

# VARIETY OF MINISTRIES AND LOVE FOR THE POPE

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*The visit of some Provinces in Europe. - The visit in the United States. - Our attitude towards the Pope.*

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Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! The yuletide season once again provides me with the opportunity to share a few thoughts with you. The theme of these reflections is suggested by my recent visits to various Provinces of the Congregation and by the election of Pope John Paul II.

## **The visit of some Provinces in Europe**

I returned to Rome yesterday after visiting the Provinces of Austria and Belgium-South, as well as the Vice-Province of France-Benelux. The Oblates there are doing wonderful work.

Only twenty-four in Austria, they take care of an important Marian shrine, Maria Taferl, and serve two parishes; they are also involved in preaching and in pastoral activity among workers, and have a most generous and flourishing Missionary Association.

Belgium-South numbers 120 members, half of whom are former missionaries in Zaire. Many work in parishes, others are hospital or prison chaplains, and some teach. Two retreat centers, Velaines and Barvaux, receive various groups. Evangelizing the inner city and working-class milieu by new approaches is the major preoccupation of a certain number of Oblates. The Province moreover has given birth to a unique and durable experience in community living, that of La Poudrière, which has become a source of inspiration for men of good will from all orientations. Real artists can be found among the Brothers. The Missionary Association is vigorous and active.

The Polish Vice-Province has 47 Oblates dedicated to serving immigrants of Polish origin. These men work under difficult conditions, especially so because these immigrants are dispersed and are being progressively integrated into their adopted country. The Vice-Province has 26 houses, residences or stations, including a boarding-school at Vaudricourt and a vacation center for Polish families at Stella Plage. The election of Pope John Paul II, who in the past has visited their house in Brussels where he celebrated the Eucharist, was an occasion of great rejoicing for them.

These three Provinces face a common challenge, that of vocations. There are neither novices nor scholastics in training – a major problem for the future! Another question was raised at some of the meetings: the diversity of apostolic commitments and the feeling sometimes experienced of being marginal because of one's own commitment, judged by some as too traditional or, on the contrary, too progressive to be Oblate. Exterior works are certainly important – we are missionaries and missionaries to the poor – but still greater importance must be given to interior dispositions and to the mission received. We are Oblates first of all by what we have in our hearts: the total gift of self to Jesus Christ, a deep love for the poor and the most abandoned, a sense of community and the disposition to obey. When we are animated by such sentiments and have received a mission from the Institute for the work we are doing, we do not have to question ourselves on our identity.

## **The visit in the United States**

From July 17 to September 14 I was in the United States visiting four of the five American Provinces: Central, Saint John the Baptist, Southern and Western. I had already spent a few weeks in the Eastern Province in 1975. From this visit I retain the impression of a group of Oblates deeply attached to the Congregation and proud of being Oblates, well-rooted in the American milieu and close to people of all conditions, at the same time bound to the classic forms of ministry and open to new calls.

In these Provinces, as in the three preceding, I was able to observe that the desire to reach the poor, the most abandoned groups, is present. It is expressed in various ways: apostolate with migrants, especially the Spanish-speaking (Puerto Ricans and Mexicans), also but to a lesser degree with blacks

and Indians; apostolate with rural, isolated populations (Rio Grande Valley, various places in Maine); apostolate with the poverty-stricken, as in a suburb of St. Louis; apostolate with prisoners: some twenty of our Fathers are prison chaplains...

I also witnessed some initiatives that are really characteristic of the Oblate spirit. At the Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows, for instance, a radio station has been established to reach the blind, to read for them the main newspaper articles that appear, and to proclaim Jesus Christ to them. There too help has been extended to the sick by giving a missionary dimension to their sufferings, and to this end was created the Association of Victim Missionaries. How many more examples could be given!

The Chicano Film Festival, created and developed by the Oblate College of the Southwest in San Antonio; the HOME Co-op, a people's training center for handicraft (East Orland) and Community Life (Portland), a residence for problem youth (St. John the Baptist Province); adaptation of retreat houses – there are fifteen of them – to answer present needs; Marriage Encounter groups, mutual aid groups for people in difficult situations (Alcoholics Anonymous, Emotional Anonymous, Overeaters...); the Center for Pastoral Renewal and Spiritual Growth at Mount Mary Immaculate (Western Province); the Center for Prayer at Sarita (Southern Province)... To enumerate them all would be impossible. From the whole there emerges an impression of vitality, a will to respond to the needs of today that can only be full of promise for the future.

The American Provinces have some forty scholastics. To answer the Church's needs, that is very little. Here as in Europe there exists the challenge of vocations and, in relation to that challenge, the need for a more intensive cooperation between Provinces. This would lead to a greater awareness of the apostolic strength represented in a group of 850 Oblates within the same country and would help to define better the Oblate image in the American Church.

The General Council will have the opportunity to discuss these questions with the Provincials next year at the joint meeting in San Antonio.

### **Our attitude toward the Pope**

As final theme of this letter I would like to reflect a moment with you on our special attitude toward the Church and, in a more special way, toward the Holy Father.

After the death of Pope John Paul I, an article in *Le Monde* (October 10, 1978) brutally asked the question: "Who killed John Paul I?". Its author, Andre Mandouze, answered: "We did... we Catholics... because we demand too much of him". He then proceeded to insist on the need for a revision of pontifical responsibilities and of our own demands as regards the Pope. At the time of St. Peter, the burden in some aspects must have been less heavy to bear!

The question that was posed made me think. It made me reflect at a more personal level on my responsibility, on yours and on that of the Congregation. Very rarely, moreover, do I visit a Province without having one Oblate or other speak to me of this problem. Do we always give to the Pope, within as without the Congregation, the support, confidence and devotedness he has a right to expect of us?

Oblates, as a whole, – I see this when visiting Provinces – remain faithful to the Pope and are perfectly loyal to him. Some however may be lacking on this point. Internal stress when faced with certain changes or, on the contrary, impatience in wanting more radical changes, partly explains this weakness. The events of recent months provide an occasion for us all to renew ourselves in our love for the Pope and in our faithfulness to his teachings.

There is no question here of a simplistic love but rather of a manly devotedness and an enlightened fidelity. The Oblate's spontaneous disposition toward the Pope and his teachings must be one of openness, of confidence and of acceptance. The Founder held to that very strongly. He reminded the scholastics at Billens, on September 11, 1832, that it was necessary to "adhere with one's mind and heart" to the teaching of the Pope "without having to wait for solemn promulgations"; and he added: "I repeat this to you so that you will make of this principle the customary rule of your conduct and so that you will transmit it to those who will come after you, as you receive it from

me”.

Faithfulness to this rule will not prevent some from experiencing difficulties when confronted with a given orientation or directive, but it will help them to bear this suffering with discretion, respect and faith. In such a situation, as Father Arrupe wrote to the Jesuits, “it is necessary to reflect before God and to take the advice that is called for in order to decide if a ‘ respectful silence ‘ is not, concretely, a greater service... Pressure by means of public opinion and personal criticism is not the proper means of manifesting ideas or opinions to the Holy Father” (1/25/72).

The Church is a mystery of faith. Joyous and confident acceptance of authority in the Church – and of the grace that we receive from her – rests finally on faith. The acceptance belongs to the same world as does that of the Saviour-God who comes to us in the form of a child. To reach him, to be able to communicate with him, we have to approach him with the soul of a child, without interior resistance, ready to welcome salvation, and then we are saved! (cfr. R. VOILLAUME, *Lettres aux Fraternités*, t. 2, pp. 127-128).

May the Virgin Mary, who knew how to receive Christ with faith and love in order to share him with the world, obtain for you the grace of a Holy Christmas and a Happy New Year!