it was done *more Oblatorum*. We have not been concerned with channelling our forces according to the principle of nationality: an Oblate went to wherever obedience called him, and he gave himself completely to the work of God and the Church, to evangelizing the poor, without asking whether his companions were from his own country or not. They were Oblates and that was sufficient; union of hearts brought about the union of forces... Such is the glorious tradition of our religious family. It is in this devotedness of each to the common task that we must seek the true bonds that will unite us all. » (31)

What is the condition of our community life today? In some respects, it retains its intense quality: we are glad to be together, we find a same family spirit animating the Congregation right across the world, relationships between the Provinces and the General Administration are good and friendly, meetings and congresses on

(31) *Ibid.*, no. 152, t. IV, pp. 241-243.

the provincial and regional levels are more numerous and the need for more of the same is felt.

At the same time, however, I also notice the following: 1) Practically in all countries the young members joining us today demand community, perhaps more than in the past. They come to us to commit themselves to the mission, certainly, but they want the mission to be rooted in and supported by a genuine community life. They want to live the Gospel together with others and to proclaim it to people with the support and friendship of others. 2) A certain number — by no means all — who have spent some 15 or 20 years living alone in isolated missions and who have led a rather individualistic life, establishing their own works with their own benefactors, have come to the end of their tether. More and more they suffer from solitude and are concluding: « I cannot hold out like this. This is not the religious life I have chosen! »

Renewal of community life is necessary both for the good of persons and for the good of the mission. It is indispensable for the future generation of Oblates. There has been much criticism of the Founder's idea of the « two portions » of the Oblate life, namely, a time within the house spent in prayer and regular observance, and a time outside spent in the preaching of missions. I believe we need to return to the spirit which animated this rule and rediscover

a new balance between prayer and action, new forms of community living and of apostolic re-organization that will favour such a balance.

Our fidelity to the Oblate ideal and our own happiness demand it.

IV

THE CHARISM OF RELIGIOUS WITHIN THE LOCAL CHURCH (1)

Mutual knowledge and appreciation. - A diversity of religious institutes. - Concern for vocations. - Shortage of priests and respect for charisms.

The topic assigned to me is: « The Bishop, Defender and Guardian of each Religious Family's Charism ».

As a matter of fact, as « the principal dispenser of the mysteries of God » and the « spiritual guide of their flock » (2), the bishop has a special responsibility in regard to each of his diocesan faithful; this is especially true in the case of religious, according to the vocation proper to them. Moreover, as a member of the episcopale college, it is his task to « use his supervisory and protective authority to ensure that religious institutes may develop and flourish in accordance with the spirit of their founders. » (3)

(1) Text submitted to the International Congress for Vocations, Rome, May 10-16, 1981.

(2) *Christus Dominus*, no. 15.

(3) *Lumen Gentium*, no. 45.

Concretely speaking, how can the bishop carry out this responsibility? How can he be the guardian, the defender and the promoter, on the spiritual and apostolic levels, of each institute's charism? And how can he foster the blossoming of vocations to the religious life?

On account of the brief nature of this communication, I will limit my intervention to religious institutes of pontifical right. Even so, the topic remains rather vast: there are contemplative and active institutes, those engaged in a well established local Church and those in local Churches still in the process of developing.

Nevertheless, here are some observations which I hope may be helpful. They express the viewpoint and the expectations of a religious superior.

Mutual knowledge and appreciation

The bishop ought to acquaint himself well with the specific nature of the religious institutes that are working in his diocese. He will esteem the charism proper to each and be aware that it is by remaining faithful to this charism that they will be most useful both to his Church and to the Church universal. (4)

If he invites a new religious institute to work in his diocese, he will first consider what this

(4) Cf. *Perfectae caritatis*, no. 2, b.

same institute, as it develops and functions according to its proper end, can bring as an enrichment to the local Church.

With a view to achieving this, he will be in favour of signing clear contracts between his diocese and the religious institutes concerned. In such contracts, the following items, among others, should be mentioned.

The religious institute recognizes the bishop as the one principally responsible for the apostolate in the diocese (5); on the other hand, the bishop recognizes the specific character of the religious institute and commits himself to respect and encourage it. (6)

The religious institute states its availability to serve the local Church in given tasks proposed to it by the bishop. In the normal course of things, these tasks harmonize with the end and charism of the religious institute. To respond to urgent needs, however, especially in mission territories, the religious institute may also take on other works but by way of exception and on a temporary basis: it should be stated that such works are to be transferred to others as soon as this can be done.

(5) *Christus Dominus*, nos. 11, 34-35.

Instruction of the S.C. for the Evangelization of Peoples, 1969, no. 13, a.

(6) *Ad Gentes*, no. 45.

Instruction of the S.C. for the Evangelization of Peoples, 1969, no. 13, a.

The contract should also recognize the religious institute's right to commit some of its members — with the approval of their superiors and under the jurisdiction of the bishop — to special ministries that are in the line of being faithful to the institute's charism. In this way, the religious institute can, according to its own special vocation, open up new avenues for the Church's mission.

A diversity of religious institutes

In his diocese the bishop, besides developing the secular clergy, will, to the degree that this can be done, assure the presence of a certain diversity of religious families of priests, brothers and sisters. Such a diversity is a wealth for a local Church. It offers the faithful different ways of consecrating themselves to God, it brings a greater variety of services to the diocese and, finally, it makes the local Church less dependent upon a single religious institute.

This latter difficulty is especially found in mission countries in regard to clerical religious institutes. Often, at the very outset, the development of the local Church was entrusted to a given religious institute; the latter, because of the immediate needs, then assumed charge of all the works and ministries, with even the bishop being a member of the same religious institute. If, after a certain number of years, it has not

succeeded to develop a diocesan clergy, nor to associate other religious families to its missionary work, there is a great risk not only of hindering the local Church's growth but also of experiencing an identity crisis as religious. A situation like this does not favour the increase of religious vocations.

Concern for vocations

The bishop will give the religious institutes in his diocese every opportunity to make themselves known and esteemed by his faithful. This he will do in a variety of ways: by speaking positively about them; by associating them to this ministry as much as possible, according to the charism proper to them; by encouraging them; by fraternally admonishing them, if necessary; by allowing them to present, either through the diocesan organisms or individually, their work in the world, the spirit which animates them, and the personality of their Founder.

On the other hand — and this is no less necessary — the religious, whatever be the family to which they may belong, must be actively interested in the growth of the local Church. They will do this through their taking part in the activities of this Church, according to their proper vocation and without fearing to express their own religious identity in their own activity and behaviour. The Holy Father insisted very strong-

ly on this point in an address to the religious of Brazil on July 3, 1980. They will also do this by helping to promote the local clergy and by encouraging and supporting every true vocation to the priesthood or to the religious life.

Shortage of priests and respect for charisms

A final point should be mentioned in regard to safeguarding the charism of religious families. Even in a crisis period, even if there is an acute shortage of secular priests in his diocese, the bishop will resist the temptation to use religious too readily as simple replacements for his clergy; and, where such a situation exists, he will strive to distinguish as much as possible the diocese from the religious institute. In this regard, from the vantage point of religious families, experience teaches that it is generally preferable to have the boundaries of a religious province extend over several dioceses, that these boundaries do not geographically coincide with a single diocese.

This is a delicate question. It requires a great deal of understanding on both sides and a real sense of what constitutes the greater good of the Church.

How can we respond to the lack of diocesan priests in a given local Church? Must we simply invite the contemplatives to leave their monastery and undertake the ministry? Or suggest to teaching or coadjutor brothers that they become

priests? Or ask members of a religious fraternal community to disperse and have each one become the parish priest of a small parish? Should we not rather see in such a situation God's invitation not only to work harder in promoting vocations but also to review pastoral methods and organizations which may perhaps date from a time when the situation of the clergy, the laity and the Church were quite different?

Here is an example. This given missionary, who should normally have been living in community, was living alone for twenty some years in order to assure a continuous service in a remote outpost. He writes: « For myself — and this is also the experience of two or three confreres in the same situation — this kind of lived experience poses an enormous question mark. It seems to me that in most cases such an experience ends up with a gradual estrangement from the Congregation. Affective attachments will be more or less retained..., but the vital bond, the sense of belonging to a concrete community, the conviction of working in the name of a concrete community... all of that is broken to the advantage of an individualism which pretends to give everything to the Church... Often enough such a life alone and cut off from the family is the excuse for keeping one's *own* money, for living *one's own little life* for oneself without being disturbed by anyone. Is this still the religious life? »

The solution is not easy, even if the principles may make it appear so (7). There is an area of serious responsibility here both for the bishops and for the religious superiors, a responsibility they must share together, in dialogue and understanding, for the greater good of the whole Church.

(7) Cf. *Christus Dominus*, no. 35.

V

THE OBLATE AND THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY (1)

The Founder and the Blessed Virgin. - The Superiors General and the Blessed Virgin. - Marian devotion in a period of crisis. - Orientations for the future.

Four years ago, in this same place, I gave a talk on the Oblate charism and I concluded by saying:

The charism of a worldwide missionary Institute such as ours will live in the measure that its men are spiritually living well, in the measure that they are holy. « We must be truly saints ourselves, » Father de Mazenod declared at the Congregation's outset. (2) Were he to return today, he would not say otherwise. Perhaps, however, he would exhort us to go oftener to the Blessed Virgin Mary, our Patroness and our Mother, much as he himself did during his most trying hours. She is at the heart of the Oblate charism, but in

(1) Conference given on March 23, 1979, to a Meeting of Oblates at Cap-de-la-Madeleine in Canada; already published in OMI DOCUMENTATION, no. 87/79, (May 1979), pp. 1-12.

(2) Mazenod to Tempier, December 13, 1815.

a discreet way as someone who inspires and sustains, who encourages and accompanies. (3)

At this time, I would like to pursue this theme and I am doubly happy to do so, first because I am back again with you in a much loved place, and secondly because it is an occasion for me to speak about the Blessed Virgin and the Oblates. Mary is truly at the heart of our lives, even if we do not think very much about it. We bear her name « as a family name », said the Founder. (4) She it is « who protects us » and obtains « for us all graces » of which we are in need. (5)

At this meeting I would like to answer two questions:

I - What has Mary been in our past history?

II - What should Mary be for us today?

I. MARY'S PLACE IN OUR PAST HISTORY

Our past history: that means our Blessed Founder, Father de Mazenod, and it also means our Oblate tradition.

(3) Conference of April 30, 1975. Cf. OMI DOCUMENTATION, no. 59/75 (July 1975), p. 13. (quoted above, p. 70).

On the topic we are developing here, cf. also M. GILBERT, O.M.I., « Le caractère marial du charisme du Fondateur » in *Vie Oblate Life*, vol. 35 (1976), pp. 80-96.

(4) Mazenod to Tempier, March 20, 1826.

(5) Mazenod to Tempier, December 22, 1825.

The Founder and the Blessed Virgin

Some years ago I already spoke about the Founder and the Blessed Virgin when, with Fathers Gauthier and Croteau and encouraged by Father Maurice Gilbert, we conducted a seminar under the late Father Marcel Bélanger, on the Marian character of our spirituality. (6)

When I look at the past, a fact stands out which must be acknowledged: the Blessed Virgin Mary, Immaculate in her Conception and Mother of Mercy, Mother of the Missions, has always held a central place among us. The first purpose of the Congregation, it is true, is not to promote the cult of Mary, even though that is one of its purposes — the Founder said so on many occasions (7); it is first and foremost the evangelization of the poor. « The aim of our Institute, » said Father de Mazenod, « is the very same which the Son of God had in coming on earth. » (8) And Jeancard in his « Mélanges historiques » insists that « evangelization of the poor is the original and foremost idea which, with the passing of time, developed and gave

(6) « Essai sur le caractère marial de notre spiritualité I. Chez le Fondateur », in *Etudes Oblates*, vol. (7) 1948, pp. 13-45.

(7) For example, Mazenod to Bishop Arbaud, March 10, 1828. Testament of Bishop de Mazenod, August 1, 1854.

(8) Letter of October 8, 1831, quoted by Fabre, Circular no. 14, March 20, 1864: *Circulaires administratives*, I, p. 122.

birth to the Congregation... It is always the same thought, that of the salvation of the poor and the abandoned, which inspired every development. It is the master idea, the motivating force which is reborn in all its power, whenever the call of heaven says to the holy Founder: "Go ahead still further"... » (9)

On the other hand, we are to preach the Gospel to the poor under the patronage of Mary, with the help and support of Mary and with Mary's sentiments in our hearts. When we study the Founder, we see that Mary was present at every moment of his life, especially at the most difficult times; when, for example, people resisted the apostolic zeal of his missionaries, or when vocations were scarce, or when an Oblate was going through an inner crisis, or fell sick, was near death, or when an Oblate work was in need. Here are some examples:

— To Father Tempier, April 13, 1826: « Let us pray to good effect so that the Father of the family send us workers... This grace is one for our good Mother to obtain for us... »

— To Father Honorat, May 28, 1826: « Lay this matter, like all those which concern us, at the feet of the most holy Virgin. »

— To Bishop Arbaud, March 10, 1828: « I have always told you the same thing about Notre-Dame du Laus. This shrine is dear to the whole

(9) JEANCARDD, *Mélanges historiques*, Tours, 1872, pp. 70-72.

Society because all of us profess a very special devotion to the Mother of God. »

— To Father Mille, July 24, 1831: « Don't let's forget the Blessed Virgin, our Patroness... We must look to her for the prayer of Jesus Christ to be extended to those too (now so many) he said he would not pray for: *Non pro mundo rogo*. This thought is one I often dwell on, I pass it on to you, with my blessing and a brotherly embrace. »

— On December 8, 1831, he wrote to Brother Saluzzo, who was seriously tempted about his vocation: « You will come first to Notre-Dame du Laus to place yourself until further orders under the mantle of our Good Mother. It is my last effort to save you. »

— On June 5, 1838, he wrote to Father Mille, superior at Notre-Dame du Laus: « Our good Brother Morandini, whom Providence has brought to our Lady's shrine, must ask her with child-like confidence to obtain the miracle of his cure... All of us here will be praying with him. »

— In Heaven itself he sees the departed Oblates close to Mary: « I presume that our community must be placed quite close to our Patroness. I see them at the side of Mary Immaculate and, consequently, close to our Lord Jesus Christ, whom they have followed on earth and whom they contemplate with delight » (to Father Courtès, July 22, 1828).

Finally we know all that the Founder did for the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Some months previously, on August 1, 1854, he had written in his will: « I invoke the intercession of the Most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of God, daring to remind her in all humility, but with consolation, of the filial devotion of my whole life and of the desire I have always had to make her known and loved, and to spread her devotion everywhere through the ministry of those whom the Church has given me as children, who have the same desire as myself. »

Father de Mazenod was not a theoretician on Marian cult, but he was a man profoundly devout and dedicated to Mary, and it was with her, in her company, that he lived his whole life as a missionary of the poor.

The Superiors General and the Blessed Virgin

What happened after the Founder? What place did Mary hold in the Oblate spiritual tradition? To give a fully adequate answer to this question, a thorough in-depth study has yet to be made. Some work in this line has already been done, for example in the article of Father Roger Gauthier which appeared in *Etudes Oblates* in 1948. When preparing this talk, I have personally done some research: in the circular letters of the Superiors General, in the necrolo-

gical articles, in the lives of our Servants of God, in the writings of some of our great missionaries. I cannot say everything here. I will deal especially with the circular letters of our Superiors General.

In these circular letters we find first of all the idea of an « apostolic corps » with Mary Immaculate as its Mother. Such expressions are already explicitly contained in the Founder's writings: « the corporation of Mary » (10), her « elite corps » (11), which goes into battle « under her flag » (12), « under her banner » (13).

Fathers Fabre (14), Soullier (15), Augier (16), Dontenwill (17) readily repeat these same expressions.

Another idea which often occurs in the circular letters is that expressed by Leo XII in the Letter of Approbation of the Institute: « In conclusion, We firmly hope that the members of this holy family... who claim as their patroness the Virgin Mother of God conceived without sin,

(10) Mazenod to Most Rev. Roothan, S.J., October 28, 1848.

(11) Mazenod to Honorat, August 18, 1843.

(12) Mazenod to Honorat, October 9, 1857.

(13) Mazenod to Noble, July 21, 1858.

(14) Circular no. 15, March 19, 1865: *Circulaires administratives*, I, pp. 140, 145.

(15) Circular no. 51, December 28, 1892: *Ibid.*, II, p. 98.

Circular no. 55, January 1, 1894: *Ibid.*, II, p. 137.

Circular no. 60, May 5, 1895: *Ibid.*, II, p. 253.

(16) Circular no. 84, July 2, 1905: *Ibid.*, III, p. 49.

(17) Circular no. 137, March 19, 1927: *Ibid.*, IV, p. 91.

will strive with all their strength and especially by their example, to bring back to the bosom of the Mother of Mercy those people whom Jesus Christ on his Cross willed to give her as sons and daughters. » (18)

This thought is found expressed by Fathers Soullier (19), Augier (20), Lavillardière (21), Don-tenwill (22), and Deschatelets (23).

Under Fathers Augier and Lavillardière, two events will leave their mark on the Marian devotion of the Institute: the fact that in 1900 Leo XIII confided to the Congregation the promotion of the Scapular of the Sacred Heart and of Our Lady of Mercy, and in 1904 the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

On the occasion of the first event, Father Augier recalled our apostolic purpose: to bring back sinners to the bosom of our Mother of Mercy; and he adds that the devotions to the Sacred Heart and Mary Immaculate, Mother of Mercy, are « the most precious treasures of our religious family ». (24)

(18) LEO XII, Apostolic Letter *Si tempus unquam*, March 21, 1826.

(19) Circular no. 59, February 17, 1895: *Circulaires administratives*, II, pp. 204-205.

(20) Circular no. 73, August 27, 1900: *Ibid.*, II, p. 441.

(21) Circular no. 92, April 21, 1907: *Ibid.*, III, p. 195.

(22) Circular no. 137, March 19, 1927: *Ibid.*, IV, p. 91.

(23) Circular 191, August 15, 1951: *Ibid.*, V, p. 371.

(24) Circular no. 73, August 27, 1900: *Ibid.*, II, p. 441.

In 1906 the General Chapter again recommended to the zeal of the missionaries the spread of this scapular and that of the Immaculate Conception. This prompted Father Lavillardière to write:

The Church has given us a double mandate: to preach the graces which came to the world through the Immaculate Conception, to popularize devotion to the Sacred Heart. We will be blessed in proportion to the zeal with which we acquit this honoured and sanctifying mission... (25) As Oblates of Mary Immaculate, let us make known the glorious privilege of our Mother, and we shall see her become our co-worker in the conversion of unbelievers and of sinners. (26)

The Scapular of the Sacred Heart and Our Lady of Mercy then place before our eyes both the purpose of our calling and the most effective means to accomplish it. May all our missionaries, may every Father... become preachers of Mary's motherly mercy and of the infinite pardon of the Heart of Jesus! (27)

With Archbishop Dontenwill, still greater insistence is given to the privilege of the Immaculate Conception — 1908 was the fiftieth anniversary of the apparitions at Lourdes — and thus he, too, writes:

Our Congregation, established in the Church to honour the Immaculate Conception and to spread devotion to Mary, and which has become more alive and productive since receiving that mandate,

(25) Circular no. 92, April 21, 1907: *Ibid.*, III, p. 195.

(26) *Ibid.*

(27) *Ibid.*, p. 196.

as our venerated Founder himself attested..., has consequently the duty to glorify and have others glorify this privilege of Mary which fills with joy the hearts of all true Christians. (28)

In 1920, at the close of the 20th General Chapter, the Congregation was solemnly consecrated to Mary Immaculate.

Under Father Labouré, the Institute committed itself to Catholic Action. Immediately the invitation was extended to work through Mary:

Cum Maria et per ipsam. In our work, let us not forget that we are Oblates. When possible let us give preference to associations established under the banner of the Blessed Virgin and may Mary Immaculate always be our model and inspiration for Catholic Action. (29)

From these examples we must especially retain the deep need felt by the Superiors General to situate Mary always at the centre of our life and of our apostolic works.

For the centenary of the arrival of the Oblates in Canada, in 1941, Father Labouré again recalled:

Mary Immaculate is « Queen of all our missions and special patroness of our Arctic missions ».. « She reigns in the very heart of the "Province of Canada", in the national shrine at Cap-de-la-Madeleine, which our venerated Founder would have been so happy to see confided to his

(28) Circular no. 104, November 12, 1908: *Ibid.*, III, p. 230.

(29) Circular no. 164, March 19, 1939: *Ibid.*, IV, p. 376.

sons. She is the patroness, under various titles, of a number of our houses and mission stations ». Everywhere our preachers « make her known, loved and invoked ». Everywhere « she presides over our missions, blesses our efforts and receives the homage of our success. » (30)

Father Deschâtelets spoke of Mary with the same zeal and with the same enthusiasm. He even tried to bring together a synthesis of Oblate Marian spirituality in his circular letter no. 191, « Our vocation and our life of intimate union with Mary Immaculate ». (31)

Two years later, in another circular letter, « The Marian Year and the Oblates of Mary Immaculate », he invited each one to commit himself totally to the celebration of the centenary of the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. « No Oblate of Mary Immaculate can remain indifferent, » he said. (32) And he went on to explain how that year should be, for the Congregation, a year of renewal in personal and communitarian devotion to Mary and a year of intense Marian apostolate.

In 1965, he launched another invitation to the Oblates, but this time « to study and ponder the dogma (of the Immaculate Conception) and everything related to Marian theology, in view, »

(30) Circular no. 168 bis, August 15, 1941: *Ibid.*, IV, pp. 457-458.

(31) Circular no. 191, August 15, 1951: *Ibid.*, V, pp. 298-386.

(32) Circular no. 202, November 1, 1953: *Ibid.*, VI, p. 78.

he said, « of better understanding their proper spirit and, in a way, the spirituality of the Oblates ». (33)

At the time of the 1972 Chapter, his final address to the Oblates, as Superior General, was to be an act of faith in the Congregation, « by the very reason of its devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary ».

I believe above all in our Congregation, by the very reason of its devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Chapter of 1966 expressed its faith in her who is the Patroness and Mother of the Institute, in several articles which affirm vigorously the protection of Mary Immaculate. It is not possible that we deteriorate, that we weaken, that we can no longer serve the Church and God's glory so long as we draw the inspiration for the whole of our lives from that masterpiece which in one article brings together the whole of our spiritual doctrine:

The Congregation is established under the title and patronage of the Most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary. Hence, in the exercise of their ministry the members will foster within themselves a filial devotion towards her as Mother of Christ and of the Church.

They will recognize in this Virgin a type of the faith of the Church, and the perfect model of their own faith, since she received Christ in order that she might share him with the world whose hope he is.

In their missionary joys and sorrows, they will always be closely united to her who is the Mother of Mercy. Wherever their ministry may lead them,

(33) Circular no. 221, August 22, 1965: *Ibid.*, VII, pp. 200-201.

they will strive to instil in the hearts of men a deep devotion to this Immaculate Mother, who is victorious over all evil. (1966 Constitutions and Rules, art. 6). (34)

I will say no more on the past, even though much more remains to be said about it. With the Chapter of 1972, we are already in the present.

II. THE PLACE OF MARY IN OUR LIFE TODAY

Today, what have we? What place has Mary for us? For the Church as a whole, there is talk sometimes of the crisis of Marian devotion, of the rejection of Mary like the rejection of God. « What has happened? » Paul VI asks. And he replies: « This is what has happened together with so many spiritual upheavals: devotion to our Lady does not always find our minds as well disposed and inclined as formerly, as happy to profess it in the depths of our hearts. Are we today as devoted to Mary as the clergy and the good Christian people were formerly?... Has not a wordly outlook, a critical attitude made us less spontaneous, less convinced in our piety towards our Lady? » (35)

(34) Circular no. 247, April 11, 1972: *Ibid.*, VIII, p. 443.

(35) PAUL VI, April 24, 1970, cf. *L'Enseignement de Paul VI* - 1970, pp. 290-291.

Marian devotion in a period of crisis

The Oblates have not escaped this crisis. For a certain number among us, Marian piety — as any other form of piety for that matter — has been strongly shaken. A good number of exercises have disappeared. Those Oblates who held on to them a bit more tenaciously have little by little grown silent; they continue to pray to Mary, but rather discreetly, sometimes with the feeling of walking alone on this path.

And yet! I do have the impression that most of us, despite all these upheavals and questionings, retain in the depths of our hearts a lively love for Mary and a filial trust in her.

A moment ago, in recalling the memory of Father Deschâtelets, I quoted the very fine article 6 of the Constitutions. It was composed — it is good to say so — at the very time of the questionings. And how many other positive signs there are! A few weeks ago, I was going through the answers of Oblates when consulted on the new Constitutions: about fifty answers, personal and communitarian, mentioned Mary. (36) Most of them wanted more to be said on the Blessed Virgin:

We would like to see a more central place given to Mary in the Constitutions, more theological, more comprehensive (United States, no. 12).

(36) 1966 Constitutions and Rules: C.7, C.30, R.36.

I am sorry to see disappear: *model of the faith of the Church* (Rome, no. 14).

The group has the impression that the section on Mary is poor, that Mary merits better treatment (United States, no. 15).

I regret the disappearance of *Mary, Mother of the Church*, (and also) the very consoling paragraph: « It is in great intimacy with her that they will share their sorrows and their joys as missionaries ». It is simple but significant (Canada, no. 41).

As for the third part, on formation, the regret is unanimous: Why is Mary absent from this part of the Constitutions? (France, no. 1; Poland, no. 28; Canada, nos. 32, 33, 34, 37; Italy, no. 49; Spain, no. 60; Chile, no. 61).

Among the answers received, only one is negative (a group of three, no. 132). It is about the Rosary: « Too much emphasis is given to a devotion which was traditional in the past. »

On the whole, these reactions then are very positive. Another significant sign: last November, during its annual meeting at Kandy in Sri Lanka, the International Permanent Formation Committee, wishing to work out guidelines to help formators in their reflection and in the evaluation of programs of formation, spontaneously saw fit to add a paragraph on Mary:

We have been approved by the Church under the title of Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

1) As formators, do we help our candidates to deepen their devotion to Mary in line with the present teaching of the Church? Do we reflect the same attitude in our lives?

2) To what extent do our community structures give Mary a privileged place in our prayer life?

3) What attitude should we develop in the candidates vis-a-vis popular Marian devotions?

I recall another fact. Three years ago I was in Poland, speaking on vocations with the novices. They asked me: « Elsewhere in the Congregation, how do they explain the fact that there are still many novices in Poland? » — I gave three reasons, based on what I hear being generally said: 1) To choose the priesthood and religious life, here, was a public affirmation of one's freedom and of one's opposition to an unacceptable political regime. 2) It is the fruit of a very vital Christian faith: the faith is practised by 85 to 90%. 3) It is perhaps also, according to some, the result of a Church which has remained strongly traditional. — They reacted to these explanations. Among others I recall this remark: « Yes, in Poland, the faith is practised, but we also pray at home. And moreover we have great devotion to the Blessed Virgin. That has its influence on us. »

If therefore you were to ask for my overall impression on devotion to Mary in the Congregation, I should answer: Exteriorly, in many provinces, it appears to have diminished; it has lost a good number of external manifestations which, it seems, no longer satisfy the religious feelings of today, for instance litanies, novenas, scapulars, and even, in certain places, the rosary... whilst at the same time, Mary is loved, people

have confidence in her, they pray to her with all their heart but do not know how to show this exteriorly. The fear of being judged, the present critical attitude of which Paul VI spoke (37) paralyze some. For this reason, today, pilgrimage centres (Lourdes, Fatima, here...), spiritual renewal movements, like the Charismatic Movement, the Focolari Movement... have an important role in the Church: they allow private devotion and the religious need that is always within us to be freely and spontaneously expressed. Today's world, which is no longer Christian, permits no more. And today's world is sometimes found to be present in our religious houses. Such and such a religious, for example, feels more at ease to pray with laity who are deeply Christian than with his confreres: the critical attitudes of the latter stop him short and make him mute.

However, despite this unfavorable climate, one must not be afraid — as Pope John Paul II would tell us — *we must not be afraid* to confess Mary, to confess one's faith in Mary, just like we confess our faith in Jesus Christ.

There are some real problems, certain devotional forms may be out-of-date, but Mary is always there and, despite difficulties, we must exert ourselves to give her, today as in the past, the place to which she is entitled among us: her

(37) Cf. *supra*, note 35.

place at the centre of our life and her place in our apostolate.

Orientations for the future

At the very core of our life, it seems to me that three attitudes are to be cultivated which fit very well with our spirit and with our history.

For us, *the Blessed Virgin* — the Constitutions state it — *should be above all the model of our faith and of our commitment to the service of God*, the model of our oblation. The attitude of Mary, when she said to the Lord: « Be it done unto me according to your word! » and when she received Christ in order to share him with the world, should be the fundamental attitude of every Oblate, in the measure that he becomes aware of God's plan, of God's will in his regard. An attitude of total availability to fulfill the designs of God, just like Mary did. This supposes that we take the time to reflect and to meditate on the life and vocation of Mary.

Secondly, *the Blessed Virgin should be for us the way leading us to be gradually imbued with the mystery of Christ*, so that little by little we ourselves become other Christs, as the Founder wanted of us. (38) This so that we experience through the Blessed Virgin, in the depth of our being, the sentiments which she

(38) 1818 Constitutions and Rules. Cf. *Missions O.M.I.*, 1951, p. 55.

felt in living and meditating in her heart the mystery of Jesus; so that in the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Nativity, of the Public Life, of the Passion and Resurrection of her Son, we may experience the same sentiments which she did as she lived these mysteries. If anyone can lead us to the heart of Christ and help us to share his mystery, it is certainly the Blessed Virgin. And to achieve this, taking part in the liturgical feasts of the Blessed Virgin and the daily recitation of the Rosary are still the most effective means.

Lastly, *the Blessed Virgin should be our friend, a true companion in our missionary life.* Within ourselves we continually live in the presence of someone. People whom we know, whom we love have their dwelling within us and become the habitual companions of our interior life. For us who are Oblates, two persons should habitually be present within us: Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin. And it is in their company and with their sentiments that we should be attentive to people's misery and want to respond thereto.

In the Constitutions, we are asked to live, in union with Mary, our joys and our sufferings as missionaries. The Blessed Virgin is for us a presence, just as she was present among the Apostles at the beginning of the Church. It is a discreet presence — little is said about it —, a constant presence — she is always there —, a

presence which is a support, an encouragement, an inspiration. In our lives as Oblates, the Blessed Virgin should be that enduring and discreet presence, which sustains us and keeps us united to Christ in all our missionary activities.

If we live the reality of Mary in this way, if the Blessed Virgin is present at the centre of our lives, she will easily have *her place in our apostolate*.

How will she be present there? In two ways especially: by prayer to Mary for the people whom we evangelize and by preaching to people the mystery of Mary.

The history of our Institute is filled with both of these realities. Since we were founded we have never ceased praying to Mary: prayers for the poor, prayers for all peoples, prayers for all in need of conversion. I have already given some examples of this; I could add many more. Often there are spontaneous invocations which vary with circumstances and constitute a true prayer from the heart: one prays like one breathes. I have in mind Father Joseph Gérard, Brother Anthony Kowalczyk, Father Belle, Father Trèves. Others like Father Lacombe (39), Bishop Grandin (40), use longer formulae, composed in

(39) Handwritten text on the back of a holy card of Our Lady of Peace, kept in Archives Deschâtelets, Ottawa.

(40) See P.-E. BRETON, *Vital Grandin*, Paris, Fayard, 1960, pp. 241-242.

most trying situations, which likewise point up both their love for the poor and their confidence in Mary. In our apostolate, prayer to Mary is not any less necessary today than it was in the past.

It is equally relevant today as in the past for the Oblates to continue to preach the Blessed Virgin, to make her known and loved. It is an obligation which springs from our very being. One cannot be an Oblate of Mary Immaculate and never speak of the Blessed Virgin. True enough, it is more difficult. We cannot do so in exactly the same way as we used to in the past: mentalities differ, language has changed, theology itself has evolved.

Our language should be simple, direct, exact. We must dare to speak of Mary — speak with faith — while conscious of the limitations of language. (41)

Our language should take into account the progress of Marian theology and of the biblical sciences. To speak of Mary always with reference to Christ and the Church; to speak of Mary in terms of the most certain realities of her life and mystery; to have at heart the need to confirm our fellow Christians in their confidence in Mary and to develop in them a true, deep and enlightened devotion. We have two documents

(41) See A. ROUET, *Parler de Marie face aux mentalités modernes*, in *Cahiers Marials*, 112, 1 avril 1978, pp. 67-82.

as indispensable guides in this matter: Chapter VIII (42) of the dogmatic constitution « *Lumen Gentium* » and the apostolic exhortation *Marialis cultus* of Pope Paul VI.

Lastly, in speaking of Mary, it must be clear to our Christian people that we are aware of the needs, the sufferings, the appeals of today's world: a fairer sharing of wealth, peace in the world, respect for family life and human rights, the integral liberation of man, the dignity of women...

Here, at Cap-de-la-Madeleine, I know that you pray intensely to the Blessed Virgin, you are not afraid to preach about her, you invite people to place their trust in her; and through her, you invite them to return to Jesus Christ and to commit themselves to serve their neighbour. Thus you also bring about deep changes in people's hearts and real conversions.

In the Oblate tradition, the shrines of the Blessed Virgin have no other purpose: to make Mary known and loved, and through her, to reconcile people to each other and to God. (43)

To all my brother Oblates who work here in this national shrine which, from the moment they have been here, has grown and developed, I wish to express the thanks of the Congregation.

(42) *The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and of the Church.*

(43) Act of Visitation of Notre-Dame du Laus, October 18, 1835.

And I would like to add one final word — it is from the Founder to Father Mouchette who was at Notre-Dame de Lumieres: « And do not forget either that in becoming the guardians of this precious shrine... you are charged to pray for the whole Congregation and for me especially. » (44)

(44) Mazenod to Mouchette, August 9, 1853.

VI

THE MISSIONARY ASSOCIATION AND HONORARY OBLATES (1)

Nature of the M.A.M.I. - What it offers us. What we should offer it. - Honorary Oblates.

The session which opens this evening has a double importance. In the first place, its content is important: reflection and exchange on the Missionary Association of Mary Immaculate, on its present situation and role, on its possible development in today's world. Secondly, it is important because of what it signifies. It indicates the wish and the will of the General Council to give a new thrust to the Missionary Association. In 1948, Father Deschâtelets had given a similar impulse to the M.A.M.I. (2) His initiative was fruitful. In several provinces the Association developed and experienced a new burst of vitality. Thereafter, with the passing years, enthusiasm waned in some places — happily not everywhere

(1) The part dealing with the Missionary Association was given at a meeting of provincial directors of the M.A.M.I., at Rome on February 12, 1978. The part dealing with Honorary Oblates is taken from an address given at a reception of such Honorary Oblates in Rome on January 2, 1984.

(2) Circular letter no. 182.

— and the movement became a bit sluggish.

Present-day circumstances to some degree invite us to shake off our lethargy and to set out again with renewed faith and dynamism. God's Spirit speaks to us through these circumstances. Since the Council, in fact, there has been much talk about promoting the laity in the Church, about the need to increase its pastoral and missionary commitments, about new ministries to be entrusted to the laity; there is also talk about new modes of belonging and being associated with religious institutes. This is like a wind gusting through the Church and it is in such a context that we are invited to reflect on the Missionary Association and how it can accomplish its role in today's world. This Association has two particular advantages it must always retain: it is open to all Christians and it is very flexible in its structures and requirements. It takes no one out of his or her own milieu to strike out on a new road to somewhere else; rather, it helps the person to journey better on the road on which the Lord has placed him. It does this by broadening the horizons of heart and interest, opening these up to the needs of the world, by taking part and sharing in the richness and missionary grace of Blessed Eugene de Mazenod.

Nature of the Missionary Association

Here is what Archbishop Dontenwill said when on June 7, 1929, he defined the Association:

The Association of Mary Immaculate is like an extension of our Congregation into the ranks of the faithful. It wants to bring together with us all who befriend our undertakings, our missions especially. Its members intend to work, with the means at their disposal, to support us and to help us in our missionary apostolate. Under the protection of Mary Immaculate, the Mother of Mercy, they become apostolic auxiliaries to the Missionary Oblates; they are, to some degree, part of our religious family, sharing its joys and sorrows, its battles and struggles, rejoicing in our success, making our Congregation ever more known, winning new friends for it, propagating its publications, recruiting vocations for it and supporting its apostolate with their alms. In return, we grant them a share in the our prayers and good works, in the sacrifices and merits of our missionaries; we pray in a special way for them and make our juniorists as well as the faithful of our old and new Christian territories pray for them... Through the Association, we group together across the world people who are devoted to us, look upon our religious family as their own, take to heart its interests and lead more and more vocations to it. (3)

Let us take note of the expressions: « an extension of our Congregation into the ranks of the faithful »; its members become « the apostolic auxiliaries of the Missionary Oblates »; « they are, to some degree, part of our religious family »; « they look upon our religious family as their own ».

They are laity, fully remain laity; at the same time, however, they have the heart of an Oblate

(3) Circular no. 141, pp. 3-4.

and are, to some degree, part of the Oblate family.

In his circular letter of January 25, 1848, Father Deschâtelets repeats the essence of the same formulas and makes more precise the aims, obligations and advantages of the Association.

In this introduction I do not want to deal with all these points — that will be the work of your meeting — but I do want to underline two points: 1) what our brothers and sisters who are laity and members of the M.A.M.I. bring to us; 2) what we, their Oblate brothers who are priests and religious, should give to them.

What the M.A.M.I. brings to us

The Association's members bring to us, first of all, a definite interest in our works, our missionary activity, our vocation apostolate, the growth of our religious family. This they do through prayer, enlightened promotion, devotedness to our works, financial support.

All of these benefits are easy to understand; they are especially external in nature. There is, however, another type of support they offer us: it is more important and much more interior, more spiritual in nature. I deeply experienced it at the time of the beatification of Bishop de Mazenod. It is their faith in the Congregation

and the way they see the Congregation. Their faith in the Congregation is a support for many Oblates and in a certain way strengthens our own faith. Their outlook on the Congregation is often a more objective view, one that is more detached from the details and pettiness of our daily internal existence, and it purifies our own outlook and makes us more capable to marvel and properly admire the wonderful things that exist in our Congregation. We need these laity for our own good health!

What we ought to give to the M.A.M.I. members

For our part, as Oblates, we can and ought to give much to the M.A.M.I. members. As Circular no. 182 explicitly says: in becoming members, they have a right to our special prayers and « share in the merits of the prayers, suffrages and good works of all the Oblates ». (4) This is already an important contribution, but our duty is not fully accomplished thereby. When we accept these men and women as Missionary Associates, we undertake to help them grow in the interior life and in Oblate spirituality.

Father Deschâtelets insisted very much on this point in his circular letter of January 25, 1948. Have we sufficiently taken into account the following words of his:

(4) Circular no. 182, p. 7.

The training of the Associates to a truly Christian way of life, is what we consider to be the first and most important purpose of the Association. The Church has placed real treasures of graces in our hands for the benefit of our Associates. We have a Mass offered for them every day and reserve a share in our merits for them. When we consider that our Associates are, in some manner, a part of our religious family, then we realise that it is our duty to work seriously at their sanctification and to develop in them a real missionary spirit. Associates are our cooperators, and therefore it is along the lines of our own spirituality that they are to be trained, which means especially two things: devotion to Mary Immaculate and zeal for souls... We should urge our Associates to an interior life, but always in conformity with the duties of their state in life. This spirituality should show itself in their meetings, in the talks that are given them in these monthly meetings, in the services conducted especially for them, in the page reserved for them every month in our mission magazines. (5)

He recalled the need to work especially in forming an « elite » which constitutes a corps of exceptionally « Active Members » within the Missionary Association. « Generally speaking, the vitality of the various local "Associations" depends on the these "Active Members". They form the basic and indispensable framework of the Association. » (6)

Herein lies a vast missionary field that is open before us. The Association is open to all

(5) Circular no. 182, pp. 10-11.

(6) Circular no. 182, p. 11.

Christians, the young and the less young — have we perhaps lacked interest and imagination in appealing to the young? — and its first duty is to help these Christians grow in the spiritual life and the Oblate spirit.

Honorary Oblates

Please allow me to add a few words about another group of the Congregation's Associates. Some of these latter were members of the M.A.M.I. and others were not. It is a rather restricted group and includes in its ranks priests, religious men and women, but especially laity. I am speaking of the Honorary Oblates.

These are persons who have shown their attachment to the Congregation by exceptional witness and service over a long period of time. Their devotedness and loyalty to us can withstand any test. They have truly adopted the Oblates as their own family.

Such people are a great support for the Congregation, and from the beginning the Congregation has recognized this. There is even an official character to this recognition: she accepts these persons into her ranks in the quality of Honorary Oblates and, at the same time, gives them a full share in the prayers, merits and good works of the Congregation all over the world.

Our Founder himself did this in regard to great benefactors to the Institute. We have some

traces of this in his correspondence: in 1842, Mr. and Mrs. Berthelet; in 1848, the Hospital Sisters of Saint Joseph in Montreal; and there are others.

On May 24, 1848, he wrote to the Hospital Sisters of Saint Joseph: « This, my dear Ladies, is why, after I learned of the constant charity and zeal you have lavished on the Oblates who are established in Canada, we want to give you a solemn and lasting testimony of our gratitude. Entrusting ourselves to God's mercy and to the powerful intercession of the most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary, our Patroness, by the authority that God has given us despite our unworthiness, we grant you perpetually a full and complete share in all the holy sacrifices, prayers, penances, all the works of piety and zeal which by God's grace are being accomplished and will be accomplished in the future in our different houses in America as well as in the other parts of the world. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. »

In its plenary session of May-June 1977, the General Council saw fit to lay down certain precise criteria for appointing Honorary Oblates. They are as follows:

1. Only the Superior General can name someone to be an Honorary Oblate. He will consider nomination on the recommendation of a provincial, who must forward a *curriculum vitae* of the per-

- sons recommended. The award is not given posthumously.
2. The person nominated for this reward should be distinguished by a record of devoted service to the Congregation and its mission in the Church extended over a number of years.
 3. The life of the person recommended should give some evidence of personal identification with the ideals and goals of the Congregation. (7)

(7) *Acta Administrationis Generalis*, vol. III, 2a pars, 1977, pp. 294-295.

Part TWO

OBLATE MINISTRIES

VII

UNITY OF SPIRIT AND VARIETY OF MINISTRIES (1)

Two basic attitudes. - Variety of ministries.

Our Rules say: « Preaching missions at home and sending missionaries abroad have been traditionally central to our apostolate. There is no ministry, however, which is foreign to us, provided we never lose sight of the Congregation's primary purpose: to evangelize the most abandoned » (R.2).

Two basic attitudes

The Congregation exists for the mission, and for us this mission is evangelizing the poor. Prior to any specification of a particular missionary activity, every Oblate is animated by two basic attitudes.

The first is an attitude of faith. The Oblate is disposed and open to hear the appeals for salvation rising from the world of the poor. Sociological analysis can be a help to make this

(1) Intervention made at a session of the European Conference of the Mission, on June 25, 1975, at Vermicino, Italy.

perception more complete, more accurate, more objective, it can add complementary dimensions, but it cannot replace it, for this perception is first of all in the order of faith. For the Christian world today and for many Oblates, this perception is especially sensitive to social oppression, to what is referred to as « the collective sin ».

The second is an attitude of love. The Oblate is disposed to respond to these appeals in a Gospel fashion by proclaiming Jesus Christ, in one form or another, to the point of giving his life for his brothers in view of helping them find their full liberation in Christ.

Variety of Ministries

The concrete forms of activity vary and will always vary a great deal according to social milieu, country, time. The religious vocabulary and sensitivities are not the same from one period to another, in one culture and in another.

The first way of proclaiming Jesus Christ is through personal and community witness. The quality of life led by each Oblate and by his community is of major importance. What is our style of life, our concrete attitude to the light of the Gospel and in the presence of the poor?

Preaching the Gospel, giving missions to the poor, with the mobility that this requires, were the privileged ways at the beginning of the Con-

gregation. These have to remain such even if today the situation is quite different: many Oblates, in fact, are engaged in works where the structures are rather permanent, especially in parishes.

The General Council has begun to reflect on this question. It emphasizes the following points:

- First, we are to be missionaries to the poor wherever we may happen to be.
- We must evaluate our apostolic commitments and strive gradually to free ourselves from those which correspond no longer or very little to the Congregation's missionary charism.
- We must encourage, originate and support new ways of evangelizing the poor.
- We must promote the personal and community religious renewal of Oblates.

This missionary concern for the poor and this constant determination for spiritual renewal should be found everywhere and in each of our ministries. I would say that these elements constitute a bond of unity, a family trait.

The texts that follow illustrate this. They touch only upon certain ministries of the Congregation, that is, those about which I had the opportunity of stating my thought in greater detail. (2)

(2) On the Oblates and the formation of priests, cf. *Letters to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate*, 1984, pp. 150-157.

VIII

THE MISSION « AD GENTES » (1)

Importance of the mission « ad gentes ». - The General Administration's attitude.

I would like to stress two points in this article: the importance within the Institute of the foreign missions or the mission « ad gentes » and the General Administration's attitude towards it.

Importance of the mission « ad gentes »

It is almost impossible to picture our Congregation without its missionary activities « ad gentes ». That is, moreover, the image we have within the Church. Even though we are not exclusively a missionary congregation like the White Fathers or the Scheutists, a rather large number of Oblates are dedicated to the mission « ad gentes »: about 2000, that is to say, a good third of our membership. This puts us in fifth or sixth place among the Congregations of men who send personnel into the mission fields.

(1) Text composed for a special issue of the periodical *Vie Oblate Life* on the mission « ad gentes »; it was published in *Vie Oblate Life*, 1979, pp. 85-91.

Furthermore, the foreign missions, especially those to the Indians and Eskimos in the Far North, have made us known and appreciated within the Church. I know, for example, in what high esteem we are held by the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, an esteem that goes back a long while. Pius XI especially, and Cardinal Van Rossum, C.Ss.R., Prefect of this Sacred Congregation from 1918 to 1932, have shown the Oblates an exceptional confidence in this regard. Why? The reason, so it would seem, is the total availability the Institute has shown in responding to the Church's appeal in favour of the poorest and most difficult missions, those which others either could not or did not dare to accept. Another reason is our perseverance, our faithfulness in staying on in impossible conditions. « We know quite well, » Pius XI told the Capitulars of 1926, « what the Oblates have accomplished in the Far North of Canada, in Southern Africa and at the Equator. They always go to wherever there is some particular feature of danger, challenge and fatigue, difficult climate, and sacrifice, and they are always there first. We know that the Oblates make this their specialty: it is as glorious as it is difficult. » (2)

This missionary spirit — « the soul of your soul », Pius XI again said to the members of the 1932 Chapter (3) — comes to us from the Foun-

(2) Cf. *Missions*, 1926, p. 406.

(3) Cf. *Missions*, 1932, p. 675.

der and the first Oblates. From 1818 onwards, in the very first text of the *Constitutions*, there is a passage which expresses it: « They are called to be the Saviour's co-workers, the co-redeemers of mankind; and even though, because of their present small number and the more urgent needs of the people around them, they have to limit the scope of their zeal, for the time being, to the poor of the countryside and others, their ambition should, in its holy aspirations, embrace the vast expanse of the whole earth. » (4) Father de Mazenod's companions (Pascal Ricard, Hippolyte Guibert, Charles Albin, Jean-Joseph Touche,...) were filled with this spirit and urged the Founder to take on a foreign mission as soon as opportunity allowed. (5)

The General Chapter of 1831 committed itself more definitely in this direction. « A proposal was studied requesting that the General Chapter express to the Most Reverend Father General the desire entertained by the members of the Society, namely, *that some of our members be sent to the foreign missions as soon as he will judge the occasion to be favorable*. Informed of the dispositions of a great many in the Society who long for the time when they

(4) Cf. *Missions*, 1951, p. 15.

(5) For a more detailed treatment of this matter, see Albert PERBAL, O.M.I., « Eugène de Mazenod reste marqué par sa vocation missionnaire », in *Etudes Oblates*, 1960, pp. 23-73.

will be able to carry afar the knowledge and love of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Chapter thought it good to associate itself to their holy intent and to be their advocate, and this all the more so because it considers this proposal extremely important for the glory of God and for the good of the Society. Consequently the proposal was carried unanimously... »

Ten years later the foundation in Canada confirmed this orientation and made it a factual reality. All wholeheartedly welcomed the request of the bishop of Montreal. In his mandating letter of September 20, 1841, the Founder mentions the deep motivation that is relevant here: « since... the spirit of our Institute is to procure the salvation of souls wherever God calls us. » (6) Finally, in his *Instruction on Foreign Missions*, the Founder stated: « Foreign Missions are consequently to be counted as having an obligatory place among the holy occupations of our Society. » (7)

This missionary orientation was never called into question during the entire length of our history. On the contrary, it has always been both a sign and a source of our vitality. As we said to the Provincials at the end of the 1974 General Chapter, « The mission "ad gentes" is and

(6) *Letters to North America*. Cf. OBLATE WRITINGS, vol. I, p. 8.

(7) *Instruction of our Venerated Founder on Foreign Missions*, Introduction.

remains essential to the Congregation's life. » Nevertheless, like the Church and the world, it has entered into a new phase. It requires no less generosity and heroism than in times past, but it faces other difficulties than before.

The General Administration's attitude

The present issue of *Vie Oblate Life* will certainly facilitate a better understanding of the General Administration's attitude in this regard. For my part, I will limit myself here to indicate the basic dispositions which animate us.

First of all, the General Administration is quite disposed and determined to pursue, even to promote, our commitment to the mission « ad gentes ». The reasons for this attitude are as follows:

In the first place, to be faithful to our mission of evangelizing the poor. The document on the « Missionary Outlook » says this clearly: « We will never forget that the worst form of poverty, as our Asian brothers have reminded us, is not to know Christ. And that today two-thirds of the world's population still awaits first proclamation of the Good News of Salvation. We will attempt to proclaim the Gospel to those who have yet to hear it for the first time, as well as to those who once lived by the Gospel but no longer feel the need for Christ's presence in their lives. » (8)

(8) 1972 General Chapter: *Missionary Outlook*, no. 15, b.

Secondly, to respond to the urgent appeals of the Church which are very numerous. Here, for example, are those we have received in Rome since 1973: South Korea (1973); Madagascar (1975 and 1977); Gabon (1976); Kenya (1976); Burundi (1977); Republic of Central Africa (1977); Ivory Coast (1974 and 1975); Columbia (1974 and 1975); Honduras (1975); the Marquises Islands (1977); Papua and New Guinea (1978); Iceland (1976). To this list we must add the requests to which the Congregation has already given an affirmative response: Bangladesh (1973), Porto Rico (1975), Senegal (1976), Borneo (1977), Norway (1977), Tahiti (1977) and French Guyana (1977). When we consider the demography of these different regions and the current evolution that is taking place, we cannot help but think that the future of the Church and of the world will be decided in these continents (Africa, Asia, South America) which are still being called mission territories.

Finally, to promote the Institute's vitality: it is an international, universal institute and needs wide open breathing space in order to live. To concentrate exclusively on oneself, on one's own province, to put limits to our zeal can only be fatal to us. Father Guibert reminded the Founder of this in 1832: « If our mission in Africa should not succeed, we beg you, Most Reverend Father, to consider Asia or America. This is a real need of the times: a Congregation being born needs a

tremendous challenge to its zeal: leisure would be fatal to us... » (9) This holds true also today when the Congregation is struggling to be « re-born » in a new world. If a province wants to grow and develop, it must open itself to the mission « ad gentes ». Otherwise it will become the cause of its own destruction. Missionary universality is at the very core of our existence. This does not, of course, mean that there are not numerous difficulties in the way of a « renaissance » or in adapting to a new world.

And this is precisely our second attitude: to encourage and as much as possible assist the adaptation to the new world we have entered: the new world of de-colonization and of developing nationalisms, the new world of ecumenism and of the promotion of the laity, the new world of strengthening the local Churches and of an extended concept of evangelization, the new world of the struggle for human rights and a more equitable sharing of natural wealth... The General Administration is aware of all these changes, as it also is of the Congregation's limitations, especially in young and qualified personnel. But all this does not frighten the General Administration. It cannot forget the lessons of the past and it knows very well that the challenges of the present have to be taken up with faith and courage. As it travels along this road, besides

(9) Quoted in J. PAGUELLE DE FOLLENAY, *Vie du Cardinal Guibert*, t. I, p. 272.

Gaudium et spes and the Council's decree *Ad gentes*, it takes its inspiration from the most recent documents of the Church: *Evangelii nuntiandi* and the *Directives for the Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious in the Church*.

The General Administration's concrete commitment will take the form of actions like the following: (10)

- 1) providing for the strengthening of young Churches by inviting the missionaries to promote local vocations and the ministries of the Christian laity and, when it is possible and necessary, by sending new missionaries;
- 2) proposing new foundations to all provinces who are able to undertake them, whether these be older provinces or new ones to whom God is giving vocations;
- 3) encouraging missionaries to incarnate themselves as much as possible in the areas into which they are sent, to place themselves fully at the service of the local Church; at the same time, favouring occasional assistance by sending them specialists;

(10) In this regard, it is useful to re-read the appendix to the second Communique of the General Council, in *Acta Administrationis Generalis O.M.I.*, 1972, pp. 99-108.

- 4) promoting ongoing formation of missionaries and native Oblates, either by sending specialists or by giving assistance to local sessions or by financing studies abroad;
- 5) sensitizing the entire Congregation to the problems of the Third World, especially those relating to development, unjust exploitation, and apartheid;
- 6) developing and facilitating financial sharing between provinces, especially in favor of the Third World;
- 7) promoting an open and sincere collaboration with the bishops who are responsible for the mission, and moving in the direction of establishing clear contracts with them;
- 8) interesting the lay friends of the Oblates in Christian countries to cooperate spiritually and financially in the Church's missionary activity.

The Congregation, committed as it is to serving the mission « ad gentes », finds that there is far more work to be done than it can do. « Your numerically large Institute, » Paul VI said on December 4, 1974, « constitutes a great hope for the Church for a century and a half now... » It is up to us not to disappoint this hope that the Church places in us!

IX

RETREAT HOUSES (1)

A bit of history. - What I expect from this ministry.

Right from the very beginning of the Institute, this ministry was in some way foreseen and wanted by the Founder. Its concrete form was limited, but its principle had been established. In the first Constitutions and Rules of 1818, Father de Mazenod wrote: « The aim of the Institute... is to bring together secular priests who will live in common and strive to imitate the virtues of our Saviour Jesus Christ, in order to devote themselves principally to preaching the divine word to the poor. »

He then specified how this was to be achieved: « by missions, various forms of catechism, by retreats or other spiritual exercises. » Therefore, it is first of all a matter of going to the people in the rural areas and in places most deprived of spiritual help. For priests, however, he added this: « The house of the Mission will always be

(1) Address given at a session for Oblate Retreat Centres, on May 21, 1982, at Mississauga in Canada. It has been published in OMI DOCUMENTATION, no. 116/83 (April 1983), pp. 4-10.

an open refuge and like a saving pool in which (the priests) will come to bathe and begin a new life... » (2)

Thus, in regard to priests, from the very outset our house — and at that time we had only one — was seen as a retreat house: priests could come to it for spiritual self-renewal.

Eight years later, in 1826, at the time when Leo XII approved the Institute and we had four houses (Aix, Laus, Marseilles, Nîmes), laity as well as priests were given the opportunity of making the spiritual exercises (of a retreat) with us. Here is what article 8 of the 1826 Constitutions says: « That is why the missionaries will, when they consider it useful, give retreat exercises to priests, to ecclesiastics, and even to laity, be it within our own house or elsewhere. »

As early as 1824 Father de Mazenod himself gave one of these retreats to some 150 men at Nice. And on March 5, 1826, when in Rome, he wrote to Father Tempier concerning the future novitiate in Marseilles:

I also will be sorry to renounce the hope of being able to give retreats in the house; they do so much good. I know that in France their benefits are unknown and confessors do not trouble themselves to recommend them; but even if we would only bring together half a dozen persons, perhaps the liking for them will catch on and God knows with what profit for souls! But, if we are going to have novices in the house, what room

(2) 1818 Constitutions and Rules, 1ere partie, ch. I.

will remain to lodge the retreatants? If we were sure this work would succeed, we would have to be able to buy the neighboring houses. These thoughts come to my mind as I go about the streets of Rome pursuing our affairs. Adieu, I embrace you all. (3)

From this beginning we can trace how, little by little, the ministry of closed retreats and of retreats houses continued to develop in the Congregation.

It was one of the aims in the foundation, in 1837, of Notre-Dame de Lumieres: « ...giving spiritual retreats to priests who will be very glad to meditate for a few days in solitude, in the shelter of the Blessed Virgin's shrine. » (4) Retreats were also given at Notre-Dame de l'Osier (5), at Notre-Dame de Pontmain (6), at Saint Andelain. (7)

In 1861, it was Ireland's turn. After studying this kind of work in Brittany and in Vendee, Father Robert Cooke wanted to establish it in the new house he had built at Inchicore. « (This house), » he wrote, « while providing suitable lodgings for the community, is meant to serve as a retreat house for priests and laity. » (8) He

(3) Mazenod to Tempier, March 5, 1826. Cf. OBLATE WRITINGS, vol. VII, p. 51.

(4) Document of Archbishop Célestin of Avignon, June 9, 1837, quoted in *Missions*, 1874, p. 180.

(5) Cf. *Missions*, 1867, p. 392.

(6) Cf. *Missions*, 1879, p. 348; 1892, pp. 461-462.

(7) Cf. *Missions*, 1883, pp. 180-181.

(8) Report of December 24, 1861, quoted in *Missions*, 1862, p. 9.

mentioned this subject again in 1863, 1864, and 1865. (9)

In these reports we see how much hope Father Cooke placed in retreats and the joy he experienced at the first retreat successes. In 1864 he wrote:

The house of Inchicore has seen the beginning of the important work of retreats. This was the principal purpose of its foundation. The first general retreat took place in the month of October 1863. From that time on, we can count more than 124 gentlemen who have taken part in our exercises of piety. Among them we find several of the chief merchants, magistrates, city mayors, young doctors, seminary students, and others. The working class is not excluded from our sessions. Some Dublin merchants have made it their duty to send their employees to follow the instructions and retreat exercises.

Before the feast of the Immaculate Conception, we had a First Holy Communion retreat in which some forty children belonging to the best families in Dublin and environs took part. This retreat did a lot of good, and the parents were very pleased with the results. Numerous and noteworthy conversions already give witness to the blessings the Lord is showering on retreat work. A number of fathers of families and young men, who in their way of life were neglecting their religious duties, have become fervent Christians after spending a few days at Inchicore... Our house, therefore, offers a haven for repentance; but it is also frequented by some elite souls who go there to acquire a fuller knowledge of their duties. In the month of August, we will be having,

(9) Cf. *Missions*, 1863, p. 290; 1864, pp. 518-520; 1865, pp. 614-615.

on the recommendation of the Archbishop of Dublin, a general retreat for priests. And so we will be including all the different social classes.

In Canada, the first closed retreat was given on the Isle of Saint Paul, near Montreal, by Father Telmon, from April 14 to April 18, 1842. (10) In 1911, Father J.-M. Rodrigue Ville-neuve launched this work in Ottawa at Saint Joseph's Scholasticate. (11)

We can follow the subsequent development of this ministry in the reports made for the General Chapters of 1926, 1953, 1959 and 1966. There were many provinces, perhaps some twenty or so, which had retreat houses. At that time, a good number of Oblates were committed to preaching, either full-time or nearly so. Then from the years 1965-1968 onwards, the crisis began to set in: there were changes in pastoral practice, difficulties in recruiting retreatants, a scarcity of preachers... These difficulties were not everywhere the same. Nevertheless, while we still have an impressive number of houses, it is clear that the reality underlying them has changed a great deal. In some instances, these houses are primarily vacation locales for lower income families and only occasionally retreat centres; in other instances, they are places for solitude and desert experience; others receive as many con-

(10) Cf. Gaston CARRIERE, *Histoire documentaire de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée dans l'Est du Canada*, t. 1, p. 119.

(11) Cf. *Missions*, 1928, pp. 37 sq.

gresses of professional groups as they do retreatants; in others, preaching remains the primary concern, and this in a great variety of ways.

In the six Oblate regions, the United States has the largest number of retreat centres and houses: 15; Canada has 9; Europe has 10, four of them in Germany; Africa has 4, Asia 2, and Latin America 2.

What I expect from this ministry

At the beginning of this talk, I told you that we consider retreat houses to be, in a certain way, privileged places for evangelization. They are fully in line with the purpose of the Congregation whose first mission is evangelization, especially the evangelizing of the poor, of the most abandoned.

To the evangelizing currently being done in parishes, in preaching and in parish missions, and in the other ministries, retreat houses and centres add certain features that highly favor the growth and strengthening of the faith, namely, an atmosphere of recollection, prayer, direct contact with a priest, and exchanges in small groups.

In the Preface to the Constitutions the Founder says: « We must spare no effort to extend the Saviour's empire..., we must lead men to act like human beings..., then like Christians and, finally, we must help them to become saints. » This points out the degrees one can distinguish

in the growth of a spiritual man. A retreat house adapts itself to the level or degree of each person. I do think, however, that it has a special role to play in regard to the higher levels: it should aim not only to convert people, but to help them grow spiritually, to become true adults in the Faith.

A wide-ranging variety of people come to retreat houses. Often, however, the men and women who come are people who already possess a certain degree of Christian living and are able to wield a definite influence in their own milieu. Priests, religious men and women come to retreat houses: in them, they should be able to receive a strengthening of their vocation as well as a new impetus for their journey to God and their service to the Church. Laity from different social milieux also come to retreat centres. At a time when the Church is talking so much about the promotion and ministries of the Christian laity, these men and women should be able to find theological enlightenment in these centres, spiritual support and the missionary openness that is indispensable for today's adult Christian.

In 1934, Cardinal Villeneuve, O.M.I., Archbishop of Quebec and an ardent apostle of retreat houses, pointed out to his clergy that a general rebirth of faith could come only from fervent Christians who would act as a leaven raising up the mass of the faithful. And he added: « It is

the closed retreat that forms these apostles, these elite Christians.» (12)

There is no doubt that centres such as yours can wield a profound influence on the life of today's Church and in the formation of a Christian laity that is truly committed and solid in its faith.

To achieve this goal, we must insist that these houses be and remain genuine centres of evangelization.

To be quite concrete, allow me to tell you what, as Superior General, I expect from this ministry in the Congregation. I know you are already doing most of these things, but the fact of recalling them will be both a confirmation and a support.

1. First of all, be flexible and open in accepting groups. There certainly is no lack in variety: Renewal in the Spirit, Focolarini, Legion of Mary, Marriage Encounters, Curtillos, Alcoholics Anonymous and also marginal groups looking for understanding, compassion, spiritual freedom... Do take care, however, that the goal always remains a deepening of their faith, and, as much as possible, give preference to groups that are liable to have a definite influence on today's society. I know that, speaking very

(12) Circular letter to the Clergy of the Archdiocese of Quebec, February 2, 1934.

practically, your choices are often limited and that you have to live... the house has to be kept operating. Nevertheless, it must not happen that financing the operating costs becomes the main criterion for deciding how the house is going to be used: spiritually speaking, that would be a disaster.

2. Set your hearts on you yourselves doing the preaching and on assuring for your house an adequate, well qualified team of Oblates who evangelize. This is a very important point. Our vocation is not administrating or operating retreat houses to which other religious come to preach. No. Our vocation requires that we ourselves proclaim God's Word to men and women, that we communicate it to them in « a simple and direct language » (R.7) after we have ourselves contemplated and prayed it. It is also our vocation to advise people, to guide them individually, if necessary, by spiritual direction and in the sacrament of Reconciliation.

Maintaining and developing a retreat house cannot be the task of one man alone, such work requires a team. It demands a serious commitment from the province which must foresee and prepare the Oblate personnel needed for this work.

3. Make a special effort to bring your retreatants into direct contact with Jesus Christ

through prayer, reflection on the Gospel, participation in the sacraments of Reconciliation and of the Eucharist. Such contact is indispensable and will always remain the essential element in a retreat: coming face to face with Jesus Christ, discerning what he expects from me, and committing myself in regard to him.

Often we remain merely on the way to this. Our current psychological methods risk to keep us on the level of a purely human ideal: we help people to « act like human beings », to be well adjusted and free from complexes, but we do not always go further and help them become true « Christians » and « saints » as the Preface to our Constitutions asks us to do.

4. Still more concretely, your houses ought to be special places for the formation of consciences. Everyone today is repeatedly saying that the world is undergoing a profound value-crisis: each individual is inclined to make up his own truth and to establish his own criteria for morality. And yet, there is only one truth, it is objective, and it alone, as Jesus has told us, can make a person free. (13)

In this area, an immense and extremely difficult task faces you, that of helping men

(13) John 8:31-32.

and women attain an authentic spiritual freedom, forming them to true discernment, one that is based on truth and not on popular slogans and public opinion. That is how persons achieve a healthy autonomy and become adult in the faith.

5. Again, to be very concrete, open your retreatants to the needs of the present-day world and to the Church's great concerns: the promotion of justice and peace, the need of sharing, of assisting immigrants, ecumenism, the fostering of priestly and religious vocations, without forgetting Oblate vocations. We cannot remain indifferent to these concerns and, according to circumstances, it is your ministry to sensitize your retreatants to the needs of today's world.

I have no hesitation in saying that your ministry is one of the finest in the Congregation. It is also one of the most difficult. It requires a great love and respect for the retreatant; it demands an accurate and deep knowledge of Christian doctrine and of the Scriptures; it presupposes a comprehensive vision of today's world and its needs. And over and above all this, it requires the gift of spiritual discernment as well as the talent of expressing yourself well, clearly and simply, in such a way that you will be understood by people and can really communicate with them.

X

PARISH MINISTRY (1)

People who are poor. - A life-style that is simple and of the poor. - Community and missionary concerns.

A large number of Oblates in most of the Congregation's provinces work in parish ministry. We have been debating the place this ministry should have within our Institute since the days of the Founder. Excellent studies have been written on this matter, among others that of Emilien Lamirande, published in *Etudes Oblates* in 1964. (2) I will not go over this ground again; I prefer instead to concentrate on a guideline given by Pope John Paul II during his trip to Brazil two years ago.

After pointing out that priest religious should « prove capable of working side by side, in a loyal and disinterested way, with diocesan priests, whose tasks, » the Pope said, « they are called

(1) Address given at Villa Cavalletti, near Rome, Italy, on September 8, 1982, during a study session for Oblates of the province of Italy involved in parish ministry. It has been published in OMI DOCUMENTATION, no. 119/83 (August 1983), pp. 1-4.

(2) pp. 273-290.

to share, not by way of exception but constantly, » he added this:

In the pursuit of collaboration there is a frequent temptation to dilute as much as possible, almost to the point of extinction, that which characterizes and identifies religious life and religious. It is clear that this is not helpful either for religious life or for collaboration. A priest religious, immersed in the apostolate alongside diocesan priests, should clearly show by his attitude that he is a religious. The community should be able to sense it. The same should be said of a religious who is not a priest, or of a sister, in their respective collaboration with lay people. (3)

In concrete terms, what does this mean for us Oblates? We are, in actual fact, involved in parish ministry and will be for a long time to come. Are we carrying it out in an Oblate way? What special quality ought we to bring to it? These are questions I would like to address in this talk.

People who are poor

First, regarding *the people* who make up the parishes we accept, we ought to have a strong preference for parishes in a poor milieu, those which others would rather not have.

Our Constitutions are clear on this point: « Wherever we work, our mission is especially

(3) July 3, 1980.

to those people whose condition cries out for salvation and for the hope which only Jesus Christ can fully bring. These are the poor with their many faces; we give them our preference. » (C.5)

This principle has guided our Congregation throughout its history. To give but one example, here is a quotation from newly-elected Father Labouré's circular letter of December 3, 1932. He wrote:

If the option is ever given us of choosing between a fine, splendid and rich work in one of our metropolitan centres and a poor, abandoned, discouraging, difficult work, be it in our red suburbs or in foreign missions, let us not hesitate: let us take what is unnoticed, ignored, painful. Are we not the pioneers of the Gospel, the missionaries to the poor, the sons of Bishop de Mazenod? In a word, are we not Oblates? (4)

Such policy is applicable at two levels. At the 'province level, when deciding to accept or retain responsibility for a parish: to give first choice to the poorest, most forsaken areas. At the level of the Oblate parish personnel: while dedicating themselves to serving all the parishioners and every group within the parish, the pastor and his assistants should always be particularly concerned with the poor among them; people on the fringe, immigrants, drug victims, broken families... Were an Oblate to lose this

(4) *Circulaires administratives*, t. 4, p. 245.

concern for such persons, he would cease being an Oblate at heart.

A life-style that is simple and of the poor

Secondly, regarding our *behaviour* and *the way we go about our work*. As Oblates in a parish, we ought to pursue a life-style that is both simple and of the poor, free from any seeking of personal gain or advancement of self (C.21). Our aim is to be good servants whose love is completely unselfish (C.2). It is natural that this be outwardly evident.

It is also natural that our parishioners should realize that we form a community, a family, a group of men strongly united in « obedience and charity » around Jesus, « truly interdependent » (C.38), men who do not put one another down but rather support and encourage each other, who pray together, who pool their money and God-given talents and, thanks to such sharing, radiate the joy and warmth of the Gospel. (CC. 39, 41).

Another special mark of our way of doing things will be our closeness to people, our deep and sincere love for them. Our Rule requires that we « love others as Jesus loves them » (R.12). We will also « take into account their values and aspirations » (C.8), « encouraging them to undertake ministries and to shoulder the responsibilities which are properly theirs in the Christian community » (R.6).

Community and missionary concerns

Thirdly, with regard to the *direction our parish ministry should take*, three things are required of us Oblates:

To begin with, we are to make our parishes into real communities, living communities whose Christians know and love one another and have a spirit of sharing. As our Constitutions say: « We have as our goal to establish Christian communities and Churches deeply rooted in the local culture and fully responsible for their own development and growth » (C.7).

We are required also to pay special attention to the teaching of religion, to catechesis. Oblates are men « set apart for the Gospel » (C.2), to teach people « who Jesus Christ is » (Preface). Oblate parishes should be outstanding for the quality of religious teaching and preaching available there. In this teaching, the Blessed Virgin Mary should always hold a special place. « Wherever our ministry takes us, we will strive to instill genuine devotion to the Immaculate Virgin » (C.10).

There remains, lastly, one other feature that will distinguish Oblate parish ministry: a missionary outlook and the inculcating of a sense of justice. « We are a missionary Congregation, » our Constitutions also say (C.5). This should be evident in our parishes. Christians we minister to should be ready to respond to the world's

needs, to see beyond their personal or purely local concerns and develop a missionary mentality that is truly universal, one which embraces the whole world.

At the heart of this missionary concern, we are called upon to emphasize and develop a sense of justice in our parishioners: helping them to open their eyes to conditions of injustice and exploitation that millions of men, women and children are suffering in the world, urging them to contribute in some way toward establishing a more just society.

Whatever their work, Oblates will collaborate, according to their vocation and by every means compatible with the Gospel, in changing all that is a cause of oppression and poverty. They thereby help to create a society based on the dignity of the human person created in the image of God. (R.9)

This is what I wanted to tell you about Oblates and their parish ministry! If you thoroughly abide in these values, and if you do so in a spirit of obedience and availability, ready always to go wherever your superiors may send you, then you need not worry about your Oblate identity. You are true Oblates, the kind our Blessed Founder wanted.

XI

ACTION FOR JUSTICE (1)

Some principles. - Practical guidelines.

How is action promoting justice integrated into the mission of evangelizing the poor? I reply briefly to this question by recalling certain general principles and by pointing out some practical orientations. A presentation made by Father Bartolomeo Sorge, S.J., at the Union of Superiors General (2) has helped me in my reflection.

Some principles

1. Promotion of *Justice is an integral part of proclaiming the Gospel* (3) and therefore of the Church's mission. The Church's mission, however, is not to be reduced to the promotion of justice: it is broader than that. Hers is a mission of salvation accomplished through the proclamation of God's Word, through the administration of the Sacraments, through the « diakonia » or service.

(1) Work document prepared for the plenary session of the General Council, Rome, January 1977.

(2) Circular no. 28/76.

(3) 1971 Synod of Bishops.

Action in favour of justice is especially linked to the proclamation of the Word and to the « diakonia ».

2. Every priest, every religious, like every Christian, has a *responsibility* in this promotion of justice. « Together with the entire Church, priests are obliged, to the utmost of their ability, to select a definite pattern of action, when it is a question of the defense of fundamental human rights, the promotion of the full development of persons, and the pursuit of the cause of peace and justice; the means must indeed always be consonant with the Gospel. » (4)
3. There is thus an obligation for each religious and priest to be committed to the promotion of justice. How is he to fulfill this duty? Father Sorge, speaking of the religious in general, indicates a *triple service*: prophetic, critical, educative:
 - a) « *Prophetic*: being *signs* in the world of justice, unity, peace and a life of love, signs that are intelligible and credible. » In this connection we could give the example of Mother Teresa and her sisters: a religious life that is truly poor, simple, centred on God and fully given

(4) 1971 Synod of Bishops: *The Ministerial Priesthood*, Part II, I, 2, b.

to the most neglected. The world has understood her witness. Does our own life, as we actually live it here and now, still bear a similar witness?

- b) « *Critical*: by open denunciation of injustices, and by taking one's stance on the side of the poor and oppressed. » An example that could be given is Bishop Helder Camara. In exercising this « critical » service, I note two important points:
- 1) Take into account the objective gravity of the rights that are being violated. I have in mind, for instance, the right to life, the right to education, the right to a just trial for political prisoners, the right to religious freedom,... and also such situations as apartheid and the shameful exploitation of immigrants.
 - 2) Do this always in the name of the Gospel and be careful to say so, so as to parry as much as possible the accusation that we are « meddling in politics ».
- c) « *Educative*: by forming consciences, by animating and orienting the laity in their commitment. » Even though the religious and the priest have a special responsibility in this promotion of jus-

tice, the level on which they are to fulfill this responsibility is not that of the layman. The effective renewal of the temporal order is not the proper field of the religious and the priest but of the laity. Paul VI asserts: « The laymen should take up as their own proper task the renewal of the temporal order... It belongs to the laymen, without waiting passively for orders and directives, to take the initiative freely and to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the community in which they live. » (5)

Practical Guidelines

1. The Oblate, as a religious, priest and missionary to the poor, *has a duty to work for the promotion of justice*. Because of the current world situation, this duty is more urgent than ever. Those who hold responsible positions in the Institute, and especially the General Government, must sensitize the Oblates and make them aware of this duty.
2. This commitment to the promotion of justice is to be carried out while *taking into account the vocation proper to our Institute*. Promoting justice is not the specific mission

(5) PAUL VI, *Populorum progressio*, no. 81.

of the Congregation: the Congregation's mission is broader, namely, proclaiming the Gospel to the poor.

3. Consequently, *the degree of commitment* to the ministry of justice, both for the Institute and for the individual Oblate, will vary greatly according to the concrete circumstances and the interior call of each.
4. In all instances and whatever be the degree of involvement in the service of justice, the Oblate must see this commitment and live it out in the context of his vocation as priest, religious, missionary to the poor, and in communion with his Institute.
5. The first kind of involvement is to examine if there is need to reform one's own personal and community life. Am I free in regard to consumer goods or am I enslaved to them? Because of the fact that I have chosen Gospel poverty, what has concretely changed in my life and on the level of my interior freedom, my openness to the poor and to sharing?
6. An Oblate must also ask himself what the most blatant injustices are in his own milieu: hard attitudes towards strangers, indifference to the exploitation going on in the Third World, rejection of a given social group, etc.; and what he himself can and ought to do in the relevant instance. Each

community should also ask itself these questions.

7. A given individual Oblate may feel a special call to commit himself to this kind of ministry. His community — which always owes him fraternal love — is bound to sustain and support his commitment in the measure that this commitment was undertaken in consultation with the community and in submission to his superiors.
8. The General Council itself may be called to take a stand in the name of the Institute on certain more important issues when, after a serious study of the issue, it deems that its involvement will serve effectively to promote the cause of justice.

XII

UNIVERSITY EDUCATION (1)

Importance and difficulties of this work. - What we ought to expect it to achieve. - Conditions for progress.

I begin by telling you how happy I am to be with you and how glad I am about the work you are doing at Saint Paul University.

Importance and difficulties of this work

I know — at least to some degree — the *difficulties* you have to face, and this meeting has helped me know them even better. There is the problem of a sufficiently numerous Oblate personnel; the problem of finding the right road in trying both to maintain a legitimate and beneficial pluralism and, at the same time, to be faithful to the ideal of a university that is candidly Catholic; the problem of harmonizing requirements that are at times quite diverse: the needs of scientific research, of priestly forma-

(1) Address given November 17, 1984 to a meeting of Oblates working at Saint Paul University, Ottawa, in Canada; also an address given at the inauguration of a new wing of the same University on October 30, 1981.

tion, of the challenges the world addresses to us, of pastoral commitments; financial problems, at times; and the problems arising from the status of being a university federated with a more affluent brother who is more powerful than you are.

In spite of these difficulties, I still think you have *a very important role to play* in the Ottawa-Hull area, in the Church in Canada, and in the Congregation as a whole.

I have no infallible assurance about the future any more than you have; however, when I consider the definite services Saint Paul University is providing and can offer, I wholeheartedly hope that the Congregation, and you, first of all, will do all that is possible to maintain your University, as an Oblate work, and have it produce all the fruit it can as a Catholic university.

Man needs learning. He needs vast amounts of precise, deep and coherent knowledge. He especially needs to find a meaning for his life. Especially today when so many people are experiencing poverty, people expect from universities knowledge which promotes openness to love, openness to sharing with those who have less, and which leads to a genuine and full liberation.

When I think of a University such as this one, entrusted as it is to the Oblates, I have the vision of a university formation which never separates knowledge from love, from love for

people; which makes students sensitive and aware of the appeals for liberation and salvation which well up from the depths of human misery, be these appeals those right on our doorsteps like atheism, the breakdown of family life, drugs, or those from the poorer countries which bear the names of hunger, injustice or oppression.

What, then, can we expect from Saint Paul University? I shall briefly sum up in three points and then I will mention some necessary conditions to achieve the same.

What we ought to expect from this work

First of all, we are dealing with *a university*. As such, it must remain *competent in the realm of thought*. It is especially in the order of thought that its activity must operate. Let the professors here be capable of doing research and training their students to be able to think and to think properly. As I visit the Congregation, I notice more and more how necessary today is the ability to reflect and to think. We are often poor in this domain, poor in studying the secularized world, in researching the evangelization of cultures, in renewing our missionary pastoral efforts in regard to people who are caught in a process of radical change.

Secondly, we are dealing with a *Catholic* university. Hence the intellectual formation it offers must be deeply rooted in the Catholic faith, be inspired by the Church's teaching, and accept

to be guided by the Church's magisterium on points that are essential in faith and morals. Furthermore, it is normal to expect it to offer serious basic formation in philosophy, theology, canon law. The first form of poverty you are called to relieve is that of religious ignorance. Often enough, we are not sufficiently sensitive to that.

Thirdly, we are dealing with an *Oblate* university. It is therefore quite normal that it be animated with the Oblate spirit, that is to say, with the concern to evangelize, to evangelize the poor. It is to be expected that it should have such organisms as the Institute for Missionary Sciences and the Pastoral Institute. Both of these Institutes should be profoundly characterized by the two elements mentioned above, namely, by their quality of reflection and of Catholic inspiration.

Conditions for progress

To keep such an enterprise alive and well, certain conditions are necessary. I mention a few of them.

1. *We must have faith in the enterprise, strongly believe in its importance and value. I know that you have this kind of faith. At the same time, however, you must have a deep faith in yourselves and in the Congregation as capable agencies to maintain and develop this enter-*

prise. On this latter point, our faith is perhaps less firm and that slows us down somewhat.

2. Do all you can *to remain united among yourselves* on the basic goals of your work: its intellectual character, its authentic Catholic inspiration, its concern to evangelize the modern world, especially the poor. If this unity is not present, the risk is great that the entire work will be weakened, and this in turn will harm its influence and discourage some of those who work here.

3. *In regard to this work, aim rather for competence and fidelity to its own spirit than for expansion.* This is indeed your orientation, as your Rector wrote on February 1, 1979: « Saint Paul University will remain strong if the perspective of faith, the promotion of Gospel values and the Gospel's impact on the world are well kept in mind and are the determining factors for its priorities and activity. »

Other conditions, more concrete in nature, are likewise necessary, such as the clear support of your Province, or the support of the Oblate Conference of Canada, the support of the General Administration, a sympathetic attitude of the Bishops and of the other religious Congregations. These conditions will all the more readily be satisfied if the three mentioned above are met.

XIII

EVANGELIZING THE SECULARIZED WORLD (1)

*The secularized world. - Evangelizing the poor. -
Evangelizing activity. - The quality of the one
who evangelizes.*

With the last Chapter and the Constitutions of 1980, we have entered a new phase in our history. Our intention was to do so with the outlook, heart, and attitudes of Father de Mazenod.

Just as in 1816, we are fully aware that an immense field lies open before us. The Church, this precious inheritance of the Saviour, is experiencing a crisis that is perhaps even deeper than the one which brought about the birth of our Institute. The world no longer wants anything to do with the Church; it is rejecting the Church. A multitude of believers are abandoning her and a number of her priests are leaving the priesthood.

Solid in her love and faith, the Church con-

(1) Conference given at the Oblate Meeting at Cap-de-la-Madeleine in Canada, on May 20, 1982. It has already been published in OMI INFORMATION, no. 112/82 (October 1982), pp. 1-14.

tinues to appeal to men who are zealous for God's glory and who love the Church, who are ready to sacrifice everything to walk in Christ's footsteps and work with him in evangelizing the world, especially the world of the poor and the most abandoned.

Such is the appeal we still hear today and which brings us together in apostolic communities as Oblates (C.1) now, as this 20th century is drawing to its close.

In this talk I would like very simply to answer two questions: To what are we, the post-Chapter Oblates, called? And how can we respond adequately to this call?

I. TO WHAT ARE WE CALLED?

To what are we called? We are called to evangelize a world that is becoming more and more secularized. The two important key words are: *to evangelize* and *secularized*. During the course of this year marking the bi-centennial of our Founder's birth, the realities these two words denote will be the topic of two study sessions either organized or sponsored by the General Administration: « Evangelization in a Secularized World » at Saint Paul University from August 9 to August 20; and « Evangelization in Oblate Life and History » at the General House from August 29 to September 20.

These congresses have their origin, to some

degree, in the last Chapter and they express one of the main concerns of the Congregation today.

The secularized world

Our world has radically changed, especially in the West and in the industrialized countries as well as those in the process of becoming such. The Council clearly recognized this changed situation, calling it « a real social and cultural transformation. » (2) Every domain, economic, psychological, social, political and religious is affected by this change. (3) This change has plunged traditional values into a state of deep crisis and it remains the source of much concern and anxiety. (4)

We find ourselves solidly planted in a new world: a world that has extended its mastery over nearly the whole of nature and is constantly increasing it; a world that is keeping its distance from us, seeking to be more and more autonomous in regard to what is sacred and religious.

This is evident in family life. « Marriage, the transmission of life, the vocation of being spouses are no longer perceived as sacred realities, but rather as a domain subject to man's freedom, dominion and free choice motivated by economic

(2) *Gaudium et spes*, no. 4.

(3) *Ibid.*, nos. 5-7.

(4) *Ibid.*, nos. 4, 8-10.

and psychological considerations... The authority of parents — as well as that of every superior, for that matter — which was formerly seen as the expression of God's will, is today bereft of all sacred quality and called into question... » (5)

‘This is evident in professional and social life. « Work heeds the imperative of profit and management. Its religious meaning is less and less perceived... » (6)

The same is true of human relationships, of cultural life and leisure, of schools. Everything is subject to analysis, analysis that presents itself as scientific. The signs and symbols of religion are more and more rare and discreet; the blessings of the *Ritual* meant for various circumstances of life are out of style; and even the priest, as priest, feels lost in this new society. He is accepted providing he consents to being forgotten and to becoming an anonymous individual in the crowd; but if he is openly a man of God, a man of the sacred, his presence easily becomes an embarrassment.

In Asia, Africa and Latin America, this is not quite the case, things have not yet evolved to this point; here too, however, the trend exists and is gaining strength as the phenomenon of urbanization and industrialization grows apace.

After noting the fact of secularization, the

(5) Cf. *Prêtre et Apôtre*, août-septembre 1969, pp. 197-198.

(6) *Ibid.*

Council poses the question of its legitimacy. It advances a distinction we must constantly retain. On the one hand, it recognizes as « perfectly in order » and in conformity with the Creator's will « the autonomy of earthly affairs » taken to mean « that created things and societies themselves enjoy their own laws and values which must be gradually deciphered, put to use, and regulated »; and, on the other hand, it rejects, in the name of faith, an autonomy of temporal affairs which would mean « that created things do not depend on God and that man can use them without any reference to their Creator. » (7)

Six years later, on March 18, 1971, Pope Paul VI returned to this subject and further developed it under a special aspect: « The Phenomenon of Secularization as Related to Atheism. » (8)

First he recalls the fact of secularization, which involves an increasing autonomy of the profane. This fact is a trait marking our western civilizations and a process which may seem to be irreversible.

Then he mentions the tendency to pass from this fact to an ideological system, that is to say, from secularization to secularism. Such a system urges us « to take man as the sole reference point, his reason, his freedom, his earthly pro-

(7) *Gaudium et spes*, no. 36.

(8) Address to the Secretariate for Non-Believers, in *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, vol. IX, 1971, pp. 191-196.

jects, quite apart from a perspective of religion no longer shared by all. And society itself, in its desire to remain neutral in regard to ideological pluralism, is organizing itself independently of all religion, relegating the sacred to the subjectivity of individual consciences. » (9)

The Pope then asks: Is this world, bereft of the sacred and secularized and without reference to God but which does leave, to those who can or want, the possibility of acknowledging a transcendent and personal God, an advantage or a detriment to believers? — His reply is clear-cut. « While it is a possible opportunity for the religious maturing of a certain elite (i.e. for making their faith more pure and less sociological), it is, in the first place, a fertile ground for atheism for those who — and they will always be the greater number — retain a weak faith which ill survives the lack of external support. » (10)

This world, bereft of the sacred and laicized, is our world. It is the world in which we live, the world of our countries and families. This world promises happiness; and, side by side with its progress and marvellous successes, it spawns an innumerable multitude of new poor and unfortunate people: men and women who no longer find any meaning in life, who know fear and anguish, who give themselves up to violence, al-

(9) *Ibid.*, p. 192.

(10) *Ibid.*, p. 195.

cohol, or drugs, who feel unloved, sacrificed and rejected in this universe which, in seeking to bypass God, is becoming inhuman. (11)

It should also be pointed out that, for some years now, a reaction has been setting in. Pretty well everywhere and in many forms a religious awakening, a search for « meaning », for the meaning of the universe, of man and human history is manifest. The interest in oriental religions, the Youth Council of Taize, the Christian Festival, the proliferation of sects, renewal movements in the Spirit, the return to practices of popular piety are all evidence of this. We thought that God was dead; and now we notice that God does not die so easily in people's hearts.

This awakening, however, though important, must not lead us to forget the basic trend which is at work in our present-day world and is making it more and more secularized. Moreover, the religious pluralism in which this trend expresses itself does not necessarily make evangelization easier.

It is to this kind of world that the Oblates are sent today. As our Constitutions say: « Wherever we work, our mission is especially to those people whose condition cries out for salvation

(11) Cf. JOHN PAUL II: « Atheism, the spiritual drama of our times » - Address to the International Congress on Evangelization and Atheism, October 10, 1980, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. III, 2, 1980, pp. 825-832.

and for the hope which only Jesus Christ can fully bring. These are the poor with their many faces; we give them our preference » (C.5).

Evangelizing the poor

We are sent to this world in order to evangelize it. What have we done up to now in this regard? Answering this question is difficult: one risks being either too complacent or unjust. When I reflect on the Congregation's work in most countries of the West, I come to the conclusions which follow.

At first, nearly everywhere we felt helpless and at a loss as we faced this new secularized world that was coming into being. We did not know what to make of it, how to tackle it. Thereafter, some became frightened: they did not dare to look this new world squarely in the face; instead, they concentrated their efforts — and still do — on those groups of Christians who are still practising, even if such groups have greatly diminished in number.

Others did decide to take a good look at this new world. In it they discerned a call, an urgent appeal for salvation in Jesus Christ. They went out to it, they wanted to meet it where it was at, to learn its language, to evangelize it by living its life. They did this with much generosity and goodwill. Sometimes, perhaps, they did so without the required preparation and caution; they

thereupon experienced suffering and incomprehension. These Oblates have a right to our gratitude and support, for they have had the courage to open new paths that are indispensable for evangelization today.

Others, finally, — and there are some in both of the above-mentioned categories — were dazzled by this new world and ended up being overcome by it.

These three attitudes exist in nearly all the provinces of the Congregation. They are the attitudes either of persons or of given groups whose members are trying mutually to support and help one another.

What about the Congregation as such? What has it done up to now in regard to the secularized world? Has it adopted a common stance towards it? It has certainly become aware and is continually becoming more conscious of the major challenge being addressed to it. The recent Chapters and General Councils have given a certain number of orientations which make it possible to advance little by little in this area. The Regional Conferences have done the same.

Taking the Congregation as a whole, however, I do not think we can say that, up to now, it has committed itself, really and with its whole being, to evangelizing the secularized world. In most countries of the West, the Congregation remains more involved in safeguarding and nourishing the faith of Christians rather than

in evangelizing those who are not Christian or are so only in name.

This attitude is easy to explain. Oblates are growing old; they are settled into well-established works and structures; there are the needs of bishops, the constant calling into question these last 25 years, the few vocations... All of this is very real.

And yet, if the Founder were to return, what would he say to us? He would undoubtedly say: You are missionaries! So be more forgetful of yourselves! Forget how old you are! Forget your own well-being and your material security! Stop questioning yourselves about your identity and the more or less conscious motives which may have influenced your vocation!... Leave all these preoccupations in the hands of Jesus Christ and go out to the poor, to the most abandoned, to those who are far from the Church and whose faith is dying! Be missionaries in this new world that is now your world, and that « more than ever needs preachers, competent spiritual guides and missionaries who are totally available » (12).

We are a missionary Congregation. Our principal service in the Church is to proclaim Christ and his Kingdom to the most abandoned. We preach the Gospel among people who have not yet received it and help them see their own values in its light. Where the Church is already established, our commitment is to those groups it touches least. (C.5)

(12) Paul VI to the Capitulars, December 4, 1974.

Awareness of our own shortcomings humbles us, yet God's power makes us confident as we strive to bring all people — especially the poor — to full consciousness of their dignity as human beings and as sons and daughters of God. (C.8)

I am convinced that our missionary vocation requires us to make a clear option in favour of those groups made up of the poorest, the most abandoned, the most threatened in their faith in the context of the secularized world: the young among the common people, for instance, the workers, the immigrants... It is up to the Oblates in each country to identify these groups.

It is to these that we must go first of all and more and more. And we must go to them in order to evangelize them.

We are made for the poor; our particular mission is to preach the Gospel to them. These two things are very clear, it seems to me, both in the Founder and in our Constitutions and Rules.

The Founder comes back to this theme constantly, whether in regards to ministry in France or in mission countries.

To the Oblates he had sent to Africa and to Ceylon he unceasingly repeats: You are there, first of all, for the pagans, for the non-believers, and not for the few Christians who happen to be there. And you are there to proclaim the Gospel to them, to make Jesus Christ known to them, to convert them, and not for anything else. « When will you begin to win the unbeliev-

ers? » he asks Father Semeria. « Are you on your island (Ceylon) only as parish priests of old Christians? I had always thought the idea was to convert the pagans. That is what we are made for rather than anything else. » (13) And to Bishop Allard in Africa he writes: « Up to now your mission is a failed mission. Frankly, one does not send a Vicar Apostolic and a fairly large number of missionaries to have them look after a few scattered settlements of old Catholics. A single missionary would have been enough to visit these Christians. It is clear that the Vicariate was established in this area only for the evangelization of the (unbelievers). Now, we have already been there for several years and you are involved in something quite different. I think, to speak truthfully, that you are not fulfilling your mission... » (14)

He speaks in the same vein to the Oblates working in France. « Our missionaries are called to evangelize the poor and to work for the salvation of the most abandoned souls, » the Founder wrote to the bishop of Limoges. « To each

(13) Mazenod to Semeria, February 21, 1849.

» » » , January 17, 1850.

» » » , April 2, 1850.

» » » , March 12, 1851.

» » » , October 10, 1857.

(14) Mazenod to Allard, November 10, 1857.

» » » , July 15, 1852.

» » » , May 30, 1857.

» » » , October 28, 1859.

his own mission. » (15) He used the same kind of language when writing to Fathers Courtès (16), Mie (17), Dassy (18), to the Vicar General of Grenoble (19), to the bishop of Orleans (20).

But is it possible to evangelize the poor of the secularized world? And how is it to be done? Yes, it is possible; it is even an essential duty. « Let us say it clearly, » Paul VI asserted, « believers, confronted by the fact of a definite secularization of this world, have a prophetic mission to fulfill: that of challenging secularized man's tendency to close in on himself, to attempt by his own powers to achieve salvation and liberation from all ills, including those of sin and death. » (21)

The Oblate evangelizes by his life, first of all, by the authenticity of what he is. This is an indispensable starting point, but it is not sufficient.

He also evangelizes by his action: his action of doing good, of devotedness, of goodness — « The apostolate of goodness is the best of all, » Father de Foucauld said (22) — and by his action

(15) Mazenod to Bishop Buissas of Limoges, October 24, 1855.

(16) Mazenod to Courtès, July 22, 1826.

(17) Mazenod to Mie, September 7, 1826.

(18) Mazenod to Dassy, October 11, 1847.

(19) Mazenod to Teston, June 17, 1828.

(20) Mazenod to Bishop Dupanloup of Orleans, February, 1854.

(21) Paul VI, April 4, 1971; loc., cit., p. 196.

(22) Letter to his sister, end of 1913.

for justice. Jesus healed the sick and eased human misery; he took up the defense of the weak and the oppressed, the adulterous woman (23), for example, or the children (24). This is equally necessary, but it, too, is insufficient. By virtue of his specific vocation the Oblate must go further.

He must also evangelize by word. In the first article of the original Constitutions of 1818 we read: « The aim of the Institute is primarily to form a gathering of secular priests who will live together and strive to imitate the virtues and example of our Saviour Jesus Christ, *mainly by devoting themselves to preaching the divine Word to the poor...* by means of missions, catechism, retreats or other spiritual exercises » (25). And still today we read in the new Constitutions: « Our mission puts us on constant call to answer the most urgent needs of the Church... *most of all by proclaiming the Word of God* ». (C.7) « Our mission is to *proclaim the Kingdom of God* and to seek it before all else. » (C.11) Scholastics « will cultivate those skills needed for an *effective ministry of the Word.* » (C.61)

By word to proclaim Jesus Christ to the poor, to proclaim the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ: as long as an Oblate has not begun doing this, his evangelization effort remains incomplete. « There is no true evangeliza-

(23) John 8:7.

(24) Matthew 19:13-14.

(25) 1818 Constitutions and Rules, art. 1 and 2.

tion if the name, the life, the promises, the kingdom and mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed. » (26)

For a certain period of time and in several countries, we did not know what words to speak to secularized man, how to present Jesus Christ to him. And so we stopped preaching; we contented ourselves with the silent witness of our works and life. Paul VI admitted that there is a problem: « Modern man is sated by talk, he is... tired of listening and... impervious to words. » (27)

And yet, our Oblate vocation requires us to speak. It requires us to confess Jesus Christ openly. « Like the apostle Paul, we "preach Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). » (C.4) Our Constitutions also say: « To seek out new ways for the Word of God to reach (peoples') hearts often calls for daring; to present Gospel demands in all clarity should never intimidate us. Awareness of our own shortcomings humbles us, yet God's power makes us confident as we strive to bring all people — especially the poor — to full consciousness of their dignity as human beings and as sons and daughters of God. » (C.8)

This is the main challenge we Oblates must take up in the present-day world. The temptation is to remain more or less on the way to this, to limit ourselves to defending earthly

(26) PAUL VI: *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 22.

(27) PAUL VI: *Ibid.*, no. 42.

causes, to convince ourselves that we no longer know or are no longer able to tell people who Jesus Christ is.

« We cannot help speaking of what we have seen and heard! », Peter and John declared before the Sanhedrin. (28) Preaching, the verbal proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ, is indispensable for salvation. The present Pope, as also his predecessor, keeps saying this to priests in every country that he visits. (29) Furthermore, this explicit proclamation of the Gospel belongs to the very core of our Oblate vocation within the Church. We must, therefore, look for new approaches, try to discover the most effective ways, initiate ourselves to the techniques that are best suited to teaching modern man, the poor of the secularized world, who Jesus Christ is. This, along with the witness of our lives, is the principal prophetic contribution that the Church is asking us to make.

II. HOW TO RESPOND TO THIS APPEAL ADDRESSED TO US?

Thus, we are today called to evangelize the poor in a world that is new, one that is more

(28) Acts 4:20.

(29) John Paul II to the clergy of Zaire, May 4, 1980.

John Paul II to the clergy of France, May 30, 1980.

John Paul II to the clergy of Brazil, July 2, 1980.

John Paul II to the clergy of Gabon, February 17, 1982.

John Paul II to the clergy of Bologna, April 18, 1982.

and more secularized. How are we going to do this Under what conditions will we be able to make our contribution and cooperate in this task? It is to this question that I shall now attempt to provide an answer and, in doing so, I shall allow myself to be inspired as much as possible by our Constitutions. An adequate response to the challenge addressed to us will result both from the quality of our evangelizing activity and from the quality of our being. On both points the Constitutions offer us a rich teaching wherein the old mingles with the new. I will give you only a rapid summary of what they suggest to me. A more complete study needs yet to be made, but this would not be possible for this occasion.

Our evangelizing activity

As already mentioned, this activity must strive to proclaim Jesus Christ explicitly, to « proclaim the Word of God which finds its fulfillment in the celebration of the Sacraments and in service to others », and « to establish Christian communities and Churches deeply rooted in the local culture and fully responsible for their own development and growth. » (C.7)

This is essential, this remains a constant. Such a ministry however, will take on different forms, and will especially take into account the new world in which it is to be accomplished.

Not taking the needs of this world into account would be obstructing God's plan and inflicting useless suffering upon ourselves.

In the first place, our evangelizing activity ought to approach the modern world in a positive way, with humility, trust and respect. It must acknowledge the world's legitimate autonomy and desire the world's full development. The Church and the priest do not have an answer for everything, nor must they want to control everything. The laity are called to assume a more prominent role, even within the Church. (R.6) Basically, this is a liberation for the Church, and especially for the clergy: the Church will no longer have to be responsible for so many profane auxiliary tasks which distract her from her own proper mission and make her into a power that is too human.

Our Constitutions ask us « ever to be close to the people with whom we work, taking into account their values and aspirations. » (C.8) They request us « to support lay people in discerning and developing their own talents and charisms. » (R.6)

They also ask us to respect the particular cultures where we are called to work, be these cultures of different peoples or of different social groups. « An adequate formation should be assured when an Oblate receives an assignment for which he has not been trained. This refers especially to those ministries where a sensitivity to

another culture and a knowledge of the language, history and pastoral situation of a people is necessary. Ministry with the poor or with minority groups also requires an understanding of their socio-economic conditions and of the social teachings of the Church. » (R.78; cf. also R.37).

Being close to the people, respect for the lay world and for different cultures, awareness of our own limitations as priests and as representatives of a particular human culture, being disposed to allowing ourselves to be enriched by those whom we evangelize: « We will let our lives be enriched by the poor and the marginalized as we work with them, for they can make us hear in new ways the Gospel we proclaim. We must always be sensitive to the mentality of the people, drawing on the riches of their culture and religious traditions. » (R.8) All these features are quite prominent in our new Constitutions. They express an overall attitude toward the new world to which we are sent.

In a more active way, however, what do we as Oblates bring to this world?

Again our Constitutions say: « Our mission is to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to seek it before all else (cf. Mt. 6:33)... We commit ourselves to be a leaven of the Beatitudes at the heart of the world. » (C.11) It is worth noting that this article serves as a transition between the two chapters of Part One on « The Oblate Charism ». It is both by our missionary apostolic

life and by our missionary activity that we will be a leaven of the Beatitudes. Further on, I will be saying a few words on our religious life; now I want to highlight three elements that characterize our apostolic activity.

First of all, the Oblate has been and remains a man of the Word: his main mission is « to teach (people) who Jesus Christ is » (Preface to the Constitutions). This ought to be his constant concern in all his ministries. He should greatly want to fulfill this mission very simply, with faith and courage, in a language that is straightforward, adapted to and understood by all. (R.7)

Secondly, and in a complementary fashion, the Constitutions ask the Oblate — and this is more new, more revealing of the present-day world — to « bear witness to God's holiness and justice », to « announce the liberating presence of Jesus Christ and the new world born in his Resurrection. » (C.9)

Some specific forms of this are indicated: for instance, in response to a special call of the Spirit, identifying oneself with the poor to the point of sharing their life and commitment to justice; or being present where decisions affecting the future of the poor are made. (R.9) But whatever the work of the Oblate may be, he is to collaborate in the transformation of all that is a cause of oppression and poverty. (R.9)

This is necessary today. It is a matter not only of evangelizing persons but also the struc-

ture of the present-day world, its social and political structures, its culture. And, as far as we are concerned, we are to do this by concentrating very especially on the world of the poor. (30)

For an adequate discernment in regard to this kind of commitment, two criteria seem important to me. The first one is this: our orientation should clearly be one of evangelization, that is to say, the purifying and transforming of structures according to the values of the Gospel and the Beatitudes. This excludes certain methods incompatible with the Gospel: for instance, the promotion of hatred among people or the class struggle. (31) The second one is this: the concrete form of our activity should correspond to the vocation that is specifically ours in the Church, as religious and as priests. The teaching of the Council (32), of Paul VI (33) and of John Paul II (34) cannot be ignored in this mat-

(30) Cf. *Evangelii nuntiandi*, nos. 18-20.

(31) Cf. JOHN PAUL II: *Laborem exercens*, no. 20.

(32) *Presbyterorum ordinis*, nos. 4-6.

Optatam totius, nos. 19-20.

Perfectae caritatis, nos. 2, 8, 10, 20.

(33) Message to priests, June 30, 1968.

Synod document on the Ministerial Priesthood, November 30, 1971.

Address to the priests of Rome, February 17, 1972.

Evangelica testificatio, nos. 9, 11, 16-24, 50, 52-53.

(34) Address to the priests of Rome, November 9, 1978.

Address to the priests of Rome, March 2, 1979.

Address to the priests of Mexico, January 27, 1979.

Address to the priests of the U.S.A., October 4, 1979.

ter. In our activity, the formation of conscience, Christian education, the spiritual support of committed laity and, at times, taking opportune public stands will normally take the first place.

Thirdly — and this is in even more immediate relationship with the secularized world — the maintaining of certain works or institutions that are strongly Christian and clearly identified as Christian. I am thinking here of such works belonging to your provinces such as the shrine of our Lady of the Cape, of Saint Paul University, of Centres like Jésus-Ouvrier and Saint-Pierre... The Congregation needs works like these, and the world needs them even more. As Paul VI observed, radical secularization tends to remove from human society all signs of God's presence and to suppress institutions that are essentially religious. It creates a climate for the absence of God. This is a misfortune for the generality of people, for those whose faith is weak. The faith of the latter needs external support for its very survival. « One would have to be snobbishly ignorant of human nature and its neces-

Address to the priests of Paris, May 30, 1980.

Address to the priests of Rio de Janeiro, July 2, 1980.

Address to the priests of Gabon, February 17, 1982.

Letter of Holy Thursday, April 8, 1979.

Address to the Superiors General, November 24, 1978.

Address to the Religious of Brazil, July 3, 1980.

Address to the Jesuits, February 27, 1982.

sary social expressions to be astonished at this. » (35)

It is not a matter of multiplying Christian institutions or of wanting to build a Christian world on the fringes of the secularized world. There is only one world. But if we want this world to have a soul, and to have a Christian soul, it must have some signs of God's presence, and especially some centres that are clearly Christian and of the first quality for the expression, the deepening and the nourishing of one's faith.

And so, with all my heart and soul, I congratulate you for having kept and developed these works; and I encourage you to make them even stronger and more effective as a leaven of the Gospel Beatitudes in today's world.

I will now go on to the last point: the qualifications of the one who evangelizes.

The quality of the one who evangelizes

Already in 1815 the Founder was convinced that « the needs of the people » required missionaries who could give everything, who would commit themselves to « the way of abnegation, of renunciation, of self-forgetfulness, of poverty, of fatigue, etc. » (36) Thirty years later, he noted

(35) Address of March 18, 1971.

(36) Mazenod to Tempier, December 13, 1815.

this in his *Diary* about an Oblate whose conduct left something to be desired: « I do not at all want any smoking wicks in the Society: let them be burning, giving warmth, providing light, or else let them leave! »

This was very clear to him. Would he be less demanding today? I do not think so. His words, perhaps, might be phrased with more subtlety.

The present-day world needs missionaries of the first quality, missionaries who are solid in their faith and virtue. It needs them for two reasons. First of all, as has been mentioned, this world is fed up with speeches: it will accept the message only if it is based on the holiness of the witness, on the authenticity of his life. And then, precisely because of the world's great achievements and indifference toward God, there is the risk that it will seduce and devour the witness, if the latter is not sufficiently strong or if he is not too sure about his religious and priestly identity.

Here is what our Constitutions ask of us: to be, by means of our religious life, in the midst of the world in order to challenge, in Jesus' name, its insufficiency, its egotism, its refusal to share with the poor, its closed attitude toward God.

By our consecrated chastity, we want to challenge « the tendency to possess and use others » (C.15), by our poverty, « the excesses of power

and wealth » (C.20), by our obedience, « the spirit of domination » (C.25), by our perseverance, the inconstancy in the area of love, and, at the same time, we want to remind the world of the unfailing « fidelity of Christ to the Father » (C.28). In the same way, by our fraternal community, we want « to bear witness before the world that Jesus lives in our midst and unites us » (C.36), and that « in Jesus, God is everything for us » (C.11); also, by our « frequent recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation », we proclaim « the joy of God's pardon to the world » (C.32).

Now, either these things are mere words or they are a very serious challenge addressed to us. As someone who evangelizes, the Oblate cannot be satisfied with half-measures: he leaves « everything to be a disciple of Jesus » (C.2), his choice can only be a « radical » one. (C.12) In order to be credible when « we announce the liberating presence of Jesus Christ and the new world born in his Resurrection » (C.9), we ourselves have to be really free with the freedom that Christ brings, and wholly detached from the present world with its concupiscences and enslavements.

What modern man expects from us is:

- an attitude of serenity and peace enabling us never to be troubled in the midst of life's anxieties and struggles. Such an attitude is based on a well-enlightened faith and on what is most stable and solid in the faith, namely,

the existence of God, his love for man, the incarnation of his Son, and the salvation God brings us in him;

- an attitude of complete openness to others and of universal love enabling us to be of service to all, cooperators with all, and always ready to share with whoever has less than we, especially the poor and the deprived;
- an attitude both of admiration for and of detachment from the realities of this world, for we have found Christ and in him have discovered everything. « For his sake I have forfeited everything, I have accounted all else rubbish... I wish to know Christ and the power flowing from his resurrection; likewise to know how to share in his sufferings by being formed into the pattern of his death. Thus do I hope to arrive at the resurrection from the dead. » (37);
- finally, an attitude of complete authenticity. « Either tacitly or aloud — but always forcefully — we are being asked: Do you really believe what you are proclaiming? Do you live what you believe? Do you really preach what you live? » (38)

This is the kind of witness that is needed to evangelize the modern world and to be a leaven

(37) *Philippians* 3:8-10.

(38) PAUL VI: *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 76.

of the Beatitudes within it. In a formulation that is new and generally quite positive, our Constitutions do not ask for anything else. They are no less demanding than the earlier ones were. Under the serenity, peace, joy, availability to serve and universal love of today's Oblate, there remain hidden, as before, total renunciation to self and the total gift of one's person to Jesus Christ and to the Church. Regarding the spiritual childhood practised by Therese of Lisieux, someone wrote: « The mountain path up Carmel is covered with rose-petals: but sweep it clean and you will discover the hard edges of the rock beneath. » (39) This is also true for the post-Chapter Oblate.

Fortunately, there is someone who accompanies and sustains him on this road, someone who has already admirably travelled it well before him. This someone is the Immaculate Virgin Mary.

« She received Christ in order to share him with all the world, whose hope he is. In her we recognize the type of the Church's faith and of our own. » (C.10) She is also « the model and guardian of our consecrated life. » (C.13) « With Mary Immaculate, the faithful handmaid of the Lord, and under the guidance of the Spirit, we enter into closer union with Jesus Christ. » (C.35)

(39) BRUNO DE J.-M., OCD, *Vie d'Amour de saint Jean de la Croix*, 1936, pp. 149-150.

« In the joys and sorrows of our missionary life we feel close to her... » (C.10)

On the occasion of this feast of the second centenary of the birth of our Founder, may she help us all in today's world to be authentic evangelizing Oblates, such as Blessed Eugene de Mazenod wanted us to be.

Part THREE

FORMATION AND ANIMATION

XIV

WHAT DO I EXPECT OF FORMATION? (1)

The background of my expectations. - Inner consistency and human maturity. - Option for Christ. - Integration of the vows. - Love for the poor. - Proclaiming Christ. - Solidly grounded in doctrine.

As the subject of this talk, I have been asked: What do you expect of formation in the service of the Church of today, what does the Congregation expect today of scholastics?

At different times I have had the occasion to say what my expectations are of Oblate formation; the first was to the Permanent Committee on Formation, in January 1977, and the last was in January of 1979 at a meeting of Provincials.

My expectations remain the same today, and I will repeat them to you, adding a few comments. First of all let me tell you the reason for these expectations.

(1) Address given on the occasion of a meeting of the Oblate Scholastics of Europe at Vermicino in Italy, on July 16, 1979. It has been published in OMI DOCUMENTATION, no. 100/81 (May 1981), pp. 1-9.

I. THE BACKGROUND OF MY EXPECTATIONS

When I think of the Oblates, when I think of the young men who are seeking their way with us or would like to find their way with us, I immediately recall what our Founder wanted and his ideas about the Congregation.

In founding the Congregation, Father de Mazenod wanted to set up, as he said, a society of « men of interior life, truly apostolic men », perfectly trustworthy and zealous men, to constitute an « elite corps » at the service of the Church, devoted especially to the evangelization of the poor. In this respect one must re-read his first letters to Father Tempier. (2) They show clearly the kind of men he wanted in the Institute.

One cannot form an elite body with just any kind of material! And so he will require men who possess a genuine human strength and well-tried virtue. In this matter he is sometimes cutting. The passage that he addresses, for example, to Father Courtès about a certain Father Martin:

Only Father Martin, who has no more courage than he has common sense, finds it difficult to reconcile the work that he has been given and the regularity that I demand. The world will not be won with apostles of this kind. If I had been

(2) Mazenod to Tempier, October 9, 1815.

Mazenod to Tempier, November 15, 1815.

Mazenod to Tempier, December 13, 1815.

like that at 25 years of age, I think I would have begged God to let me drown in a lukewarm bath as a punishment for such cowardice. (3)

In the 1818 manuscript of the *Constitutions and Rules* (4), he gives a lengthy description of the kind of men that he wants as candidates for the Oblate life.

It is important for the good of the Church and so as to obtain for the Society the means of attaining its end, to admit within its bosom none but subjects who are able, with the help of God's grace, to serve it and to build it up. It is impossible to be too careful in making sure of the vocation of those who ask for entrance and in getting to know thoroughly their virtues, their talents, and their other good dispositions...

But let the Superior General and his Council consider carefully in the presence of God that, to be worthy of admission into the Society, one must be called by God and have the qualities proper to a good missionary and be capable of making a holy priest. One must have a strong desire for one's own perfection, a strong love for Jesus Christ and his Church, a strong zeal for the salvation of souls. One's heart must be free from all disordinate affection for earthly things, a strong detachment from one's family and birthplace, a disinterestedness that goes so far as to scorn riches. One must have the desire to serve God and the Church, be it in the missions or in the other ministries taken on by the Society, and the desire to persevere for the whole of one's life in fidelity and obedience to the holy Rules of the Institute.

(3) Mazenod to Courtès, March 6, 1831.

(4) Cf. *Missions O.M.I.*, 1951, pp. 82, 84, 85.

It would be desirable that whoever wishes to enter into the Society should have an aptitude for the sciences, if this has not already been acquired; that they should be endowed with good sense, intelligence, good judgment, memory, good-will under every trial; that they should be polite, respectable, well brought up, in good health...

Necessary at the time of foundation, these requirements remain so today and will continue to be so tomorrow. To achieve its end the Congregation has to rely on its personnel, on the human and Christian value of each of its members. It is, and will be, as good as its personnel.

The Founder thought often along these lines. And the thought brought to mind, not without a certain envy, the beginnings of the Company of Jesus for which he had a great admiration. « (It) was, from the beginning, an army of generals. » (5) « Each soldier alone was worth an army! » (6) He would very much have liked it to be the same for his little Society!

And so I take this ideal as my reference — together with the needs of today's world — when I answer the question: What do you expect of Oblate formation today?

II. WHAT I EXPECT

In my answer, I cannot say everything. I will stick to some fundamental elements. With regard

(5) Mazenod to Tempier, August 1, 1830.

(6) Mazenod to Tempier, September 25, 1832.

to these elements, I will give their substance without lingering too long over their dynamic development. It is a question of an ideal picture.

I know quite well that life is less absolute, more complex, personal evolution more varied. In one sense, a lifetime is needed for the formation of the perfect Oblate. Do not let the picture give rise to fears. On the other hand it should help you to be aware of the seriousness of the task and give you food for thought when, on the eve of a permanent commitment, you have to take counsel before taking that definitive step.

For an Oblate these factors are the guarantee not only of an effective missionary activity but also of a life that is happy and that really finds fulfillment in the Congregation.

This, then is what I expect of Oblate formation:

1. *Men with a real inner consistency and stability and human maturity.* They have personality, a personality that is more and more self-affirming, a personality of which they are in firm control.

What is an adult, humanly speaking? It is someone who has left behind the defects or caprices of childhood. He is no longer concerned with toys and childish things, with his own little gratifications, but with real things and with matters of more importance. He is open to the problems of others and of the world. Furthermore, he is capable of free decisions and of ful-

filling his commitments. He has a sense of responsibility; he can be counted on when he has given his word or accepted a task.

Lastly, he is someone who has already acquired a certain experience of men and events; he has become less severe, more nuanced, more understanding. He knows that other people, even the greatest of them, have their limitations, are liable to have some defects. These do not scandalize him and he still has the capacity to appreciate and admire. He is not always criticizing everything.

2. Men who have really chosen Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ crucified, with a view to consecrating themselves to his saving mission, and who have already acquired a sufficient knowledge of him, through the experience of prayer, of obedience, of brotherly love, of apostolic work, of a real poverty and disciplined life.

This absolute choice of Jesus Christ is at the very root of Oblate life. It is its basis and principle of unity. Until this choice is made there is no progress, religious formation does not take hold, one is only marking time on the spiritual path. That is why it is so important that, from entrance into the novitiate, one should be already put clearly before this choice.

« Why am I here? What have I come to look for? » This is the first question to ask, and until I can reply, « I am here to search for Christ, and

to let him live in me, so that I can give him to the world, » my novitiate has not really begun.

It is quite normal that at the beginning my response, while being positive and generous, will still be rather superficial. I say: « I have chosen Christ, I want Christ, I burn with desire to give him to the world, » but in reality, the fundamental choice has not yet been made, for I do not yet know myself well enough and above all because I do not yet know him.

All the years of formation go to deepen this two-fold knowledge so that the choice of Jesus Christ, generous but superficial at the beginning, might become firm and enlightened at the time of priestly ordination. At that hour I renew my choice of Jesus Christ, and I renew it in joy, but now I know much better what it costs to be with Jesus Christ, and I am more humble, I rely more on his grace.

The knowledge that is in question — this must be quite clear — is above all the kind gained from experience. The years of Oblate formation have allowed me to know Jesus Christ through a long and sometimes difficult experience of prayer, obedience, community life and fraternal sharing, which has cost me something, through the experience of human misery in the world and of detachment, of real poverty in my life, through a constant personal effort to discipline my existence and to conform it to the Gospel.

There is no other way to know Jesus Christ and to really make him one's choice. No one can escape it. If you do not set out on this path at the time of formation, you are preparing a future as an Oblate of suffering, disappointment and bitterness.

You will have observed the relation between the first two points: sufficient human maturity and choice of Jesus Christ. The second is hardly possible without the first. There must be real inner consistence and stability and human maturity to commit oneself, as an Oblate, to the following of Christ.

The other expectations — those that I am going to mention now — are intended in a way to give precision to and to fill out these first requirements. I shall go over them more quickly.

3. *Men who have understood and accepted the renunciation inherent in the three vows, and now are capable of sustaining it in peace, love and joy.*

As we enter into Oblate life, it is an illusion to dream that some day perhaps there can be an Oblate life without vows or priesthood without celibacy. — This dream, it is true, one finds more amongst religious forty or fifty years old! — Realism demands that at the time of commitment there must above all be the desire to give everything and to know that it will be necessary to achieve an integration.

This point is important not only for the prudent discernment of vocation, but especially as an expression of religious maturity. The integration within our whole being of the renunciation of the three vows can only be brought about progressively.

At the beginning, this renunciation — which is also a surpassing of self — exists especially in the will. The sensitive or instinctive part of our existence has not accepted it. There will be days, inevitably, when faced with a particular experience of solitude, or sensual attraction, or the behaviour of someone in authority, veritable battles will rage within us. The spiritual effort will have the effect, little by little and with a lot of patience, of making the senses and instincts as chaste, poor and obedient as the will.

This is a slow task. It lasts the greater part of one's life. Success is only partial as long as the movement of the senses is opposed to and obstructs the gift, the oblation chosen by the will. The attitude of freedom, of peace does not exist; the senses are sad, they look for compensations. This is the time when what are called « complexes » can arise and develop. A particular religious has stomach trouble, not to start with because he has trouble digesting his food but because he cannot « stomach » his superior or perhaps... the ecclesiastical institution. It is sensitivity getting its own back. It is the same with poverty and in a very special way with chastity.

In this area what I expect of first formation is that it will lead the Oblate to a clear vision of the situation and give him the chance to know if he can or not in a normal way live the consecration of the vows in peace, love and joy. To this end, the help of a spiritual director is necessary.

4. *Men open to the calls of the poor and determined to give their lives for them, in intimate communion with the Church and the Congregation.* Their personal charism has allowed itself to be imbued, inspired by that of the Congregation. They are men of mission and feel themselves to be members of an apostolic body whose history and saints they are familiar with.

As Oblates, we are missionaries to the poor, and we do this in community, as an « apostolic corps ».

It is essential that we should be open and attentive to the calls of the poor and be ready to undertake anything to help them, like the Founder. But our response — and for the Oblate this is essential too — must not be individualistic, independent; it must be written into the action programme of the Congregation and be taken up by the Institute. Our Founder and various Superiors General such as Fathers Fabre and Labouré laid a great emphasis on this. I quote from Father Fabre, the second Superior General:

Never lose sight of the fact that works must never be personal. It is as religious that we do them, and so it is in the name of the community and for the community that we do them... In a Congregation, the greatest danger that there could be is an over-strong spirit of individualism. As the religious must not consider himself, so the house must not consider only itself; it forms part of a province, which itself forms part of the Congregation... We must keep alive amongst us the sense of being a Congregation, an esprit de corps... In the moral as in the temporal order this esprit de corps is indispensable to preserve the family spirit... (7)

The Oblate vocation is a vocation to community. It is necessary for the work of evangelization, to assure its permanence and effectiveness; it is necessary too for the apostolic worker, to assure his development and faithfulness. If we are alone, there is something missing in our witness; it will also be more difficult to hold out for long.

Under this aspect, the current demand for community life, and for a more committed community life, expressed by the majority of the young, is a sign of health and a reason for hope in the future.

5. *Men who have chosen to serve the poor in a way that is clearly related to evangelization*

(7) *Circulaires administratives*, no. 22, t. 1, pp. 203, 212.
Circulaires administratives, no. 24, t. 1, p. 246.

and which tends always — even if it cannot be done immediately — toward the explicit preaching of Jesus Christ and the celebration of salvation in the ecclesial community and by means of the sacraments.

A reading of Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* shows that the content of evangelization is vast and complex, that it follows a variety of paths and that there are close relationships between evangelization and the promotion of human values — development, liberation. The history of the Congregation teaches us this too.

Nevertheless, within this ensemble — our *Constitutions* and our history teach us the same lesson — there are choices to be made, some activities are more in conformity with our vocation in the Church. Every human activity is not necessarily a work of evangelization, and every work of evangelization does not necessarily have the same value for us.

The Oblate, as the Founder wrote in the Preface to the *Constitutions*, « devotes himself to all the good works which priestly charity can devise, and *above all* to the work of the missions, which the Institute regards as its principal end. » To preach by the word Jesus Christ to the poor, to proclaim the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ: it is towards this that we must tend, wherever we may be.

6. *Men who have a solid doctrinal foundation in philosophy and theology*, which will give them stability as well as openness and discernment when faced by current movements. Today especially and because of our vocation, this doctrinal foundation is indispensable. Without it, under the influence of circumstances and one's own tendencies, one easily falls prey to current movements, to fundamentalism, to marxism, to cosmic sciences or the quest for marvels, when one ought to be a Gospel guide, and a trustworthy leader of the people of today.

This is a fairly common picture and not special to the Oblates. In many countries the standard of philosophical and theological studies has gone down. This gives rise for preoccupation for the future. Changes were necessary; a greater flexibility was inevitable, but because of external circumstances more than anything else (drop in numbers of scholastics, closure of several scholasticates, changes in educational systems...) the amount of time devoted to philosophical studies and even to theological formation in the proper sense has been considerably reduced, and this at a time when lay people are specializing more and more and becoming more demanding of the priest as counsellor and spiritual animator.

Father Arrupe remarked about some Jesuit provinces: « When one sees how many of our young people have made their studies in these provinces, one asks oneself if these priests will

be able to exercise their ministry as the Church and the Company demand. » (8)

I tell you this so that you, for your part, will place a high value on doctrinal formation and give yourselves to it with all your hearts. It is indispensable for the evangelizing mission of the Oblate. And if one day someone amongst you should feel within himself a disposition and special attraction to specialize in philosophy, theology, spirituality, missiology... let him not hesitate to say so. The Congregation needs men like that, specialists in the ecclesiastical sciences and in the human sciences that bear on the mission.

In short, what I expect of formation is a formed Oblate, even though I know quite well that formation goes on for the whole of one's life.

A formed Oblate is one who has already achieved a substantial unity in his life at the various levels: human, spiritual, intellectual, communitarian.

First of all he is someone who has found a centre in his life. He has met Christ, he loves him profoundly and gives himself to Christ to continue with him the work of people's redemption, especially amongst the poor.

He is someone who has a sufficient knowledge of himself, his strengths and limitations,

(8) Report on the State of the Company, September 27, 1978, no. 36.

who accepts himself, without hatred or vanity, and who has arrived at a progressive mastery of his imagination, his sensibility, his passions. By means of working at it, he has succeeded in bringing discipline and order into his life.

He is someone who is in possession, in an integrated way, of the system of Christian values. By his life of study and prayer, he has acquired a « philosophy », a « wisdom » which allows him to accept, judge and dispose of everything in a Christian perspective. Nothing confounds him, be it a failure, a humiliation, a disaster or a great joy.

He is someone, finally, who loves his brothers deeply, who knows how to enter into relationships with them, and on whom they can rely absolutely. But someone also who stays morally autonomous: capable of solitary prayer, of suffering alone, of working alone, or of passing long periods alone with God.

« To form Christ in ourselves with the help of his Immaculate Mother, the Virgin Mary », that was the aim of formation in the Founder's thought. This aim has not changed. Today as yesterday, may the Immaculate Virgin Mary help us to achieve it!

JESUS CHRIST THE FIRST FORMATOR OF OBLATES (1)

What did our Lord do? - He adapted himself to his disciples. - He made them spiritual men. - He gave them his Spirit. - What must we do? - Welcome young people with love. - Put them face to face with Christ the Saviour. - Initiate them to spiritual discernment.

I owe the main content of this conference to the thirty days of spiritual exercises I made twenty-four years ago under the direction of Father Jean LAPLACE, S.J. Year after year since that time I have been able personally to verify and experience the solid basis and realism of such a teaching.

I begin with two texts from our Constitutions: both are among the most basic of those relating to formation.

How, indeed, did our Lord Jesus Christ proceed when he undertook to convert the world? He chose a number of apostles and disciples whom he himself trained in piety, and filled

(1) Conference given at the Oblate Formators Institute in Rome, June 8, 1983. It was published in OMI DOCUMENTATION, no. 122/83 (December 1983), pp. 1-9.

them with his Spirit. These men he sent forth, once they had been schooled in his teaching, to conquer the world which, before long was to bow to his holy rule. (Preface)

Jesus personally formed the disciples he had chosen, initiating them into the «mystery of the Kingdom of God» (Mk. 4:11). As a preparation for their mission he had them share in his ministry; to confirm their zeal he sent them his Spirit.

This same Spirit forms Christ in those who endeavour to follow in the Apostles' footsteps. As they enter more deeply into the mystery of the Saviour and his Church, he moves them to dedicate themselves to the evangelization of the poor. (C.45)

This reality has not changed. Jesus Christ not only calls some to Oblate life but, through his Spirit, he also internally forms the Oblate. Externally it may seem that a given organization, this or that person, such and such a program of studies hold the chief place: instead, the primary role in formation always belongs to Jesus Christ. Today, just like yesterday, it is he who forms his own apostles.

The first task of the Oblate formator, therefore, is to see what our Lord did, and then to try and work together with him in doing what he did.

I. WHAT DID THE LORD DO?

Three things are strikingly evident. First, Jesus adapts himself to each of his Apostles: he

doesn't treat Peter in exactly the same way that he treats John. Secondly, he tries to transform them from the men of the flesh that they were into men of the spirit. Finally, he sends them his Spirit and gives them his full confidence: into their hands he surrenders and entrusts his Church.

Jesus adapts himself to each one

The narrative of John the Evangelist (2) is revealing. To John and Andrew Jesus presents himself as someone they would like to meet and know well. They are disciples of John the Precursor. On a given day, when Jesus was passing by, the Precursor fixed his eyes on him and said, « Look! There is the Lamb of God! » The two disciples heard this and began to follow Christ. Jesus turned around and asked them, « What are you looking for? » « Master, » they replied, « where are you staying? » Jesus said, very simply, « Come and see. » And so they went and saw where he was staying and they remained the whole day with him. To link their lives with his they felt the need for greater intimacy with him, and Jesus met their need.

It is all very different in Peter's case. First, it is Andrew who tells him, « We have found the Messiah! » and then leads him to Jesus. Jesus, in turn, addresses him with a direct and

(2) John 1:35-51.

instant call: he looked at Peter and said, « You are Simon, the son of John; your name shall be Cephas — which translated means Peter. » This appears to be less a call and more a taking of possession, a very direct approach best suited to Peter's impetuous temperament.

In Philip's case, the procedure is more simple. Philip himself seems to be a rather simple person, perhaps even a little naive. He is basically a good man and quite dedicated, but he does not like responsibility and is easily embarrassed. We need only to recall the incident on Palm Sunday when pagans approached him and asked to see Jesus. (3) Something similar occurred at the multiplication of the loaves. Jesus, it seems, wanted to tease Philip a bit when he asked him, « Philip, what are we going to do? Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat? » Once again Andrew comes to his rescue. « There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and a couple of dried fish, but what good is that for so many? » (4) At the Last Supper itself Philip asked a question which was in everyone's mind but that no one dared to voice. Philip asked it without being too much aware of the painful element it might contain. « Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us. » (5) Jesus approaches

(3) John 12:20-22.

(4) John 6:1-9.

(5) John 14:8.

such a rather simple disciple very simply: he speaks only two words to Philip, « Follow me! » And Philip followed him.

It is quite another matter with Nathanael! Jesus was now dealing with an intellectual, and a rather critical one at that. So Jesus will again change his approach. Let us note, first of all, that Nathanael is also Philip's friend; intellectuals sometimes like to surround themselves with simple people, even with those who may be a little naive: in the latter they find ready admirers. It is Philip who leads Nathanael to Jesus. In addressing Nathanael, Philip feels obliged to use a formal approach: « We have found the one Moses spoke of in the Law — and the Prophets too — Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth. » He had, unfortunately, said a little too much. « Can anything good come from Nazareth? » was Nathanael's response. Philip, at a loss, merely replied, « Come, see for yourself! » Now let us note what Jesus does. He gives Nathanael no leeway but immediately proceeds to arouse his curiosity. When he saw him still approaching, Jesus remarked, loud enough to be heard, « This man is a true Israelite. There is no guile in him. » The tactic worked. « How do you know me? » Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, « Don't worry about it... Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree. » On hearing this, Nathanael believed. But Jesus countered: « Do you believe just because I told you I saw you under

the fig tree? You will see much greater things than that. »

In this approach of Christ we perceive a first lesson: we are to accept the other person as he is, accept him in the simple reality of his being, and adapt ourselves to him. Jesus takes people as they are, loves them as they are, and only then does he try to transform them and lead them on to his objective.

Jesus tries to transform his disciples from men of the flesh that they are into men of the spirit

Here, too, the attitude of Jesus is very enlightening. The Apostles were men of the flesh who were dreaming of human success, of the re-establishment of a temporal kingdom where there would be first places at the Lord's right hand and left. All of Jesus' efforts aim at bringing them to relinquish this purely earthly outlook, to go beyond the world of the senses and of reason alone, and to raise them to the level of faith, to have them enter into the paschal mystery.

Before Pentecost his success in this enterprise was rather limited. The Apostles seem to understand something one day and then on the morrow act as though they had learned nothing. We can think, for instance, of the attitude revealed by James and John when the Samaritans refused them hospitality: « We came to them, and they refused to receive us! Let us call down

fire from Heaven to destroy them! » Jesus turned and reprimanded them. (6)

At the Last Supper they were still arguing as to who should be regarded as the greatest among them. They had not grasped the mystery of the cross, the mystery of salvation through the cross. Even on Ascension Day they asked Jesus about the coming of Israel's temporal kingdom: « Lord, are you now going to restore the rule to Israel? » (7)

In Peter's life there are two incidents which can teach us a great deal in this matter; one is when he confesses Christ's divinity and the other, which happened later, is his reaction when the mystery of the cross was proclaimed. In the first event Jesus says that it is the Father, God's own Spirit, who inspires him; in the second, Jesus says it is Satan. We can recall the relevant Scripture texts. (8)

The first incident. Jesus asks his disciples, « Who do people say that the Son of Man is? » They replied, « Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. » Jesus then asked, « And you, who do you say that I am? » Simon Peter answered, « You are the Christ, the Son of the living God! » To his response Jesus said: « Blessed are you Simon, son of John! No mere man has revealed

(6) Cf. Luke 9:52-55.

(7) Acts 1:6.

(8) Matthew 16:13-14; Mark 8:27-34.

this to you, but my heavenly Father. » And he added, « I for my part declare to you, you are "Rock", and on this rock I will build my Church... »

Peter was certainly glad on that occasion: to be told in the presence of all the others that he is inspired by the Father's Spirit is no small compliment. But now we come to the second event.

The second event. The Evangelists narrates: « From then on Jesus started to indicate to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly..., to be put to death, and be raised up on the third day. » Now this was something else! Peter cannot go along with this. He does not dare to intervene publicly this time, but he does intervene. He took Jesus aside « and began to remonstrate with him, "May you be spared, Master! God forbid that any such thing ever happen to you! » For Peter, this was bad. Jesus immediately turned on him and said, « Get out of my sight, you satan! You are trying to make me stumble and fall. You are not judging by God's standards but by man's. »

It was no longer the Spirit of God who was leading Peter but the spirit of the world and of Satan. How can we discern the difference? By the attitude we take in regard to the mystery of the cross.

Jesus then said to his disciples: « If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very

self, take up his cross, and begin to follow in my footsteps. Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.» (9)

In the pedagogy Christ used in forming his Apostles, we have therefore two elements worth noting: that on which he insists and the criterion he gives them for discerning which spirit animates them.

What Jesus insists on most is that they be able to go beyond a purely human and earthly perception of the Kingdom of God. The criterion he gives them is the mystery of the cross, of salvation through the cross — a scandal to the Jews, foolishness to the pagans, but the very wisdom of God.

This is the sum total of all that Jesus tried to bring home to his disciples during the three years of his public ministry. He does relatively little pastoral planning; instead, he goes straight to the heart of the problem: he initiates them in the central salvation mystery which ought to be the soul of every apostolic man. Let us note that he comes back on this even after his resurrection. To the disciples of Emmaus he said, « What little sense you have! How slow you are to believe all that the prophets have announced! Did not the Messiah have to undergo all this so as to enter into his glory? » (10)

(9) Matthew 16:24-25.

(10) Luke 24:25-26.

When he had given them his Spirit, Jesus sent his disciples into the world

The Apostles' initiation was complete with Pentecost. They had finally understood the essence of the mystery of salvation. They understood it in their hearts, through humiliation and suffering, as well as in their minds. They could now go anywhere in the world to proclaim this mystery to the people: they had become true witnesses.

The book of the *Acts of the Apostles* shows us the profound transformation that had taken place in them, and it also tells us the content of their witness: Jesus who had died and is risen again; Jesus, the Saviour of mankind.

More could be said about Jesus' pedagogy: how he initiated the Apostles to prayer, to compassion and goodness toward others, to inner freedom. What we have just witnessed, it seems to me, goes to the very heart of the matter and responds to the objective we had chosen. I will therefore not say anything further on this point and go on instead to our second question.

II. WHAT THE OBLATE FORMATOR DOES

He does what Jesus did. He welcomes and sincerely loves the candidate; as soon as possible he brings the candidate face to face with the mystery of Christ the Saviour and gradually

initiates him to spiritual discernment. And thus the candidate will be able, in fidelity to and under the leadership of the Spirit, to carry on the great work of the world's redemption.

Welcome the candidate with love

If there is no love, there is no formation. In this regard, the new Constitutions which treat of formation insist on three things: the *person* of the candidate is the central feature: formation exists for his benefit; formation is progressive by nature: it is *growth* and is something that happens within the candidate; formation has a fraternal, communitarian character: its natural milieu is the apostolic *community* wherein all are « involved in a process of mutual evangelization » (C.48).

These three distinctive elements are essential for the Oblate formator. He is, like Christ was to the Apostles, very close to the aspirants. He lives with them, shares with them, adapts himself to each of them, accepting each one as he is, and he helps them grow by the example of his life, his prayer, his observations, his daily behaviour. He is more of an older brother and a friend to them than he is a person invested with authority. He needs lots of patience and confidence and love if he is to persevere in this task.

On the other hand, it can be very rewarding work. When quoting the Constitutions (C.48), we

called formation « a process of mutual evangelization. » Not only does your close contact with the young shield you from growing old too quickly; often enough, too, you have the privilege of marvelling at a generosity, a thirst for authenticity, a spirit of creativity, freedom and daring, a sense of justice that you will find more rarely in other groups. We can recall St. Benedict's remark in the Benedictine Rule:

Whenever important questions are to be decided in the monastery, the Abbot will call together the whole community and will himself state what the issue is. Then he will listen to the advice of his brothers, ponder the matter by himself, and thereupon do that which to him seems to be the most useful. We have said that all are to be called together; for often it is to the youngest that the Lord reveals what is best. (11)

It is very important that the young men admitted to the novitiate already have an adequate human and Christian maturity and show sufficiently clear signs of a real vocation. Otherwise the process of religious formation is slowed down for months and sometimes for years. Moreover, the formation community is burdened and often paralyzed.

This first point, namely, welcoming the candidate, could be developed much more. I will not do so now, however, for I consider it more useful for our purpose to insist rather on the points which follow.

(11) Chapter III.

As soon as possible, bring the candidates face to face with Christ the Saviour

We said that it is Jesus Christ who forms his apostles. The sooner you eclipse yourselves in his presence, the greater the chance that the religious formation you want to give will succeed.

So do not hesitate to put the candidate, right from the moment he enters religious life, face to face with Jesus, and with Jesus crucified, with Jesus who saves the world through the mystery of his cross and resurrection. Confront him with this mystery and allow him to react. This is the starting point for Oblate formation. Religious life can be lived only in a perspective of faith.

Recall in this regard the radicalism of the Founders of different religious Orders, of St. Francis of Assisi, Ignatius Loyola, Father de Mazonod..., also of those who are the inspiration of contemporary religious renewal, v.g. Father de Foucauld or Mother Teresa.

In the general examen which precedes admission into the Company of Jesus, St. Ignatius wants the Jesuit aspirant put face to face with Christ our Lord and then asked « if he accepts and desires with all his might everything that Christ our Lord loved and embraced... and this to the point of desiring injustice, false witness, insult, being treated and considered a fool (with-

out giving reason to be) because he wants in some way to resemble our Creator and Lord Jesus Christ and to imitate him by putting on his garment and livery... »

To be accepted in the Company, the aspirant must have such a desire, or at least sincerely desire to achieve it, « to have the desire for such holy desires », out of love for Christ and for Christ crucified, and he must also be disposed to take the means thereto. Together with God's grace, the Company will help him towards this goal. This entire passage should be read and meditated, even in its rather inelegant style. (12)

Father de Mazenod uses the same approach for the Oblates. In his words:

How should men who want to follow in the footsteps of their divine Master Jesus Christ conduct themselves if they, in their turn, are to win back the many souls who have thrown off his yoke? They must strive to be saints. They must walk courageously along the same paths trodden by so many before them: apostolic labourers for the Gospel who, while carrying out the same ministry to which they themselves now feel called, handed on such splendid examples of virtue. They must wholly renounce themselves, striving solely for the glory of God, the good of the Church, and the growth and salvation of souls. They must constantly renew themselves in the spirit of their vocation, living in a state of habitual self-denial and seeking at all times

(12) Cf. Constitutions of the Company of Jesus, The General Examen, Ch. IV, nos. 101-103.

to reach the very summit of perfection. They must work unremittingly to become humble, meek, obedient, lovers of poverty and penance, mortified, free from inordinate attachment to the world or to family, men filled with zeal, ready to sacrifice goods, talents, ease, self, even their very life, for the love of Jesus Christ, the service of the Church, and the sanctification of their brethren. (Preface to the Constitutions, pp. 11-12)

Articles 2 and 4 of the present Constitutions as well as the corresponding excerpts from the Constitutions of 1826 express the same outlook. The same is true of article 63 on the Oblate cross and the parallel 1818 text of the Founder.

Putting the aspirant into the presence of the mystery of Christ who gives his life for the world, bringing the candidate back regularly, as circumstances require, to contemplating the mystery, and this throughout all the years of formation, is the greatest service a formator can give him. For it is in the mystery of Christ the Saviour that the candidate will gradually discover the centre of his Oblate life and the basis for his missionary zeal and perseverance.

The process of the candidate's formation is essentially an interior reality. What takes place is that the novice or the new Oblate, « led by the Spirit living within him, develops his personal relationship to Jesus and gradually enters into the mystery of Salvation. » (C.56) The formator assists him from the outside, supporting him,

accompanying him, and helping him always to keep in sight this central focus of his formation.

The first step consisted in placing the novice face to face with Christ the Saviour so that a dialogue of friendship can begin between them. The second step is:

Initiate the new Oblate to spiritual discernment

The dialogue of friendship with Christ the Saviour is meant to last a lifetime. An Oblate's true worth is proportionate to the fervour and generosity which animates him.

Once the scholasticate or the years of initial formation are over, the formators are no longer present; nevertheless, Christ's Spirit within each Oblate will be active and continually at work.

Other spirits will also be present, clamoring to make themselves heard. Hence the paramount importance that formators initiate the new Oblate to spiritual discernment; that formators bring him to recognize, through experience, the concrete objective and subjective signs that will enable him throughout his entire life to identify which spirit is leading him on.

Remember the case of Peter. One day it is God's Spirit who inspires him; and some time later it is the spirit of Satan. Every disciple of Jesus, no matter how far advanced he may be, remains subject to this diversity of influences or inner motions.

Spiritual discernment has been defined as

« the ability, acquired through experience, of recognizing the influences that come from God in order to accept them, and those which come from the world or the devil in order to reject them. »

St. Ignatius' thirty days of Spiritual Exercises are an excellent experience to learn, in practice, the rules governing discernment. All our formation at the novitiate and scholasticate should strive for this goal. The greatest service you can give a young man is to make him into a man of God, a Christian adult in the faith, led by God's Spirit.

As we have already mentioned, the objective rule for Christian discernment is accepting, in faith, the mystery of the cross, both in Jesus and in ourselves, as the road to salvation. Fidelity to the Church and obedience are also indispensable discernment criteria.

The subjective rule for discernment corresponds to the spiritual movements Jesus mentioned in the Gospel and which are manifest in ourselves: joy, peace, truth, openness to others...

God's action is recognizable in its effects. Attitudes that bring us joy and peace usually come from God; those which are troubling and bring on sadness are at least questionable; the ones which take us out and beyond ourselves, which open us to others, usually come from God; those which move us to withdraw within

ourselves, which make us complacent, lead us to self-glorifying, are bad. We need only to reflect on the rich young man: « At these words (of Jesus' invitation), the man's face fell. He went away sad, for he had many possessions. » (13)

A heart that is calm and pure is needed to discern spiritual influences, and these latter must always be related to the objective rule. For any pious joy or apostolic desire to be authentic, it must conform to the teaching of the Beatitudes: the choice of Christ who is poor, obedient, humiliated. Once again we can recall the zeal of James and John ready to invoke Heaven's fire on those who did not receive them, or the Apostles' insistent longing for the coming of the temporal kingdom: sentiments such as these cannot come from the spirit of God.

I think I have now said enough so that you can see how I conceive the formation of an Oblate in regard to what is its very core. The candidate's life is to be fixed on Christ the Saviour and he is to become a man led by Christ's Spirit.

The Oblate formator is there to put him on this road and accompany him all along the way through all the years of formation. The formator's active intervention will be simultaneously discreet, constant, and completely oriented to the Founder's ideal, namely, of giving to the

(13) Mark 10:22.

Congregation « men of interior life, truly apostolic men. » (14)

As a complement and follow-up to these reflections, I suggest that you carefully read and meditate the Constitutions and Rules articles which the Select Index lists under the words: **Christ, Jesus, Holy Spirit, and Discernment.**

(14) Mazenod to Tempier, December 13, 1815.

XVI

OBLATE FORMATION ACCORDING TO THE CONSTITUTIONS AND RULES (1)

Basic traits of Oblate formation. - Its main general thrust. - A process of integration and unification. - Three preferential areas. - Mary's presence.

The organizers of this session have invited me to speak to you on Oblate formation according to the new Constitutions and Rules. I am very pleased to do so. It was specified that the period in question covered the time of first religious commitment till the time of perpetual vows. I shall therefore particularly insist on this period, keeping in mind that we are dealing with both scholastics and Brothers.

We shall see first what are the fundamental traits characteristic of Oblate formation. Then we shall consider the general thrust to be given to this period: intensifying one's friendship with Christ and entering more deeply into the mystery of salvation. Thirdly, we shall state what

(1) Address given at the European Formators' Congress at Vermicino in Italy, on August 27, 1983. It has been published in OMI DOCUMENTATION, no. 125/84 (April 1984), pp. 1-10.

steps are proper to this period: an effort at integrating and unifying one's life. Finally, we shall consider the three special areas in which this effort is to be achieved: living the life of the theological virtues, missionary spirit, and the self-denial proper to the vows.

I. FUNDAMENTAL TRAITS OF OBLATE FORMATION

Compared to the old Constitutions of 1928, the present articles on formation have been extended considerably. From being simply a chapter of Part Three, placed between those that treat of the government and of leaving the Congregation, these articles now form a complete part by themselves, Part TWO of the new text. This step was already taken at the 1966 Chapter. The text we have today is more concise, more unified, better balanced; it has both preserved and improved the tenor of the 1966 text.

In the present text, here are the traits which characterize Oblate formation.

Firstly, it is *personal*, that is, it takes into account — indeed, very much so — the person of the candidate. Oblate formation exists for him, it is centered on him. It takes him as he is; it tries to respect the values he bears within him; it strives to adapt to his tempo; it presents him with a challenge, namely, the Oblate ideal as it is presented in Part ONE of the Constitutions; and it aims at his « integral growth »

(C.47) according to this ideal. Its goal, therefore, is to lead the candidate to the fullness of his being as an « apostolic man, capable of living the Oblate charism. » (C.46)

The second trait flows from the first and is this: formation will be essentially *growth*, growth which takes place from within: it is not a « mould » or « shape » imposed from without. It will be gradual and require much patience. It will not be judged primarily on the objective value and wealth of the programs offered — although these are indispensable — but on the degree in which the candidate has assimilated them. A candidate who is incapable of maturing interiorly, who is incapable of acquiring experience, is not suitable for Oblate life. Right from the beginning it is presupposed that the candidate is capable of reacting, of deeply responding, not only at the level of the intelligence but also at the level of the will, the sensitivity, of one's whole being. He is capable of an interior life. We must also presuppose, or rather we believe, that the Spirit of God is at work in him and that the Spirit's action will intensify in the measure that formation continues and proceeds.

Finally there is a third trait which characterizes Oblate formation: it is *community oriented*. The apostolic community is its normal milieu, a community wherein, according to the Constitutions, « all are involved in a process of mutual evangelization » (C.48). In a later ar-

ticle the Constitutions specify that « as disciples of the same Lord, the formation personnel along with those in formation make up one community, » even if the formators, in fact, « constitute a nucleus at the heart of the community... and have a specific responsibility. » (C.51)

It is of primary necessity that the Oblate formator should take these traits into account. Like Christ with his Apostles, he will be very close to the candidates: novices, scholastics, young Brothers. He will live with them, share with them, adapt himself to each one, accepting them as they are and helping them grow through the example of his life, through his prayer, his reflections, his everyday behaviour. He will be, in their midst, an elder brother and a friend more than a man endowed with authority. At the same time, however, he will be an animator and a guide; his principal task will be to accompany the candidate, to enlighten him on his vocation, to encourage him and initiate him in genuine spiritual discernment.

The formator himself will reap many benefits in his turn. His contact with young people will not only have the advantage of preventing him from aging too quickly, but he will often have occasion to admire their generosity, their concern for authenticity, their spirit of creativity, freedom and daring, their sense of justice — all of which are seen less often in other milieux.

II. THE GENERAL THRUST OF OBLATE FORMATION

What should be the general thrust of formation during temporary commitment? The answer is provided in article 56 of the Constitutions which deals with the novitiate: « Led by the Spirit living within him, the novice develops his personal relationship to Jesus and gradually enters into the mystery of Salvation through liturgy and prayer. »

Growing in friendship with Christ and entering into the mystery of Salvation, striving to develop an apostolic friendship with Christ, this is indeed the basic thrust in the years of temporary commitment! The formed Oblate should be a friend of Christ, a friend who is sound and faithful, capable of suffering and giving his life for Christ. He should be a friend « who cooperates » in Christ's work of salvation, who « shares in his mission » and « devotes himself to the evangelization of the poor. » This is exactly what the first articles of the Constitutions teach us. (CC. 1-5).

To become Christ's friend, to leave all things to follow him, not mainly to be alone with him and enjoy his presence in the silence of the cloister — that would be a contemplative vocation — but to « enter the combat, to fight, even unto death, for the greater glory of the most holy and sublime name of God » (Preface to the Constitutions). This is a friendship which impels

us to go out to the world, to go out to all the peoples of the earth, especially to « those whose condition cries out for salvation and for the hope which only Jesus Christ can fully bring. » (C.5)

In the novitiate — this is the irreplaceable starting point — the candidate will be brought face to face with Christ, with the crucified Christ who saves the world through the mystery of his cross and resurrection. He will be introduced into the presence of this mystery and given space to react thereto. If his reaction is positive, if he is touched by this mystery and anxious for a deeper commitment to following Christ the Saviour, he will be invited to take a further step and bind himself through promises or vows. The Congregation will help him to go forward along this path to the point of a definitive and total gift of himself. That will be the principal task of Oblate formation during the years of temporary commitment.

Article 56 already points out the means, especially the contemplative means, to a greater penetration of this mystery:

(The novice) gradually enters into the mystery of Salvation through liturgy and prayer. He becomes accustomed to listening to the Lord in Scripture, to meet him in the Eucharist and to recognize him in other persons and events. He comes also to contemplate God at work in the life and mission of the Founder, as well as in the Congregation's history and traditions. Opportunities for pastoral experience in an Oblate setting help him realize the demands of a mis-

sionary vocation and the unity of the apostolic religious life.

On the question of asceticism, of discipline in one's life as a means of developing friendship with Christ, the article remains discreetly silent. It merely uses the expression: to « help them realise the demands of a missionary vocation. » Rule 41 seeks to be more precise, but there again, the original French version remains very reserved in its wording: it gave preference to *depassements* (self-transcendence), to *renoncements* (renunciation), while the English gets more simply to the point with *self-denial*: « life in community... will help novices... and initiate them into the self-denial which is part of the apostolic religious life. »

Here we have a sign of the times indeed! Is all this due to concern for the Gospel or because we suffer from a lack of vocabulary? I am not too sure. But let us leave aside the question of terminology or lack of it! The necessity for the cross and for self-denial is clearly stated in other articles of the Constitutions, especially in articles 2 and 4. There is the experience of all the Saints: only if we accept to suffer with him will we really experience Christ's friendship.

III. THE STEPS PROPER TO THIS PERIOD

During this period of temporary commitment, a number of values are presented to the

young Oblate. They are more numerous and varied than during the novitiate: intellectual and cultural values such as study or professional specialization; the benefits accruing from leisure and social activities, a rather open milieu, the possibility of pleasant and enriching outside contacts and sometimes of travel; apostolic and missionary values, different forms of pastoral commitment; and finally there are values strictly spiritual or liturgical, or values of Oblate history and Oblate spirituality. At the same time the young Oblate feels that he is becoming more adult, freer, capable of undertaking things and succeeding.

As far as formation is concerned, the period which follows novitiate is usually more important and will leave an ever deeper impression on the Oblate than the novitiate itself. The novitiate has laid the foundations but it is now that the building will be constructed, a building which will be either well made or, on the contrary, fragile, with little consistency and badly proportioned.

The multiplicity of values presented is a grace for some; for others it may be an occasion for failure. The former will finish this period more adult, more generous, more culturally developed and better equipped to serve the Church and the poor, in a word, more deeply Oblate. Others, on the other hand, if they do reach the end, will be more superficial and disorganized.

They will have touched upon everything but without ever succeeding in getting things into order. They will not have achieved a deeper unity within themselves. As early as twenty years ago, at the time of Vatican II, this problem was raised in connection with priestly formation.

If they must, at one and the same time, do their theology, read newspapers, develop friendships, take up carpentry, learn to distinguish Mozart from Bach, keep up with the social evolution of the diocese on the pretext of integrating human values into their formation — not to speak of their liturgical and sacramental life, their faith problems, their discouragement in mental prayer — are they not being confronted with an impossible balancing act in a setup that is all too complex? Will they not end up by resolving the problem by merely touching upon everything, being content with overflying the lot at a distance, with seeing everything in a sort of a featurless line-drawing — their spiritual life as well as their favourite sport? (2)

Although they do so in very few words, our new Constitutions do present an answer to this question. The reply consists essentially in requiring an effort of integrating all these values and unifying one's life in friendship with Christ and in missionary service. We find this taught in articles 50 and 65.

Article 50 reminds us first of all of the aim

(2) M. PAISSAC, « Valeurs humaines et formation sacerdotale », in the review *Vocations sacerdotales et religieuses*, no. 224, October 1963, pp. 491-517.

of Oblate formation: « To develop those whom Jesus calls to total discipleship in the Congregation, until they are mature religious, capable of carrying on the Oblate mission. » It then points out the road that must be followed: « This requires an assimilation in faith of all the dimensions of our vocation. » And finally, among these dimensions there is insistence on the self-denial of the three vows, one of the realities of the religious life that is particularly difficult to assimilate: « Gospel poverty, celibate love and availability for missionary service. »

Article 65 takes up the same idea and develops it further. Having said that basic Oblate formation is the same for scholastics and Brothers, the article reasserts the need for integrating all the activities and aspects of daily life: « New Oblates will live out their consecration in such a way that it permeates all aspects and activities of their daily life. » This article then reminds us of the aim we must have in view: « Helped by the formation team and their spiritual advisors, they will gradually become men of God, missionaries rooted in Christ who are ready to give themselves totally by their perpetual oblation. » On the same theme of integration, this article then points out the Oblate character of formation: « During this period, the Oblate charism and traditions are studied and lived. »

The Rules which follow — 52, 53 and 54 — are of particular importance and take up the

same idea. Rule 52 deals with spiritual maturity: « Spiritual formation aims at maturity in faith based on a personal decision for Christ. » Rule 53 is concerned with acquiring human maturity towards one's self, one's brothers, particularly those constituted in authority, and also toward the self-denial inherent in the commitments of Oblate life. We should note here that in the French text the word *renoncement* is used, and not *depassement*.

And in the face of all this maturity — it could seem to be a bit heavy — the need was felt to add the necessity of also developing « a spirit of daring and creativity. » It is worthwhile quoting this Rule 53 in full:

Character formation should lead the new Oblate to come to a realistic assessment of himself, to assume responsibility and to relate in a mature way to his brothers and to those in authority. It should promote leadership qualities and a sense of daring and creativity. Such formation should, moreover, enable him to face with love, peace and joy the renunciation inherent in religious commitment.

Finally, Rule 54 deals with the integration of pastoral experiences and the maturing of the apostolic man: « Capable supervisors will initiate them into the ministry and show them how to reflect on their experience in the light of the Gospel. »

IV. THREE PREFERENTIAL AREAS

From these articles and a few others in Part ONE of the Constitutions, I single out three areas that are of supreme importance in this period of formation: the deepening of lived theological virtues, the development of a missionary spirit and the integration of the vows. It is in these areas that the young Oblate is to achieve his interior unity and attain sufficient maturity for perpetual profession.

The deepening of lived theological virtues

This is the reality referred to by the phrases: « assimilation in faith of all the dimensions of our vocation » (C.50) and « maturity in faith based on a personal decision for Christ » (R.52). Our new Constitutions insist on living the theological virtues. In doing so they take a real step forward from the old ones. We read in article 11: « Growing in faith, hope and love, we commit ourselves to be a leaven of the Beatitudes at the heart of the world, » and in article 31: « We are pilgrims, walking with Jesus in faith, hope and love. »

It has often been repeated that religious life, every religious life, even the most missionary, before it is an enabling to be of service, it is an enabling to make and be a consecration. It commits the whole person to a relationship with God, and is based and centered on values not

accessible to the human eye alone, the values of the Beatitudes. This is so true that, in the words of St. Thomas, for the religious the service of his neighbour becomes « the service of God. » (3)

Consecration to the glory of God and to the setting up of his Kingdom is something beyond man's capability. It is only in living the theological virtues, under the Spirit of God within us, that we can possibly penetrate this mystery and arrive at a total commitment within the mystery itself. To reach the point of « seeing the world through the eyes of the crucified Saviour » (C.4) and « leaving all things to follow Jesus » and « desiring to cooperate with him » (C.2), this requires a self-transcendence that one cannot possibly achieve on his own. God alone can do this, and he does it through growth in living the theological virtues.

By contrast, at the origin of many defections in priestly and religious life, it is possible to detect a gradual weakening in living the theological virtues. Faith, hope and charity have become progressively stunted in the soul. God, Christ as the Son of God, the Church as the Sacrament of Salvation, are no longer — for these people — sufficiently living realities. Human values, the earthly world, the things that can be touched by the hand and seen by the

(3) II-II, 188, 2.

eye, have taken the place of these values and are eventually the deciding factors.

It is essential that the Oblate, during initial formation, should seriously and consistently practise seeing things as God sees them, valuing them as God values them and walking in Christ's footsteps with a heart that is generous and fully awake in faith, hope and charity.

Development of a missionary spirit

The second area that must be emphasized during this period is the development of missionary spirit. It is an aspect characteristic of Oblate life; it is everywhere throughout the Constitutions. Article 5 states: « We are a missionary Congregation. Our principal service in the Church is to proclaim Christ and his Kingdom to the most abandoned. We preach the Gospel among people who have not yet received it and help them see their own values in its light. Where the Church is already established, our commitment is to those groups it touches least. »

Our religious consecration is intrinsically missionary. Not only does it intensify the desire for God and for friendship with Christ, not only does it promote the practice of the virtues, but it also and in an altogether special way it impels us to go out to the world and to work tirelessly for the evangelization of the poor. It is, more-

over, an offering constantly renewed by the requirements of the mission. (C.2)

The Oblate's prayer is missionary. « It is as missionaries that we worship, in the various ways that the Spirit suggests to us. We come before him bearing with us the daily pressures of our anxiety for those to whom he sends us (cf. 2 Cor 11:28). Our life in all its dimensions is a prayer that, in us and through us, God's Kingdom come. » (C.32) « As they enter more deeply into the mystery of the Saviour and his Church, (the Spirit) moves them to dedicate themselves to the evangelization of the poor. » (C.45) In return, every act for them becomes a search for and an encounter with Christ:

We achieve unity in our life only in and through Jesus Christ. Our ministry involves us in a variety of tasks, yet each act in life is an occasion for personal encounter with the Lord, who through us gives himself to others and through others gives himself to us.

While maintaining within ourselves an atmosphere of silence and inner peace, we seek his presence in the hearts of the people and in the events of daily life as well as in the Word of God, in the Sacraments and in prayer. (C.31)

The Oblate's asceticism will also be missionary. It springs from his apostolic commitment and from real life and is oriented toward the redemption of the world.

Faith moves us to accept for the love of the crucified Lord our personal sufferings, the various

trials of the ministry and the daily demands of community life. (C.34)

The cross of Jesus Christ is central to our mission. Like the apostle Paul we « preach Christ and him crucified » (1 Cor 2:2). If we bear in our body the death of Jesus, it is with the hope that the life of Jesus, too, may be seen in our body (cf. 2 Cor 4:10). Through the eyes of our crucified Saviour we see the world which he redeemed with his blood, desiring that those in whom he continues to suffer will also know the power of his resurrection (cf. Phil 3:10). (C.4)

Finally, the missionary aspect is symbolised by the Oblate cross received on the day of perpetual profession. This cross, in the words of article 63, « is a constant reminder of the love of the Saviour who wishes to draw all hearts to himself and sends us out as his co-workers. »

The progressive integration of the self-denial proper to the three vows

This aspect is also essential during the period of temporary commitment. Great attention must be paid to it, not only to ensure prudent discernment of vocation but also as a path specially suited to lead to religious maturity. In speaking of consecrated chastity, Rule 11 makes a discreet reference to this progressive growth or integration: « In living their consecration, Oblates will endeavour to help each other to grow in maturity. » As we have already said, however, it is especially in Part TWO on formation that

emphasis is laid on this aspect of growth, of integration, of unification in the Oblate's being. « Formation is a process which aims at the integral growth of a person and lasts a lifetime. It enables us to accept ourselves as we are and develop into the persons we are called to be. » (C.47)

This applies in a special way to the area of the vows. The objective of the vows is to create within us a new being, the Gospel being, a being who reacts instinctively as Christ himself reacted. This implies a complete change of direction of our being which is so deeply stamped with original sin. The vow, like the cross, is accepted only because it causes us to live more intensely: it completes rather than goes against our being, but it begins by going against it. This going against it, this renunciation comes into us like a purifying fire. Our whole being must become chaste, poor, obedient as was that of Christ. This integration or permeation is a process that takes place only very slowly.

At the beginning, the self-denial of the vows takes place in the will, and the will has sufficient domination over the senses and the passions to succeed in checking any movements of rebellion. If such were not the case, it would be imprudent to make vows. Nevertheless, even if this mastery of the will does exist, our being still remains in a state of war. The area of the senses

and of our instincts has not yet accepted the gift.

There are days when, because of some sensual temptation or a superior's decision, a real struggle takes place in the depths of our being. Our whole effort must concentrate on making the senses and instincts as chaste, as poor, as obedient as is the will. This task takes a long time, a very long time, in fact it lasts a whole lifetime. Nevertheless, by the time of perpetual profession it should have attained a state of stability and peace sufficient to guarantee the future.

Since I have already dealt with this point in another address (4), I shall not develop it further here.

Other areas certainly remain to be examined, especially the areas of formation specific to scholastics and to the Brothers, and that would be more than sufficient material for another address. I will conclude by saying a few words about the place that Mary holds in Oblate formation.

Mary, always present

Her place remains discreet. In Part TWO of the Constitutions she is mentioned only once,

(4) Cf. above: « What do I Expect of Formation? », p. 223.

« Jesus Christ, the First Formator of Oblates », pp. 246-248.

but the phrase used gives us to understand that we must often come back to her who is the « Patroness of our Congregation » and « the Mother (of Oblates) ». (C.10)

Mary is presented as the example who inspires the apostolic man: « The goal of the formation process is that each of us become an apostolic man, capable of living the Oblate charism. Inspired by the example of Mary, we live... our personal commitment to Jesus Christ, while serving the Church and God's Kingdom. » (C.46) And in fact, in Part ONE of the Constitutions, she is mentioned in every one of the aspects we have examined.

Mary is present in the development of our friendship with Christ: « With Mary Immaculate, the faithful handmaid of the Lord, and under the guidance of the Spirit, we enter into closer union with Jesus Christ. We will contemplate with her the mysteries of the Incarnate Word, especially in praying the rosary. » (C.36)

She is also present in the deepening of our living the theological virtues: « She received Christ in order to share him with all the world, whose hope he is. In her we recognize the model of the Church's faith and of our own. » (C.10)

Likewise, she is present at the heart of our missionary life: « In the joys and sorrows of our missionary life we feel close to her who is the Mother of Mercy. » (C.10)

Finally, she is at the very centre of our reli-

gious life and therefore present with us as we strive to assimilate the vows: « Mary Immaculate, in her faith response and total openness to the call of the Spirit, is the model and guardian of our consecrated life. » (C.13)

Let us hope that formators, in their turn, will not neglect to impress upon young Oblates their duty to make Mary known and loved: « Wherever our ministry takes us, we will strive to instill genuine devotion to the Immaculate Virgin who prefigures God's final victory over all evil. » (C.10)

XVII

THE COMMUNITY SUPERIOR (1)

Authority / Service. - Obedience / liberation. - A brother and a friend. - The way of truth. - An instrument of unity and peace. - A stimulus and a support. - The Founder's example.

Today the statement is readily made that these are hard times for superiors! We expect pretty well everything from them, and often these expectations contradict each other.

In the very heart of our lives as superiors Christ is present. « As to you, avoid the title "Rabbi". One among you is your teacher, the rest are learners. Do not call anyone on earth your father. Only one is your father, the One in heaven. Avoid being called teachers. Only one is your teacher, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be the one who serves the rest. » (2) As Vatican II has taught us, in Jesus authority becomes service and obedience liberation.

After some consideration on the theme of authority-service and obedience-liberation, we

(1) This text amalgamates three brief addresses prepared for gatherings of superiors or provincials on February 9, 1979 and June 18, 1982.

(2) Matthew 23:8-11.

will dwell on the attitudes that are best suited to a good Oblate superior.

I. DOCTRINAL REFLECTIONS

Authority - service

Accepting to be superior means putting oneself at the service of others. « We exhort you to admonish the unruly; cheer the fainthearted; support the weak; be patient toward all... Always seek one another's good... Rejoice always... Render constant thanks... Do not stifle the Spirit... Test everything; retain what is good. » (3)

Accepting to be superior means renouncing to be master of one's own time, of one's work, of one's own choices; or, to put it better, as someone said to me a few days ago, to be superior means freely to choose putting all these things at the service of others as the Lord Jesus did: « My life, no one takes it from me: I lay it down freely. » (4)

It means knowing how to listen to others; how, together with them, to seek God's will; how to accompany them in accomplishing God's will; how to strengthen them and sustain them and help them grow in their vocation; together with them, how to build a better world and to build the Church of tomorrow.

(3) 1 Thessalonians 5:14-21.

(4) John 10:18.

As in every position of service, accepting to be superior means accepting a post wherein people will disturb you; it means sacrificing works which may perhaps be more pleasant and promise greater professional fulfillment. It also means taking on a burden which may seem heavy, especially today when there is so much pressure, when so many appeals make themselves heard and the Institute disposes of so little youthful strength.

Formerly the Constitutions said: « No one will either solicit or refuse any employment... » (5) In this matter today, everyone is referred to his own conscience. Let that be. I have the impression, however, that people are sometimes prone to refuse this kind of service too easily, either because they are busy in something else or because they are afraid of it. In the long run, such an attitude runs the risk of weakening an apostolic corps like ours. The Congregation needs men who are disposed to say yes to tasks like being superior, and to say yes without having to be overly begged to do so. I understand that in some circumstances one may refuse but then it should be done after serious discernment and even, when this is possible, after community discernment.

To be superior in a spirit of service, « to command by obedience » is perhaps the proper for-

(5) 1928 Constitutions and Rules, art. 236.

mula: for, in the domain of faith, we are all brothers, we have only one Master and Lord, we are all on the same level, namely, in obedience to the Father's will, as Jesus has taught us: « Doing the will of him who sent me is my food. » (6)

Obedience - liberation

In the final analysis it is this obedience which makes us constantly available in God's hands. Our life and that of every Oblate is first of all lived within ourselves, in our relationship to God. God is truth. « The truth will set you free. » (7) In the very depths of our being we are in constant dialogue with the truth. It reaches us through a variety of avenues: from a General Chapter, an election or a consultation, a superior or a fellow Oblate, from events. In all these ways God is speaking to us and is calling us. In this personal dialogue with God, the intermediary is secondary, regardless of whether he is the Superior General or the provincial, a fellow Oblate or an event. The essential point is this: I am receiving a call from God and I respond to it or I do not.

The relationships between mutual influence and obedience are true only in this perspective.

(6) John 4:34.

(7) John 8:32.

I should not be influenced by another inasmuch as he is this other person, but rather by the truth which is in him, and when I refuse this latter influence, I am not refusing a man but God. Likewise, I do not obey a man as a man, even if he were the Pope, but the truth of the mission which is in him; and when I refuse this obedience, I do not disobey a man, but God. In other words, I am not subject to a single man — we are all brothers — but to the truth: either to the truth of the spirit which animates him, and then I accept being influenced by a man who is good and true, or the truth of the mission he has received and then I am obedient to lawful authority.

Such is the liberating obedience in the religious state! This is what constitutes its greatness and also its quality of risk. It is based upon love and upon a free choice we made on a given day and which we intended to be definitive, but which we always retain the power of revoking. You have most likely all already experienced the helplessness we feel when we are dealing with someone who will not obey. Perhaps you then feel the temptation of the Sons of Thunder: I am going to force him! « Let fire from heaven come down upon him! » No! If persuasion and love and the free acceptance of obedience do not suffice, your effective power is very limited. You will have to be patient and sometimes accept with sadness that this brother is little by

little divorcing himself from the apostolic corps that he freely entered.

This is true for all spiritual authority. Before someone who does not want to obey, the Superior is powerless precisely because the authority he holds is always conditioned: it requires from his brother the free acceptance of the obedience as a channel by which God speaks to him.

In God's sight we are all brothers and have only one Master and Lord whom, when all is said and done, is the only Being we obey. From this point of view, we have to admit that the higher our rank, the more we have to obey: « I am not seeking my own will but the will of him who sent me. » (8)

II. PRACTICAL ATTITUDES

I remember long ago reading a book of the 17th century (1636) entitled: *Quel est le meilleur gouvernement, le rigoureux ou le doux?* Its author was a Jesuit and also a provincial, Father Etienne Binet. He detailed 18 reasons in favour of stern government and 44 in favour of benign government. « Make yourselves loved by loving from the heart and like a father, » is one of the main things he advises. He adds: « When a tender little lamb has broken a leg, the good shepherd

(8) John 5:30.

does not break its other one, nor does he beat it for the mishap; but he carefully sets and binds the broken leg and he carries this poor sheep in his arms. »

The whole book is filled with excellent advice, such that reflects quite well the Lord's own tenderness towards his people: « When Israel was a child I loved him... it was I who taught him how to walk, who took him in my arms... » (9)

I shall very briefly outline what ought to be the attitudes of a good Oblate superior.

A brother and a friend

Let him be a real brother and friend to the members of his community. Let him not fear to love them by putting himself at their service, by showering them with great care and goodness. Let him know how to be loved by them also. No one who leaves the Congregation or the priesthood from our ranks should ever be able to say that he did not find this friendship and support in the communities wherein he lived or in his superiors.

A way of truth

Let him be a channel of truth for his brothers. « The truth will set you free, » Jesus said.

(9) Hosea 11:1-4.

For us, truth is the conformity of our activity to God's design for us. The Superior should not fear to place his brothers face to face with the truth, the truth of their commitment as religious and priests and the truth of their mission as apostolic men. He must do this with tact and love, striving to discern together with them what the Lord expects from them, but he must do so.

An instrument of unity and peace

Let him be an instrument of unity and peace for his brothers. The Congregation is an « apostolic corps » within the Church. To foment division, demolish one's brothers, contest everything amounts to destroying this corps and paralyzing its activity.

In his own community as well as in the province and in the Church, the religious superior should promote unity by facilitating dialogue and mutual understanding and by striving to create bonds, to build bridges between persons, and first of all between his Oblate brothers and between the members of his community.

A stimulus and a support

Let him be a stimulus for his brothers in their search for God and in their apostolate among the poor. They have joined us for this purpose, namely, to find God in the *sequela Christi* and to

become missionaries to the poor. Not to help them live this ideal would be tantamount to failing in our first duty. Community meetings, review of life, community prayer, evaluation of work, a good word now and then... all these are means to achieve this. It is up to the superior to take the initiative and put these into effect.

An apostolic corps is worth what its men are worth. If the superior is not concerned about his men, if he does not care about their health, their spiritual and human growth, their happiness, if he does not support them in their work, the dynamic forces of his men will weaken and the apostolic team will fall apart.

The Founder's example

The Founder paid a great deal of attention to the physical and spiritual health of the Oblates. There are many letters of his wherein he exhorts his Fathers to be careful about their health. They should sleep enough: seven hours a night is not too much and we should not disturb those who need a siesta in the afternoon. They should eat enough. They should limit themselves in their preaching and not risk being reduced to spitting blood. In short, they should avoid « killing themselves »: in wanting to do too much, they end up being unable to carry out their duty as missionaries.

The same is true for the spiritual life. If it

is not sufficiently nourished, it grows weak and ends up dying. « In God's name, » he wrote to Father Guigues on May 27, 1835, « let them return to their communities to renew themselves in the spirit of their vocation; otherwise it is the end of our missionaries, they will soon be nothing more than sounding cymbals! » Father Guigues was then a superior in France; he was later to be the provincial in Canada.

Such is the twofold spirit which ought to animate a good superior: the missionary spirit and the community spirit. Both of them are intimately connected and mutually sustain each other. It is this twofold spirit he should communicate to his brothers.

XVIII

WHAT I EXPECT FROM PROVINCIALS (1)

General attitudes. - Administration. - Missionary Commitments. - Religious and community life. - Vocations. - Formation.

In this meeting, I would like to tell you quite simply what I, as Superior General, expect from Provincials. I am sharing with you the concerns and hopes we have on the level of the General Administration, and recalling to you the major importance of your role in the Congregation. In a certain sense, the activity of Provincials is more important than that of the Superior General. In fact, you are the ones who are in direct and immediate contact with the Congregation's men and works. Without you, a General can do practically nothing.

In your hands you hold the responsibility for the missionary commitments of your province and for each one of its members. You are responsible for the vocation apostolate and for the

(1) Address given during a Meeting of Provincials in Rome on January 30, 1979. It was published in *Acta Administrationis Generalis O.M.I.*, vol. IV, 2a pars, 1979, pp. 350-360.

quality of formation. You have the responsibility for the community life, for the life of prayer, for the spiritual and human fulfillment of your province's members. And finally, as a help and support for these major responsibilities, you also have an administrative responsibility. The latter is inevitable in a Gospel group which is at the same time a Church institution.

You are not alone in carrying these various responsibilities. You must bear them together with your council, your provincial treasurer and all the members of your province. In the final analysis, however, these responsibilities rest mainly on your shoulders and your personal attitude will always bring a great deal of influence to bear in their regard.

So, what do I expect from the Provincials? I will answer this question by commenting briefly on each one of the above-mentioned points.

I. GENERAL ATTITUDES

Before I do so, however, please allow me to mention three attitudes which I consider fundamental.

First of all, the Provincial should be a *happy man, happy in his job*. Not because he looked for this position, nor because he is inordinately attached to it — which is extremely rare nowadays — but because he accepted it gladly and finds his joy in it... as a person finds joy in doing

God's will and in rendering a service out of love. An unhappy Provincial, one who is always sad, besides harming himself also becomes a source of depression for the members of his Province... and of the General Administration!

Speaking personally, I once in a while meditate on a text of Mary of the Incarnation, a widow and a great missionary mystic of the 17th century. She had a son who was a Benedictine. In time he was named Abbot of his monastery and then assistant general of his Order. He considered this a catastrophe and bitterly complained about it to his mother. She finally told him: « But take some delight in the jobs God sends you! In them you will find your sanctification and God will take care of you everywhere. » (2) I can't give you any better advice.

Secondly, the Provincial must *love his men and know how to make himself loved by them*. Your province is not a business concern. Its first purpose is not efficiency and the increase of business transactions. Your province is above all a family, an apostolic family. Its members want to give themselves thoroughly to the mission, but they want to be deeply rooted in and supported by a community. Today this demand for community is more and more stressed both by the younger men who join our ranks — they ask first of all for a community — and by pro-

(2) Letter of September 25, 1670.

fessed Oblates of all ages. What they expect from their Provincial — this is strongly underlined in the consultations — is that he be an animator and a father before being an organizer and an administrator. They want to receive encouragement, support, inspiration, an elan from him. That is why their Provincial must be interested in them: he must take the necessary time to become interested in each of them and love them all. We value someone in the measure that we are able to love him, trust him, ask him something. Nothing more discourages an Oblate or separates him more from the Congregation than when a Provincial tells him that he has nothing to offer him; it is a way of letting him know that he is no longer needed. I recommend to you, in particular, the Oblates who are more isolated and those who see themselves as being on the fringe of things and do not take part in any gathering. Sometimes it is they who most expect or need a visit from their Provincial.

To be loved by one's men also has its importance. This will often be the sign by which we can check the real climate of a province. This is not a new idea. It is found as far back as St. Francis Xavier in the 16th century. He once wrote to Father Gomez, who was a rather rigid superior: « It is not sufficient for me to know that you love your men, if I don't know whether they love you. » (3)

(3) *Monumenta Xaveriana*, I, 651.

Finally, a third attitude: *to have an a priori trust and friendship toward the General Administration.* As a matter of fact, this attitude exists. I am quite aware of it and I thank you for it with all my heart. Such a disposition is very important. After all, even though we may be on the Provincial Administration or the General Administration, we are not rivals, although we sometimes may have different viewpoints. We all make up one and the same family and are all working for the same cause.

II. ADMINISTRATION

I now move on to the first question: what do I expect from provincials in the area of administration?

Those who are responsible for the various services here have undoubtedly spoken to you in detail on this matter. I want to mention it also, however, because it has its place, a place that cannot be overlooked in an apostolic body as varied and numerous as ours. The expectations of the General Administration on this subject can be summed up in three points.

First of all, that the Provincials have a *sufficient knowledge of and respect for the existing norms* so as to assure the validity and the good conduct of ordinary business. To know, for example, that the confirmation of the Superior General in council is necessary for the validity

of a perpetual profession, and consequently, to send the documents soon enough in order to get that confirmation on time! And it is the same with the matter of obediences, financial questions, applications to the Oblate Sharing Fund... A *Directory* exists concerning these different items, recently brought up to date by the General Secretariate.

Secondly, that the Provincials *be not afraid to take decisions themselves, at their level and within their competence*, as long as they do so *taking into account as much as possible the policies or orientations given by the General Administration*. For example, to call a scholastic to the diaconate or the priesthood, permission for a trip abroad, to promote the M.A.M.I., to associate certain lay people more closely to the life of the province... but not to make them Honorary Oblates, because this latter is reserved to the Superior General.

Thirdly, that the Provincials *send regularly to the General Administration all documents, publications, news that is of interest to the Congregation or the General Council*. For example, the province financial report, the acts of the Provincial Council, the documents accompanying the calls of novices and scholastics, the reports of provincial congresses, the province newsletters... All these items have their importance for keeping up-to-date in the line of information and to foster unity within our Institute.

III. MISSIONARY COMMITMENTS

Nowhere do Oblates exist for themselves. They exist to preach the Gospel to the poor and they do so within the Church. Here too I see three questions which can be asked of a Provincial.

A first question: is there any *planning and continuity* in the missionary commitments of your province? Are there any works and guidelines which have a real priority, recognized and taken on as such by the province as a whole? For example: the apostolate among the workers, in rural areas, among students, the apostolate for the clergy, ecumenical work, preaching, retreat houses, Marian shrine...? What place do the poor have in these and what are the real reasons that motivate our choices? To what extent have they been inspired and guided by the *Constitutions and Rules*, the *Missionary Outlook* document, by *Evangelii nuntiandi*? Is a regular evaluation made of the existing works? Are there any organisms or particular means that facilitate such an evaluation, for example, provincial assemblies, provincial congresses...? Is your province a real apostolic body or is it just an association of free lance operators?

A second question: what are your *relations with the local Church*? Do you easily get into the organized pastoral program of your diocese and what particular note do the Oblates contribute thereto? Do you serve therein as a sort

of constant reminder in favour of the most neglected groups? What kind of relationships do you have with the diocesan bishop? Do they correspond to the recent directives given by the Church? (4)

A third question: how does your province situate itself *within the universal Church*? Does your missionary interest go beyond the geographical limits of your province? Are your men open to ecumenism, to ministry for justice, to financial sharing, to the needs of the Third World...? Are they disposed to assume missionary responsibilities in foreign countries, to serve on the level of the whole Church and on that of the entire Congregation?

A last enormous problem concerns me and quite a few others in the Congregation: is there, for the Oblates as a whole, a common missionary challenge to take up as we face the miseries of today's world? In the past, such a challenge consisted in the missions to the people, in the foreign missions, especially in the poorest and most difficult regions. The Chapter of 1972 raised the question for our times, and also gave a global answer: the *Missionary Outlook*. To work at evangelizing the poor in today's world. What does « evangelize » mean? What does « the poor » today mean? What is our precise role in a materialistic, secularized society that is penetrat-

(4) *Directives for the Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious*, Rome, 1978.

ing everywhere, even to the remotest mission territories? To what are we called as priests, religious, missionaries, as those who evangelize the poor? It is not sufficient to avoid the « socio-political radicalization » mentioned by the Holy Father (4); we must be promoters and authentic witnesses of the « radicalism of the Beatitudes ». Have we found concrete ways of implementing such a program; are we not too hesitant, too fearful to commit ourselves resolutely in this direction? Together we need to reflect on these things.

IV. RELIGIOUS AND COMMUNITY LIFE

Every now and then, in the petitions for laicization, the persons concerned complain of a lack of help or of community support after having begun their apostolic work. Are they right? Are they wrong...? Most of the time the responsibility is impossible to determine; nevertheless, a Provincial needs to be very attentive in this domain. His first responsibility, after all, is to his men. In 1973 a Provincial wrote me: « In our last Oblate congress, we made this discovery that almost all those who had left were Oblates who were already working individually, who no longer had relations with the commun-

(5) November 24, 1978.

ity, except when they had a financial problem. » (6)

Your men are worth more than the work they are doing. A great part of your job consists in this: to know how to help, encourage, support your men, and to know also how to spur them on, to challenge them in the very line of their vocation. Thus you will help them grow and confirm them in their commitment. For this purpose, you have to be present to the members of your province and be always available. Except in very rare cases and in a province of few members, the office of Provincial is incompatible with any other important commitment. This office constitutes in itself a full time apostolic service.

The Provincial must be a leaven of unity in his province, open to all, patient with all and working for the good of all. This will not prevent him from having his personal preferences in spirituality as in the apostolate, but it will prevent him from becoming the man of a unique party, a unique formula. Just an example: the Congregation needs prophets. It is a good thing if a Provincial is animated by a certain prophetic spirit, but he cannot expect that all his men will have the charism of a prophet. Furthermore, the quality of prophet alone, or of theologian or of a man of prayer alone, is insufficient to make a good Provincial.

(6) April 9, 1973.

Among the questions that a Provincial must ask himself concerning the religious life of his men, I indicate the following. What community and spiritual support does the province bring to each member on the local, district, or provincial levels? Are there any structures, structures which really work, that facilitate community life and the life of prayer? Are these structures evaluated and adapted according to needs: for instance, annual retreats, provincial congresses, renewal sessions? Does the province have a defined ongoing formation program? Are such documents as *Evangelica testificatio*, *The Community*,... known and used by the members of the province?

V. VOCATIONS

Here is another major topic. Within a number of years, some provinces will disappear for lack of vocations.

Of course, it is God who calls, but if nobody among men makes himself God's echo, there won't be any vocations. A Provincial, every Provincial, must be actively interested in vocations: first to have some aspirants, then to assure the discernment of their vocation, and finally to see that the candidates receive an excellent formation.

In the provinces that each year have a certain number of vocations, I notice three things: a

deep belief in the values of Oblate life; there is Oblate work to offer the young who join us; there is a systematic and continual program for vocations.

Concerning the discernment of a vocation, especially at the time of permanent commitment or ordination to the priesthood, I have the impression that sometimes we fail in this domain. I have occasionally seen requests for laicization after one, two or three years of diaconate or priesthood. Some made the final step thinking that perhaps some day the Church would permit them to marry, or, in any case, that if it didn't work out too well, they would simply ask for a dispensation. And that is what they have been doing.

In this matter, one must be very clear with the aspirants. We have to let them know exactly what are the requirements of religious and priestly life, and not leave them with false hopes. To be obliged to change paths after a definitive commitment is always a setback and a cause of deep suffering.

I personally have great admiration for the Oblates in charge of formation. They have a difficult and very delicate task. Their responsibility is considerable. But the Provincials' responsibility is greater still because both the choice of the formators and the responsibility for acceptance for the priesthood lies upon them. It is good that you meditate on all this from

time to time. The future of these young men, just as the future of the Congregation, is in your hands.

VI. FORMATION

As a last point, I will complete the picture by answering the question: what do I expect on the level of first formation, that given in the novitiate and the scholasticate? To answer this, I will summarize certain elements which I often repeat. (7) From formation I expect the following:

1. Men who have a real *interior consistency* and who are *truly mature*. They are capable of making free decisions and persevering in commitments made.

2. Men who have made a *serious option for Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ crucified*, with the intention of consecrating themselves to his mission of salvation, and who have learned to know him sufficiently through obedience, prayer, concern for their brothers, apostolic service, real poverty and discipline of life.

3. Men who have *understood and accepted the renunciations inherent in the three vows*, and who are able to bear them in a life of peace, love and joy.

(7) Cf. above: *What do I Expect of Formation*, especially pp. 219-229.

4. Men who are *sensitive to the needs of the poor and who have decided to dedicate their lives to them*, in intimate communion with the Church and the Congregation. Their personal charism has been permeated and inspired by that of the Congregation. They are missionaries who really feel they are members of an apostolic team whose history and saints they know.

5. Men who have chosen *to serve the poor in a service that is clearly in the line of evangelization* and which always strives, even if it cannot be achieved immediately, to proclaim Jesus Christ explicitly and to celebrate salvation in the ecclesial community and through the sacraments.

6. Men who, through their study of philosophy and theology, possess a *solid doctrinal foundation* which makes them capable of a certain stability as well as of both welcome and discernment in the face of many competing trends.

7. Finally, men who realize *they are never alone*, because an interior presence dwells within them, that of Christ and of the Virgin Mary, and because, exterior to them, a community of their Oblate brothers supports them.

Such, according to my personal views, are the foundation stones upon which the Oblate structure must be built. There are other elements which are also necessary, even essential, such as a renewed ecclesiology, a sufficient

knowledge of the cultural and social sciences, of the socio-political trends of the contemporary world... If the building, however, is not constructed on these solid foundations, either it will collapse altogether or it will always be shaky; and, consequently, the Church will never be able to completely rely on it.

What more can I say to conclude Perhaps I should add a last remark that I sometimes see at the bottom of consultation bulletins: « As long as he (the new Provincial) does the best he can, as his predecessors did! » After everything is said and done, that is what will in fact happen.

It is useful, however, to stop once in a while to think and meditate before God on the responsibilities of your office. Not in order to feel crushed, but rather to keep on forging ahead with faith, hope and courage. Jesus said, « There is no greater love that to give one's life for one's friends. » (8) To accept generously to serve in the office of Provincial remains more than ever an excellent means to live this kind of love.

(8) John 15:13.

XIX

LEADERSHIP AND THE GENERAL ADMINISTRATION (1)

*Being Superior General today. - Major challenges.
- Leadership and the General Administration. -
Spiritual animation. - The future.*

First question: What does being the Superior
General of the Oblates mean to you

It means, to begin with, being responsible
for governing some 5600 men who have com-
mitted their lives to the service of the Gospel.

From their Superior General these men ex-
pect *leadership* which is simultaneously anima-
tion, inspiration, a help in reading the signs of
the times, both guide and interpretation in
discerning God's will.

This task is more difficult today because we
live in a world that is undergoing an enormous
transformation. The Oblates came into being in

(1) Text of an interview published in the magazine *Apostolat*, mars-avril 1975, pp. 20-22; completed by study-texts prepared for plenary sessions of the General Council: on spiritual animation in February 1975, and on leadership in September-October 1975; also some excerpts from an address to the 1978 Inter-Chapter Meeting, already published in *Acta Administrationis Generalis O.M.I.*, vol. IV, 1a pars, 1978, pp. 57-58, 60-61, 63-66.

1816, conceived within the heart of a priest who was keenly sensitive to the Church's needs in his time and to the religious ignorance among the poor of his milieu. To respond to this call, he wanted to found a society of priests — which Brothers could also join — who would, like the first Apostles, leave everything in order to be schooled by Christ and together live the virtues of religion so that, « filled with unbounded confidence in God », they could then go forth to preach the Gospel to the poor.

From that time until today and everywhere across the world the Oblates have grown and worked in this perspective. They have never lived only for themselves, but always to serve the Church and to evangelize the poor.

And today, it is precisely on this point that the world is challenging them, namely, on their mission and on their kind of life. Who are « the poor » What does « to evangelize » mean And what significance does the chastity, poverty, obedience, common life and prayer they promise to live have in our present-day world?

This present-day world, — it is worth noting this — exists not only outside the Institute, but also within it, and often its representatives there are the younger group who will be its future.

So, being Superior General today means being at the very heart of this tension. It is not a matter of re-founding the Congregation: the Congregation is already founded and its Founder is

beatified; but it is a matter of assuring its renewal and its vitality in today's world. In regard to the heritage and charism and values we have received, it is a matter of being faithful: the *depositum custodi*: « guard what has been committed to you » of which St. Paul speaks. (2) In regard to new appeals, however, to a new world still not clearly discernible and in the process of being born, it is a matter of considerable adaptation and changing greatly, yet all the while remaining ourselves. Genuine fidelity to the past itself requires this change.

In this task, the Superior General has to be both the guardian of the past and the promoter of change. He is expected to be both faithful and open, flexible and firm, encouraging and discerning in regard to undertakings. Happily, he is not alone in this. He has a council and his responsibility is shared. It is also limited: each Oblate is a man who is responsible and free, who in God's presence bears the weight of his own decisions. It remains true, nevertheless, that the burden of the decisions a Superior General has to take is often heavier to carry, because his decisions involve a portion of the Church.

Second question: What are the main challenges an apostolic Congregation such as ours faces in the present-day world?

(2) 1 Timothy 6:20.

There are many such challenges. Some concern the missionary personnel: it is aging and there is a shortage of vocations, especially in the older Christian countries, Poland being the exception. There are those which concern the mission itself: profound changes which require a more radical inculturation than in the past, and a real ecumenical spirit. I would also say that, as a consequence from all this, there are challenges in initial and ongoing formation.

Speaking quite personally, however, and in a general perspective, I would say that the two major challenges facing our Congregation seem to be these: 1) Are we able to find an effective Gospel answer to the appeal of the poor today? Their condition cries aloud for a hope and a salvation that only Christ can fully bring them. 2) In today's world, are we able to restore confidence in certain values basic to our lives as religious and priests, such as adoration and prayer, consecrated chastity and obedience, the sacramental life?

In a preceding talk on the Oblate charism I dwelt at length on these two points. (3) Here I shall not say more.

Third question: What do you understand by exercising *leadership* in religious life, especially on the level of a General Administration?

(3) Cf. above *The Oblate Charism*, especially pp. 60-70.

What I mean by it is wielding a real, living, inspiring influence on a given group in order to help this same group achieve certain definite goals. Authority can be exercised materially and the administration of an organism can be carried on quite correctly without there being any real leadership.

Since we are talking about leadership in the religious life, we have to assume that certain prior attitudes are present among the group's membership. The first of these is that the Institute's fundamental aims and obligations are basically known and accepted by all: if a given member does not really accept them, he has no place within the Institute; another is that the members are disposed to welcome and even want to welcome a leadership designed to help them achieve their purpose.

In point of fact, this leadership is not limited to the persons who hold positions of authority. It comes from a variety of sources: from more competent confreres, from those more involved, from professors or friends, even from persons outside the Institute, from those with a stronger personality. Besides, in any healthy Institute, the general membership's hope and desire is that leadership usually be exercised by those in authority. According to the sensitivities of individuals and the climate of a given milieu or time, some appreciate more the leadership of a team and others a leadership that is more personal.

On the level of a General Administration

The exercise of leadership on this level can be conceived in a number of ways. In our case, a given direction was taken a few years ago and it is still this same direction which basically is our inspiration. I explained it in my report to the 1974 General Chapter (4) and I will simply quote from it here.

For two years the Central Team has tried to govern by determining certain policies for Oblate personnel, missions, finances (cf. Appendices to various issues of OMI COMMUNIQUE), by increasing information and contacts, by listening a great deal and entering into dialogue, by encouraging and stimulating, but very seldom by imposing and giving orders.

Some Oblates find that there is not sufficient leadership; they would like to see more authority exercised, especially the authority on the general level. The replies to the Questionnaire on the 1972 Chapter are significant in this regard: «*To be directive or not to be directive?* On this point expectations are contradictory. Some would like very much to see a firmer attitude, more directive, imposing itself more often. Information, dialogue and animation are not enough; more is needed...» Others clearly favour the contrary attitude: «*To insist more and be more directive is a waste of time,*» they say, «*It would only increase the trouble.*» (no. 33).

What is to be done? Personally, I would hesitate a long time before encouraging a more authoritative attitude, but at the same time I

(4) Report of Rev. Fr. Fernand Jetté, Vicar General, to the XXX General Chapter, no. 35, in *Acta Administrationis Generalis O.M.I.*, vol. II, 1a pars. 1974, pp. 134-135.

would like to see a much clearer and firmer stance on the values of our life and on the orientation of our action, and I would like to see develop, at all levels, the custom of an on-going and serious evaluation of both our life and our action.

Why such an attitude? First of all because respect for the person is one of the primary values of the Christian society and of a world which considers itself adult and reasonable. And then, because the religious life, even the apostolic religious life, is not a business enterprise in which a quantitative return and increased gain is paramount; it is a free association of persons who out of love have committed themselves together to pursue certain ends.

Consequently, religious leadership is exercised less by way of imposition and commands than by way of persuasion, support, animation founded on the competence and quality of being responsible persons of government. In general, those responsible will help the entire group and each of its members to situate themselves constantly in the presence of the truth and the requirements of the vocation to which they have committed themselves both in terms of a form of life and a mission within the Church. They will also lead them on and urge them always to achieve more perfectly the goals of their religious missionary commitment.

To achieve this, it is necessary that the General Administration:

- a) have clear ideas and a real unanimity on the fundamental values of the Oblate life and Oblate missionary activity;
- b) assure the transmission of these values and orientations to the whole Congregation through speaking, publishing, congresses, retreats, meetings of all kinds;
- c) influence the provincials so that regular serious evaluation made in the light of these values and orientations take place;
- d) itself take the initiative in launching certain activities and establish certain works in fidelity to these values and orientations;
- e) see to it that the administrative services in all that they do are imbued with these same values and orientations.

The role of the Superior General

In this context, how do I see the role of the Superior General? I have no hesitation in saying that I see it as a role which still remains central and primordial, even though more and more a greater number would like to see a mode of government that is more collegially inspired than formerly. Within the Congregation the Superior General continues to wield a major influence as much, if not more, by what he is and the values he represents than by what he says.

Over and above his responsibilities in the order of administration and in reference to the

orientation just mentioned in the above paragraph, the Superior General will exercise his role mostly in the following ways:

- a) Within the General Council itself, further the pursuit of a real unanimity on the values fundamental to the Oblate life and the orientations of Oblate missionary activity.
- b) In regard to the services of the General Administration, strive to assemble a strong team that is really competent.
- c) For the Congregation as a whole:
 - promote unity and confidence by constantly referring to the Founder's spirit as relevant to our present response to the needs of the Church and the world today;
 - insist on the spiritual quality of the Oblate, of the apostolic man, and the need for him to take clear decisions both in terms of his commitment to a way of life and in his missionary thrust. And this, in spite of the risk that some may leave.

Fourth question: Today we speak more readily of superiors offering *missionary* animation rather than *spiritual* or *religious* animation. What is your comment on this?

It is quite possible that people speak like that today. For an Oblate the two are inseparable and we must not try to disjoin them.

The Founder certainly says that « we must

spare no effort to extend the Saviour's empire »; but he began by saying that we « must seriously strive to be saints », that we « must wholly renounce » ourselves, « for the love of Jesus Christ, the service of the Church and the sanctification of their brethren » (Preface to the Constitutions).

This spiritual animation is first the responsibility of superiors, beginning with the Superior General. It consists of the following: by being in a special way present within the group, help the latter fully live its religious life and retain its identity as a group of « apostolic men », priests and Brothers, consecrated to God by the vows of religion and having for its aim the following of Christ, the evangelization of the poor.

The means to effect such animation are many. Here are a few, just as examples:

- Living one's spiritual life simply and openly in the midst of his Oblate brothers.
- When an opportunity is at hand, clearly affirm one's own faith in the values of the spiritual and religious life: prayer, renunciation, the vows, humble daily dedication, perseverance in one's vocation.
- See to it that the religious dimension is included when pastoral or missionary activities are reviewed.
- Give rise to and encourage initiatives which tend to promote this dimension: houses of prayer, sessions on the spiritual life, studies

and publications on holy Oblates and on Oblate spirituality.

Today it is especially important to insist on the necessity of prayer. Jesus withdrew to pray... He passed nights in prayer. (5) Some provinces hold to a chapel with the Blessed Sacrament present in each house; others insist much less on this, do not see the need for it. Some communities have a precise prayer program; others have none at all. Some members pray a lot. Visiting a house some months ago, I heard a non-practising lay volunteer say: « Every time I come in here, I find them praying! » Others never pray in a formal way. « My prayer, » one said, « is my taking part in the struggle for the liberation of the working class. » There was no breviary, no Mass, no meditation in his life.

Prayer, frequent formal prayer, remains essential for the apostolic man. He prays because he needs to be on intimate terms with his Lord, because he feels the necessity to intercede for his fellowmen and because prayer will help him remain faithful to God in the midst of human struggles. In Asia especially, in the world of Buddhism and Islam, how can we proclaim Jesus Christ without being men of prayer? In November 1977 an Oblate wrote me and remarked: « To these people in whose lives con-

(6) Luke 6:12; 9:18,28; 11:1.

templative or community prayer holds such an important place, I at times have the impression we offer rather ideas and organizations than help in their search for God! In any case, I confess that for me personally, this contact with Asia obliges me to deepen even more my convictions in matters of faith and prayer. To those to whom we are sent, are we really men of God, really apostles of Jesus Christ, men of prayer, or are we simply teachers and promoters of an intellectualized doctrine and the directors of an activity? »

To tell you fully what I think on this matter, I would say that one of the weaknesses of the Congregation at present is the low vitality of its prayer life and the little amount of help and support in this domain that persons find in a good number of communities. When we re-read the Gospel's demands — « that one should always pray and never become discouraged » (6); « only prayer and fasting can drive out this kind evil spirit » (7) — and when we notice what remains of prayer for some Oblates, we need not be surprised by the crisis through which they are passing. « Following our tradition, we devote an hour each day to mental prayer. » (C.33) How many Oblates do this? And what is being done to help our confreres do this?

(6) Luke 18:1.

(7) Matthew 9:29.

Fifth question: What do you think of tapping the spiritual sources that are outside the Institute?

I am thinking now particularly of the Focolarini and the Charismatic Movement. Many Oblates in different provinces take part in these movements. They also help these movements. On the whole, they greatly benefit from their participation and through them, insofar as I can judge, the Congregation is also reaping a considerable gain. Sometimes I am asked what I think about Oblates taking part in such movements. My mind is this. Substantially these movements are good and they express in a special way the presence of the Spirit in today's world. So I am in favour that Oblates who feel themselves called to participate should do so — that can only be a help to renewing the Congregation — but on three conditions: a) that we are capable of discerning; b) that we do not want to impose this way on those who do not feel attracted to these movements; c) that we apply the benefits we receive toward the perfecting and strengthening of our own Oblate vocation.

Sixth question: How do you see the future in regard to the Oblates

With confidence and with modesty. Our difficulties are quite real. They are difficulties that are common to most religious Institutes today.

But besides these difficulties, new works are also coming into being quite humbly, and new sources of vocations, for example, in some countries of the Third World, in Poland and in Italy. Moreover, I see great generosity right across the Congregation. What also strikes me is the attachment laity are showing us, the interest they manifest not only in our missionary works but also in our spirituality. These are reasons to give us hope. Nevertheless, to assure the progress of the Institute, some necessary conditions must be fulfilled. I see five which I will briefly mention.

First, and this is at the root of everything, *to believe firmly in our vocation*. More than ever the world now needs vocations like ours. It needs men internally and externally free, capable of a love that is completely unselfish, and who preach a liberation which goes far beyond the limits of the present world.

Secondly, *to strengthen the ties which hold us together*. We are a family, an apostolic body in the Church. The mission both as a mandate and as an apostolic enterprise is at the heart of our lives. There is no Oblate if there is no « mission », no being sent. Our unity will be our strength. The provinces need each other. I am told, for example, that the weakening of the provinces in Europe is not without negative, depressing effect on the provinces of Asia and, vice versa, the increase of vocations in India

and Zaire have become a stimulus for the provinces of Europe. We have need of one another, and the whole Congregation is engaged in the work which each Oblate has been commissioned to do by the Congregation. Alone, an Oblate can not hold out for long, especially in frontier positions: petitions for laicization are ample proof of this. In the same way, even a province, a delegation is in serious crisis when dialogue between its members has become impossible.

Thirdly, *insist on the quality of men*. The Congregation is worth what its members are worth. I confess my disappointment and my grief over some, apparently very well endowed and filled with talents, but who lack interior consistency and who, after ten, fifteen, or twenty years of Oblate life, have not yet made that deep choice of completely giving themselves to Christ and to the service of the Church. The essential values of Oblate life have not become the foundations of their lives. They go on bargaining with God, and the Congregation can only half count on them. For an apostolic body which the Founder wanted to be an « elite corps » in the Church, this is a great weakness. Formation has a major role to play in this domain. But there is more. The local communities also have their role to play and each Oblate, before God, carries his own responsibility.

Fourthly, *to invest more in reflection*. This may sound pedantic, but for me it corresponds

to something that is very concrete. In the past I have often heard it said: « Oblates are real geni when it comes to improvising! » And it was meant as a compliment. It meant: « Put them into miserable situations where nothing is organized, and in no time they will organize everything and, as a rule, do it very well. » Today we are living in a very well organized world. At times I ask myself if we are not a little lost in it! The present-day challenges of the mission demand that we have among us men who think, men who are thinkers about our mission. We have plenty of excellent and most devoted missionaries; we have some learned members, specialists in the sciences, or in history, or in language, and that is good; but specialists in the service of the mission and of the Congregation's missionary activity, how many do we have? I have in mind problems like these: our missionary attitude in regard to apartheid in South Africa, or to the evolution of the Indian and Inuit population in Canada, or to Islam in North Cameroon or in Indonesia... How many qualified men have we to study these problems with some authority? The same is true for the study of the Founder, of spirituality, and of Oblate history; we are very poor in competent personnel, so poor that we have trouble maintaining our one and only learned review *Vie Oblate Life!* We are seriously impoverished in the Institute, on the intellectual level, by the closing of many

of our colleges, seminaries and especially our scholasticates, and, if we do not take care, that weakness will become more and more grave.

Fifthly and finally: *to take more interest in the Christian laity, to associate them more in our missionary action and in our life.* Some efforts have already been made in this direction. Numerous lay people are ready to help, the young as well as the elderly, those between 60 and 65 years, at the age of retirement. They are only waiting for an invitation from us. They would certainly be happy to participate in our spiritual life and in our missionary charism. It is up to us to take the first step and to offer them something. While yet a seminarian Eugene de Mazenod wrote: « I have noticed that a great many good things remain undone for want of someone to suggest doing them. A great number of Christians are well disposed to do all kinds of good works, works which they perhaps will never do unless they come in contact with someone who, although often infinitely less perfect than they, invites them to take action — someone who, to achieve this, needs to do little more than make the suggestion. » (8) This still holds true today.

To sum up, we must look and walk to the future with confidence but also pay the price for it!

(8) Mazenod to his Mother, February 13, 1809.

REFLECTIONS ON THE
CONGREGATION'S CURRENT LIFE
AND FUTURE (1)

Attitudes of the present Generalate. - The appeals heard. - The Oblate response. - What we need to progress.

We are — rather rapidly, in fact — approaching a new General Chapter. The purpose of this meeting is to take stock, so to speak, to see and assess the Congregation as it is today immersed in the contemporary world, this new world which both fascinates and frightens us. While it opens up almost unlimited avenues of progress for mankind, this world also dominates man and threatens to destroy him. Our Constitutions tell us: « Growing in faith, hope and love, we commit ourselves to be a leaven of the Beatitudes at the heart of the world. » (C.11)

Are we, in actual fact, a leaven of the Beatitudes? And in what concrete way do we want to be such a leaven today? Each Region has given its answer. Now the Superior General is

(1) Address given to the Inter-Chapter Meeting in Rome on May 10, 1984. It has been published in OMI DOCUMENTATION, no. 127/84 (June 1984), pp. 1-18.

asked to give his. I have already touched upon this topic on May 20, 1982, in a conference entitled « Evangelizing the Secularized World. » (2) Today I will deal with it in a more simple and family style way.

This talk is not a report on the state of the Congregation, such as is required at a General Chapter (R.117); it is rather a reflection of the Superior General, based on a viewpoint that is my own and, I believe, substantially that of the General Administration also. Since it is addressed to the provincials who « share in the Superior General's responsibility and concern for the whole Congregation » (R.97), it intends to be an exhortation to an even greater fidelity and daring in our journey toward genuine renewal.

There are three stages in this reflection:

- I. The attitudes of the present Generalate.
- II. The appeals heard.
- III. The Oblate response.

I. THE ATTITUDES OF THE PRESENT GENERALATE

During the ten years that I have been Superior General, I have become more and more aware of the depth and extent of the change affecting the world and, together with it, the Church and ourselves. We are living a transition period that penetrates to the very depths of our

(2) Cf. above, pp. 185-212.

being. Many of our certainties have been shaken, and a good number of the values on which our lives are based have been called into question.

The current evolution

Where is this transition going? To what form of society and life is it leading? At the outset, some people thought they could tell us and had a few precise models to present to us. Today we are rather more modest in this matter, be it in regard to the world, to the Church, or to religious life. We feel that the change is profound, even radical: a new world is being born and so is a new Church and a new man; no one, however, still dares to describe too exactly what these will all be. Too many « prophets » have been wrong in their predictions. Today we are simply content to point out a few fundamental characteristics: universal and practically simultaneous communications, a Church that is more incarnated and close to people, a greater place and role for the laity and women in the Church, new forms of consecrated life, a greater awareness of social sin, the ascendancy of the Third World, etc.

In this new world that is coming to birth, in addition to certain determining factors and beyond them, God is at work and so is human freedom.

The Congregation is living this phenomenon

and is part of this changing world. This is all the more true inasmuch as the Congregation is, comparatively speaking, closer to people and more involved with people than, for instance, contemplative institutes are. As I said at the last Chapter, the Congregation shows signs of renewal and also signs of great fatigue.

At times, when I review history and reflect on what in the past has helped to identify the Congregation and give it strength and coherence — our missions to the people, our foreign missions, especially those of the Canadian North — I, like so many others, have asked myself whether today we do not lack a common mission, a common challenge.

Today, have we as Oblates a specific task — a first priority that is not necessarily exclusive — which unites us among ourselves and gives us an image in the world's eyes?

I rather think that we do not. Certainly, we do not have one in the same way we did in the past, even though a number of quite distinctive traits still do characterize us: we go to the poor, we are close to them, we are in their midst as witnesses to Jesus Christ and as sons of Mary. Our Constitutions are quite definite on this point and so is the reality of the Congregation. To accomplish all this, however, we no longer have means that are specific, recognized and accepted by all. Pluralism in our charism of evangelization, which already existed in the Founder's time,

has taken on considerable development. Here, too, both the life of the Oblates and the text of the Constitutions are eloquent. I quote Rule 2 on the Congregation's ministries as one example:

Preaching missions at home and sending missionaries abroad have been traditionally central to our apostolate. There is no ministry, however, which is foreign to us, provided we never lose sight of the Congregation's primary purpose: to evangelize the most abandoned. (R.2)

The first sentence is deliberately rather modest. It appears to be as much — and perhaps even more — a statement of an historical fact as it is a norm. We notice a considerable difference when we make the comparison with the second chapter of the 1928 Rule. Its opening article reads as follows: « Missions being the principal work of the Institute, all will make it their chief concern to fulfill this duty efficiently. » (3) In the Rules prior to 1928, to be eligible for the post of Superior General there was even the required condition that a candidate have real experience of the missions: *in missionum ministerio exercitatus*. (4)

Such nuances deserve to be mentioned, even though we can still say that, in the ensemble of the new Constitutions and Rules, proclaiming God's Word retains first place in our apostolate. (cf. CC. 2, 7, 66; RR. 2, 7, 60).

(3) 1928 Constitutions and Rules, art. 11.

(4) 1818, 1826, 1853 Constitutions and Rules, art. 3 of the paragraph on the Superior General.

In the pluralism and diversity of today's world, is it desirable, is it even possible for us to move into the direction of a priority form of ministry that is more specifically Oblate? Except for the proclamation of God's Word, I would be very hesitant to see laid down for the Congregation as a whole a choice that the new Constitutions themselves did not want to impose. As I wrote on October 19, 1976, in a letter to the Oblates: « It is up to each Region and to each Province to analyze objectively the needs and appeals of the poor in its area; and to see by the light of the Gospel, the Oblate Constitutions and the Founder's spirit, how the Congregation can effectively answer those needs while remaining true to itself. »

A life-based and life-giving choice liable to obtain sufficient unanimity and become a real ferment for action ought to result either from a clear mission received from the Church — such for example is the case of Paul VI on May 7, 1965, requesting the Jesuits to accept the specific task of combatting atheism (5); or it could also flow from needs that are felt pretty well all over the Congregation and which coalesce into a common commitment that would have to be determined within a General Chapter. In such a perspective, establishing provincial and regional priorities could be extremely important, provided

(5) *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol. 57 (1965), p. 514.

this is done well in a context of true realism and is the fruit of an authentic consensus and not of ideological pressures.

In this matter, what were the concerns and practical strategy of the Generalate during these last ten years? Two attitudes especially characterize it, and I intend to elaborate on them. They are: openness to present-day realities and intensifying contact with Oblate sources.

Openness to present-day realities

First, we have tried to be attentive to present-day realities as they appear and become known, and to encourage everything in them which we felt could perhaps be a source of life. Thus, for example, we supported the development of Regions and the gradual assertion of their own identity; we encouraged the ministries of the Christian laity and the promotion of justice; we seconded the work of Gospel liberation done by the Oblates in Latin America and the projects of restructuration in Canada; we likewise assisted the Province of Italy in its special growth and link to the Focolari movement, and the Province of Poland with its many vocations and missionary élan; in the same spirit we were patrons of the study session on evangelizing the secularized world which was held at Saint Paul University in Ottawa in August 1982; etc.

Thus, our first attitude was: to be open, to welcome everything that seemed good to us and

showed promise in terms of a response to the needs of today's world. We were guided by St. Paul's advice: « Do not stifle the Spirit... Test everything, retain what is good. » (6)

In other respects, we did not see it as either opportune or in harmony with our charism to favour preferentially a given way of evangelizing the world of the poor to the exclusion of other ways, as would be, for example, wanting Oblates as a whole to adopt liberation theology, or to commit themselves to the charismatic movement, or dedicate themselves to ministry for justice, or be directed to the foreign missions, or to give up parishes... We are invited to practice a great deal of prudence in a period of change such as ours; and there is above all this: since our apostolic aim, namely, evangelizing the most abandoned, is universal, it seemed to us that reducing it to one single approach would be tantamount to mutilating it. At the same time however — history teaches us this and we must heed its lessons — the Oblate charism continues to develop, expresses itself in new modes, becomes richer in the measure that it remains open to the new appeals that arise. Here are some examples.

When we first began in 1816, it was evangelizing the poor through preaching, especially by missions to the people. Then, in 1841, in response

(6) 1 Thessalonians 5:19-20.

to an outside appeal, came the opening to the foreign missions and the sending of the first Oblates to Canada. Much later, in 1938, during the pontificate of Pius XI, a new appeal, that of Catholic Action, was heard. The Congregation responded and integrated this new dimension of evangelizing the poor into its charism: we see the General Chapter, basing itself on the Founder's spirit, « place at the Holy Father's disposal all the live forces of our Institute for the promotion of Catholic Action. » (7)

A similar phenomenon is taking place today in regard to social justice. Little by little the Church is becoming aware of social sin, of injustice in the world which, through its political, economic and social structures, is exploiting a large part of humanity. The Church has said: « The promotion of justice is an integral part of evangelization. » (8) The Oblates have perceived in this a special call for today and have inserted it into their evangelizing mission.

Do these different stages constitute a break with the past, are they choices that are incompatible with previous modes of evangelizing? Certainly not! It is rather a matter of development in the line of continuity. These are new

(7) Administrative circular no. 164, March 19, 1939, pp. 7, 8-9, 11-13, 57-58.

(8) Cf. Synods of Bishops of 1971 and 1974. Also see the Declaration of the International Theological Commission, in *Documentation catholique*, 1977, pp. 761-768.

dimensions which come to enrich our charism of evangelizing the poor. From the poor of Provence, the Congrégation opened itself to the poor of the world; from a clerical evangelization by preaching and missions to the people, it has opened itself to cooperation, to the missionary involvement of the Christian laity; from a more eschatological and individualistic perspective of Christian salvation, it has opened itself to its social and immediate aspect: « the transformation of the world... its liberation from every oppressive situation. » (9)

« To teach the most abandoned who Jesus Christ is » (10) remains the very core of the Congregation's mission. Today, however, it must fulfill it with new concerns, without geographical restrictions, by associating itself with the Christian laity, by encouraging its members, « whatever their work », to « collaborate, according to their vocation and by every means compatible with the Gospel, in changing all that is a cause of oppression and poverty... to help create a society based on the dignity of the human person created in the image of God. » (R.9)

The General Administration's intent was to be open to all these elements; this was its first attitude.

(9) Synod of Bishops, 1971: *Justice in the World*, Intro.
 (10) Cf. Preface to the Constitutions.

Contact with Oblate sources

Our second attitude — quite an evident one, it seems to me — was as much as possible to put and keep the Congregation in contact with its own roots and history. In a period of evolution when we are searching for new ways, this second attitude is at least as important as the first. Two years ago, at the opening of the Congress on Evangelization and the Oblates, I quoted Father Arrupe, then the Superior General of the Jesuits. He had been asked: « In what way does a Superior General — yourself in particular — maintain the Company of Jesus as a corps? » I take the liberty of repeating his reply, for it is perfectly suited to our purpose here.

He answered: « I should say, first of all, that it is by way of prayer... this is always the first Ignatian way for everything. » Then he added: « But to go to more practical means of action, I think that the first one to use is to deepen — and to see to it that others deepen — the Ignatian charism, because it is this charism which makes us feel that we constitute a corps, united and inspired by this spirit... I think that knowledge of the Company's history is very important, but a history that does not only help us know the events — which is already very useful in itself — but also to reflect on the message that these events tell me personally. It is a method of extraordinary effectiveness. » And he went on to say, « I have often said that if we were faith-

ful to what the Holy Spirit is teaching the Company about the different aspects of the Ignatian charism, we could be more Ignatian today than in the time of Ignatius himself. » (11)

My own deep conviction in this matter is the following. The real apostolic response to the needs of today's world will be made gradually. It will be made by the younger generations, by those who follow us, who are gradually being formed in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Poland, Italy and the Provinces which have vocations. If we want their response to be an « Oblate » response, then it is supremely important that these young generations know the Founder and the Congregation's history.

In this perspective, the beatification of Eugene de Mazenod and the other Oblate causes for beatification are important. Important too are the congresses and study sessions on the Oblate charism, on evangelization in the Oblate tradition, on the basic elements of the Oblate spiritual life. Important too is the publishing of a periodical like *Vie Oblate Life*. Of equal importance is the publishing of Oblate sources, and publishing them in the languages of those who are to read them. Finally, we must also prepare some masters in this field, guides who will help young Oblates. The recently founded Association

(11) *Itineraire d'un Jesuite, Entretiens avec Jean-Claude Dietsch, S.J.*, Paris, le Centurion, 1982, pp. 86 and 89.

for Oblates Studies and Research will contribute a great deal in this whole field.

I need hardly add that in this area your collaboration as Provincials is essential, both for initial and for ongoing formation; that you make it your concern that the Oblates in all your houses, and especially in your formation houses, have the necessary books and materials required to know well the Founder, our Oblate history and Oblate spirituality. Several Provinces have already done much in this line: I congratulate them and thank them.

It goes without saying that these two attitudes of the General Administration — openness to present-day reality and contact with Oblate sources — are clearly inspired by the Constitutions and Rules. (CC. 1, 7, 8, 56, 65)

I will not dwell further on this but will rather pass on to the second point: the appeals heard at the Generalate level.

II. THE APPEALS HEARD

They were many and varied during these last ten years. I present them as they came to us here in Rome, and I will add some comments on our response or lack of response in their regard.

The mission « ad gentes »

First there are the appeals in regard to the mission « ad gentes ». Requests are rather fre-

quent and at times quite insistent. I have in mind, for instance, a certain bishop from Madagascar who comes back every year to ask for Oblates. I have the impression, however, that at present requests are less numerous than they were five or six years ago. It is now known, in fact, that our reply is very often negative due to lack of personnel.

Side by side with such wonderful achievements as Senegal (1974), Sintang and Samarinda in Indonesia (1976), Norway and Tahiti (1977), Madagascar (1979) and most recently Zimbabwe and Zambia (1983), we also have, if not failures, at least cases of slow progress and admissions of not being able to continue: Hong Kong remains precarious; Burundi, which gave promise at first, has ended with a final, «No! Really we cannot!» I would also add here the Canadian Far North, which we no longer seem to know quite how to classify: in one way it could be ministry among Indians who have migrated into the larger cities of their own country. Here we certainly have a population whose needs are most urgent and toward whom the Oblates have a great obligation. The problem is quite complex. We are told: the pastoral care of these people has to be reconsidered, taking the area's evolution into account. This is true. And yet, what precisely will our collaboration be in a revamped pastoral system? I think we need to reflect seriously on that.

A few weeks ago I was very happy to receive three first obedience letters from young Canadian Fathers offering themselves for ministry among the Amerindians.

New categories of poor people.

Other appeals, more numerous and closer to us, can also be heard — the appeals of the « poor with their many faces », as the Constitutions put it. (C.5) I will list a few groups.

There are *the immigrants*, the political or economic refugees, in a number of countries. The Congregation is making considerable concerted efforts in favour of, for example, the Hmong in France, in the United States, in French Guyana. Remarkable, too, are the American Provinces engaged in serving Spanish-Americans. Many other initiatives exist here and there in regard to different groups: the gypsies (Holland), the Portuguese (Paris), the Haitians (Miami), Africans (Paris), the Tamils (France and Italy), as well as the Italians (Toronto and Ottawa) and Poles (France-Benelux and Canada). The General House itself has these last two years steadily given hospitality to some Ethiopian refugees who are waiting for their passports to another country. Each one of you could add yet other examples.

Should the Congregation do still more? Should it have a more unified action in this field as some other religious institutes do? I

simply pose the question... and I pass on to another group.

The youth. Except in countries of the Third World and in some Provinces like Italy, Poland..., our contacts here seem rather scant. This is unfortunate. The Founder gave himself to youth. The youth of Aix was his first apostolic work. Save for certain places like the Anglo-Irish Province, the Provinces of Germany, Australia, France-East, Texas and Transvaal, we have given up our works of secondary education, often enough out of necessity and sometimes out of principle. At the same time, requests are coming in, seeking either encouragement for the few institutions we still have left, or for reinforcements for others like the College de Mazenod at Ngaoundere, or for establishing new ones, for example, in the diocese of Multan in Pakistan where, practically speaking, young Christians have no chance to go beyond primary schooling.

I am glad to mention that definite efforts are being made in some Provinces to help certain more neglected youth groups, v.g. the unemployed, delinquents, victims of drug addiction. Such ministries often result from appeals directed to an individual Oblate, but they are supported and sometimes afterwards adopted by the Province.

The family. Families experience so much distress today! A number of Oblates, some Pro-

vinces even, are quite aware of it and, according to their abilities, are responding to this appeal. Many initiatives have been launched and are continuing: marriage preparation courses, retreats or marriage encounters, specialization in family counselling, the **Our Family** magazine published since 1948 in St. Mary's Province...

This is an extremely important apostolate for the Church and it corresponds very well to the Oblate vocation. It needs qualified personnel, however, especially in the field of conjugal morality.

Workers. This category is already partially included in the above mentioned groups, but it also retains its identity and makes an appeal that is distinctively its own. A number of Oblates are responding to it, either as chaplains in the Workers' Catholic Action, or as priests and Brother workers. The Congregation has about fifty worker-priests and Brothers, especially in France but also in Spain, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Canada... The way in which they are integrated into the workers' milieu varies greatly from person to person. What impact have these Oblates made on the Congregation's life? What did they bring to the Congregation? Has the Congregation given them the support they expected?

These are questions which the General Administration is asking. We are also quite aware that the worker apostolate cannot be the same

in France and in Belgium, for example, as in Poland and in the United States.

The major concerns of today's world and Church

Among the appeals reaching us, I would like to mention a third one. It may appear to be more abstract but it is no less real than any of the others. We in the General Council are keenly aware of this third appeal. I am referring to the major concerns of today's world and Church: justice and peace, unbelief and religious indifference, ecumenism, culture, social communications. Each of these realities challenges us, challenges us deeply. Is the Congregation really doing all it can to respond to the Church's appeal in each of these domains?

Social justice and peace in the world. It is perhaps in this area, and especially in that of justice, that the greatest effort of achieving awareness and the strongest invitation to commitment have been verified in the Congregation during these last ten years. On some points, unanimity of outlook is relatively easy to achieve, for instance, regarding the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Here we also have an example of a great Oblate who merits our full support, namely, Archbishop Denis Hurley of Durban. On other points, such unanimity is more difficult, v.g. the appropriateness of one method of intervention rather than another. This is definitely one area where the principle of

subsidiarity must apply. A General Administration cannot publicly commit itself except in issues that are precise, well-founded, and of great importance. It is moreover preferable not to multiply interventions without serious reasons, if we are to remain credible.

Unbelief and religious indifference. In a sense, this is the domain proper to our mission. « We are a missionary Congregation. Our principal service in the Church is to proclaim Christ and his Kingdom to the most abandoned. » (C.5) We Oblates « spare no effort to awaken or reawaken the faith in the people to whom we are sent, and we will help them discover who Christ is. » (C.7) In point of fact, what is our attitude in this matter?

I would say that, in general terms, our ministry taken as a whole responds to the appeal of awakening or reawakening the faith in those to whom we are sent. On the other hand, if we limit the question to the precise problem of religious indifference, unbelief or atheism, we have very few Oblates directly dedicated to this apostolate and few Provinces, if any, oriented in this direction. The world of the West has in part become religiously non-practising and even indifferent. In such a world, should not a Congregation like ours be doing more? I often have the impression that we are not sensitive enough to this appeal if it is alone and not linked to a situation of material poverty.

Ecumenism. This, too, is an appeal. Our Constitutions discreetly mention it. We read in article 6: « Our efforts will be characterized by a genuine desire for unity with all who consider themselves followers of Jesus, so that, according to his prayer, all may believe that the Father has sent him (cf. Jn 17:21). » Rule 59 says that through their studies scholastics « will come to appreciate convictions and experiences other than their own, especially those of other Christian traditions and the great world religions. »

In practice and according to different circumstances, we are faithful to these directives. Some do more and are directly engaged in activities promoting ecumenism on the national and international levels. In the concrete exercise of our ministry, better comprehension and, on occasion, real collaboration with Christians of other religious confessions, are now common attitudes.

Regarding our relationships with non-Christian religions, with Buddhism, for example, or Islam, a similar situation exists: where possible, a quite open attitude and some Oblates specialized in this field. In this connection, I would like to mention the responsibility entrusted by the Church to Father Marcello Zago who has become Secretary of the Holy See's Secretariat for Non-Christians.

Evangelization of cultures. This is more than evangelizing persons, more than evangelizing political or economic structures, more than in-

culturating the faith, though all of these are also affected.

Our Constitutions and Rules say a great deal about inculturating the faith (CC. 7, 104; RR. 8, 21, 32, 37, 59, 70) but very little about this issue. Rule 59 may be the most explicit in this matter. It deals with the studies of scholastics and says: « Studies are centered on Christ the Saviour. Firm roots in the Scriptures, the living tradition of the Church and the teaching of the Magisterium will enable the scholastics to reflect critically on the major trends of their time and the values of their culture. »

Paul VI and John Paul II, both very alert to the present-day world, have perceived the need to evangelize cultures. *Evangelii nuntiandi* speaks of this in its no. 20. John Paul II has seen fit to establish in Rome a Pontifical Council for Culture (May 20, 1982). « Since the beginning of my pontificate, » he stated, « I have considered the Church's dialogue with the cultures of our time to be one vital area, one in which the destiny of the world at the end of this twentieth century is at stake. » (12) On January 18 of the following year (1983), he described the spirit that ought to animate the members of the Pontifical Council: « It is in remembering these two principles of orientation — evangelization of cul-

(12) English weekly edition of *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 28, 1982, p. 7.

tures and the defense of man — that the Pontifical Council for culture will pursue its work... Your task is difficult but splendid. Together you must contribute to mapping out new ways for the Church's dialogue with the world of today... We would be unfaithful to our mission of evangelizing the present generations if we left Christians without an understanding of new cultures. We would be equally unfaithful to the charity which ought to animate us, were we to fail to see how man today is threatened in his very humanity, and were we not to proclaim, by our words and by our actions, the necessity of defending individual and collective man, to save him from degrading and humiliating oppression. » (13)

Are we at all concerned by this question? Yes, we certainly are. I have the impression, however, that we are moving forward more rapidly in the charity which prompts us to defend man than in the study which would enable us to penetrate new cultures. The session on evangelizing the secularized world, held in August 1982 at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, was a first step. We must pursue this work, and encourage and support institutions like Saint Paul University which would contribute thereto. In this field, study and reflection are indispensable for assuring the quality of our action.

(13) English weekly edition of *L'Osservatore Romano*, February 28, 1983, p. 7.

Recently, a fellow Oblate who is a professor of philosophy, after analyzing the motivating causes of unbelief and misbelief in our contemporary world, recalled our need for a *pastoral care of the intelligence* as well as a *pastoral care of the heart*. He wrote:

The pastoral care of the intelligence will offer reasons for our hope on the one hand and, on the other, will purify our own understanding of the faith and thereby show us the true God, and not the idol distorting the true face of God, making him repulsive to critical and scientific sensitivity and repugnant to those concerned with social justice. The pastoral care of the heart, in its turn, will make us keenly aware of our need « to purify Christians' activity » and « to reveal the servant Church who is poor and at the service of humanity ». (14)

One last appeal, that of *the means of social communications* and our use of them for evangelization. Oblates are present in this domain. I refer, for example, to AVEX in Lyon, to NOVALIS in Ottawa, to the Centre Saint-Pierre-Apotre in Montreal, to certain private radio stations in the Philippines, Haiti, Bolivia and Chile; I am also thinking of the Oblate Communications Centre in Battleford, and of what is being done in the United States at the shrine of our Lady of the Snows and in the Province of Texas. On the whole, however, our presence in this field is rather modest.

(14) JACQUES CROTEAU, *O.M.I.*, Text written for a meeting of St-Joseph Province.

For the future, I consider it very important that formators, and the Provincials first of all, insist on putting Rule 61 into practice. It reads: « Since the means of social communication profoundly influence attitudes and values, Oblates should understand how public opinion is formed and ought to develop their talents in the field of communications. They can thereby help to make Gospel values present and powerful in society. »

III. THE OBLATE RESPONSE

This Oblate response is given by you, by the Congregation. The Congregation refines this response from General Chapter to General Chapter, adapting it to the perceived needs. In this line, the 1986 General Chapter will have a considerable role to play.

When I was writing this third part, I first thought of entitling it: « The challenges we must take up! » For ten years now we have certainly been talking about challenges. Each appeal becomes a challenge. A great many articles have appeared which indicate the challenges facing the Church today. A few years ago, in the July 1980 issue of the bulletin *Pro Mundi Vita*, Gabriel Marc listed seven: the challenge of pluralism, the challenge of justice, the challenge of modernity, the democratic challenge, the challenge of feminism, the challenge of the city, the chal-

lence of affluence. All this is true and could easily be applied to the Congregation — which, for that matter, has in fact been done. (15)

I preferred instead the title: « The Oblate response to the appeals of today. » This was more broad, and more clearly includes the two basic dimensions of the Oblate charism, namely, missionary action and consecrated life.

The immediate response to a number of the appeals we have mentioned belongs to Provinces, according to their potential and in the light of the priorities they have adopted. As for the Superior General and his council, the Constitutions say: « Their first concern is our fidelity as a Congregation to the missionary thrust which is our Spirit-given heritage from the Founder. » (C.111)

This missionary thrust and apostolic élan, as I understand it, means we are to dare everything to go to the poor, to the most abandoned, in order to bring them to know Jesus Christ; and, in order to succeed in this, to be ourselves completely given to Jesus Christ and transformed by him.

Were you to ask me how an Oblate can evangelize today's world, I would give as my first answer not an indication of this or that activity; I would rather tell you: Be present to this world;

(15) Address of Father Achiel Peelman, O.M.I., to the Canadian Oblate Conference on October 28, 1982.

love this world, and especially the poor within it; love them with the heart of Christ. (R.12) In the midst of this world, be authentic witnesses of the Gospel Beatitudes — by your life, by your activity, your works. And do not be afraid to speak openly to this world of Jesus Christ. This is what it expects of you, and this is why you exist in the Church.

From time to time it is good to reflect on the fact that we get tired of everything, even of the best things. We get tired, for instance, of the Beatitudes; poverty fatigues us, we get tired of purity, we weary of meekness; tears and injustice tire us out; in trying to hope, we get tired of hope... (16). And yet, « we commit ourselves to be a leaven of the Beatitudes at the heart of the world. » (C.11)

We also get tired of evangelizing, of proclaiming the faith. It is tiresome and embarrassing to tell today's people who Jesus Christ is. And, from another point of view, isn't God already present in people anyway? Is man not already saved by the uprightness of his heart? What is the need and use of evangelizing! (17) And yet, our Constitutions say that « we are men set apart for the Gospel » (C.2), that « our principal service in the Church is to proclaim Christ and his Kingdom to the most abandoned. » (C.5)

(16) Cf. MARIE NOEL, *Notes intimes*, ed. Stock, p. 131.

(17) Cf. *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 80.

There has been a positive development and genuine progress in our understanding of the Institute's evangelizing activity. The Congregation has gradually understood that it had to associate the laity more and more to its work of evangelization. The Congregation also understood that it had to take more into account the social dimension of the faith, that proclaiming the Gospel cannot be done without promoting justice. I am strongly impressed by the fact that six Oblate Regions, one after the other and each in its own context, have become keenly aware that that these new dimensions are necessary and have listed them among their apostolic priorities.

This is a sign of life and a reason to hope. We belong to our times and we are going ahead together. A long distance must yet be covered, however, and it is on this point I would like to dwell before concluding. Five conditions, it seems to me, are necessary to help the Congregation make progress and gain strength.

First condition: that we continue to deepen these new dimensions of our apostolate, clarify them, situate them well in relation to each other and to the vocation that is ours as Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

We must promote the activity of the Christian laity, associate it more to the Church's life and apostolate, and also associate it more to the Congregation's life and evangelizing work. Do

we do this enough? Do we do it with the required discernment? with the respect due to the different vocations? For some time there was a great deal of talk about new modes of associating laity to the Congregation; a few experiments were in fact made, but on the whole there has been little progress. Perhaps the 1985 international meeting of the Missionary Association of Mary Immaculate at Lourdes will stimulate a new thrust in this line...

That however is not the most important issue. What is really at stake is the place of the lay person, man or woman, in the Church's evangelizing activity. Are we sufficiently open to it? What are we doing, concretely, where we are and work, to promote their collaboration and integrate it into the Church's ministry? What principles are guiding us in this: the claims made by popular movements, the directives of the Holy See, reflection on the theology of the Church? A great deal remains to be done in this realm. And the same is true for that other dimension, namely, the promotion of justice as an integral part of evangelization.

This dimension has come into our ministry and in our ministry it will henceforth remain. What is important now is that it be developed and really integrated into its true place in the Congregation's evangelizing work. In this regard, I repeat here what I said in May 1982 at Cap-de-la-Madeleine:

For an adequate discernment in this kind of commitment, two criteria seem important to me. The first one is this: our orientation should be clearly one of evangelization, that is to say, the purifying and transforming of structures according to the values of the Gospel and the Beatitudes. This excludes certain methods incompatible with the Gospel: for example, the promotion of hatred among people or class struggle. (18) The second one is this: the concrete form of our activity should correspond to the vocation that is specifically ours in the Church, as religious and as priests. The teaching of the Council, of Paul VI, of John Paul II cannot be ignored in this matter. In our activity, the formation of conscience, Christian education, the spiritual support of committed laity and, at times, taking opportune public stands will normally take the first place.

For me, these distinctions are necessary, even though they go against the current of certain present-day trends. I am neither ignorant of nor do I ignore the difficulties raised by this question, difficulties which partly spring from the concept a person has of the Church and of the priesthood. In this matter as in others, I personally try to let myself be guided by the teaching of the Church's Magisterium: I am convinced that in the long run that is the surest road for the Congregation.

Second condition: that we unceasingly renew ourselves in our zeal for evangelization. Here I mean the explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ and of the Good News of salvation in Jesus

(18) Cf. JOHN PAUL II: *Laborem exercens*, no. 20.

Christ. Let this be the primary and vivid preoccupation found in the depths of each Oblate's heart and in all that he does! « Our mission is to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to seek it before all else, » our Constitutions say (C.11). Everything else should find its explanation in this, everything else should flow toward this objective. It is normal that we look for new means that are better adapted and more effective; our fundamental concern, however, should always be the following: « to proclaim Christ and his Kingdom to the most abandoned. » (C.5) We must not be afraid to « preach Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ crucified, » as the Founder requested. (19)

At the end of *Evangelii nuntiandi*, Paul VI felt the need to stress the necessity of proclaiming Jesus Christ, and even of justifying this necessity, for there are today a certain number of Christians — and also some priests — who are not too convinced of this. The Pope said:

It would certainly be an error to impose something on the consciences of our brethren. But to propose to their consciences the truth of the Gospel and salvation in Jesus Christ, with complete clarity and with a total respect for the free options which it presents — « without coercion, or dishonourable or unworthy pressure » (20) — far from being an attack on religious liberty is fully to respect that liberty, which is offered

(19) 1826 Constitutions and Rules.

(20) Vatican II: *Dignitatis humanae*, no. 4.

the choice of a way that even non-believers consider noble and uplifting. Is it then a crime against others' freedom to proclaim with joy a Good News which one has come to know through the Lord's mercy? (21) And why should only falsehood and error, debasement and pornography have the right to be put before people and often unfortunately imposed on them by the destructive propaganda of the mass media, by the tolerance of legislation, the timidity of the good and the impudence of the wicked? The respectful presentation of Christ and his Kingdom is more than the evangelizer's right; it is his duty. It is likewise the right of his fellow men to receive from him the proclamation of the Good News of salvation. (22)

And for us Oblates, this is the very purpose for which we were founded in the Church.

Third condition: that we establish the truth within ourselves. Here one naturally recalls the remark made by Father Maurice Lefebvre, who was a victim of his charity in Bolivia: « Because we live a lie, the truths we bring make no headway. »

On the basis of the visits I have made throughout the Congregation, I can state that, on the whole, we do strive to live the truths we preach. There is a great deal of generosity, fidelity and fervour in the Congregation. In an area like this, however, we are called to renew ourselves unceasingly. Of this the Oblates are aware. Furthermore, among the priorities voted in the Provinces and Regions, personal and community

(21) Vatican II: *Dignitatis humanae*, nos. 9-14.

(22) PAUL VI: *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 80.

conversion, renewal of spiritual life and self-evangelization are often mentioned. For this we can be glad and thank God.

There is however one specific point — and here the Superior General and the Provincials are directly involved — wherein, it seems to me, we do not sufficiently take in hand our own responsibilities. Out of goodness, perhaps, or possible weariness, we allow certain false situations to drag on indefinitely. In the long run, these situations can only weaken the Congregation and rob it of credibility. I am referring here to Oblates who in fact left the Institute years ago, in whose case there is no hope of their returning, and in regard to whom we do not dare to take a decision. I am also referring to the overly liberal use of « leaves of absence » which are actually only a cover for a real departure from the Congregation. I understand all that may be difficult and delicate in this matter; nevertheless, both for the good of the Institute and of the persons concerned, we should, I think, between now and the next Chapter, with the assistance of the Procurator General to the Holy See, bring full light to bear on these situations — there are about fifty of them — and take the appropriate decisions.

Fourth condition: that we pursue the work undertaken for vocations, and that to aspirants who come to us we assure a solid doctrinal formation which has « firm roots in the Scriptures,

the living tradition of the Church and the teaching of the Magisterium, » as our Rules say. (R.59)

In this domain, the Provincials as well as the Superior General have a special responsibility, for it is the future of the Congregation that is at stake. Article 49 of the Constitutions is quite clear on this point. Thanks to Father René Motte and the General Formation Committee, we now have a Directory, or the *General Norms for Oblate Formation*. I strongly recommend the application of these General Norms in your Province.

Allow me here publicly to thank the Provincials of Europe and America who accept to send some of their men to help our formation houses in the Third World. A special thanks to the Oblates who, in order to provide this service, have offered themselves, at times even to the detriment of their health.

Fifth and final condition: that we develop availability and a sense of belonging to the Institute, the sense of being an apostolic corps. Our Constitutions say it very well: « We fulfill our mission in and through the community to which we belong. » (C.37); R.1) The Congregation is not a springboard for achieving one's own personal charism and individual projects. On the contrary, when we enter the Congregation, we must be ready to put ourselves entirely at the Congregation's disposal, to carry out the evangelizing work it will assign to us. If this attitude is not present, there is no apostolic corps: our

common undertaking, the mission received from the Congregation takes priority over individual tastes and projects. We must be clear on this point during the time of initial formation. After initial formation, it is normal that superiors can count on such availability, even though, on their part, they ought to strive as much as possible to respect the aptitudes and tastes of each person.

As I conclude, I recall my first visit to Asia in 1973. I was then Vicar General. Together with the Treasurer-General, Father Dupuich, I was on my way to the plenary session at Colombo. We had stopped over in India, at the mission of Kancheepuram. After a stay of two days, when I was on the point of leaving, a young man took me aside and said to me, « Thank you, Father, for having come so far to see us! »

On the other continents thereafter and in very different contexts, but always in the milieu of the poor, I have experienced similar things. What do all these men and women from all over expect from us? Bread, perhaps, and better living conditions; but, first of all and above all, that we respect and love them, and also that we introduce them to that mystery which animates us and is the foundation of our hope, namely, our faith in Jesus Christ, the Saviour of all.

May the Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of the Oblates, who received Christ to give him to the world (C.10), help us to remember this always!

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Oblates «are called to be the Savior's co-workers...; in its holy aspirations, their ambition should embrace the vast expanse of the whole earth». Thus wrote their Founder in 1818.

Today they number some 5.600 and are at work in over 50 countries. Who are they? What spirit is theirs and how are they trained? What is their apostolate? How are they coping with current changes?

This book gives answers to questions such as these. It especially invites us to reflect upon the deep values that animate Oblate life and allow it to face the future with confidence.