



Missionaries under Obedience

The Superior General's 9th Letter to the Congregation

*Fr. Wilhelm Steckling, O.M.I.
Superior General*

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*“We are witnesses of these things,
as is the Holy Spirit
that God has given
to those who obey him.” Acts 5:32*

Dear brother Oblates,

Being a good listener is a quality that people appreciate. What obedience literally means is exactly that: to have an open ear, to pay attention. People also say: “Opportunities are often missed because we are broadcasting when we should be listening.”

For the past thirteen years my ministry has been one of service to the Congregation at the level of the General Council. I have had the privilege of meeting many of you, seeing your situations and hearing about you and your lives and mission. In this letter I would like to reflect with you on how we listen to God, to one another, to the cry of the poor, to those who lead us in our mission, and suggest some directions which our listening needs to take in order to respond in a concrete fashion to the needs of the 21st century as ministers of immense hope.

This letter is all about having open ears, and so we begin by asking ourselves: “Are we good listeners? Can we listen to individual people and to the needs of the larger world loved by God? Do we have a heart open to the inspirations of the Spirit in prayer, to the counsel of our religious community, to the plans of our superiors? Or has a widely autonomous, individualistic society got the better of us, closing us up in small, comfortable worlds where we do not need to pay attention to others?”

I am completing my earlier letters on poverty and chastity with this third one on obedience. It deals with another basic value, another wellspring that brings vitality to both our Oblate life and mission. Life and mission go together; in living the vows we become missionaries. When we choose the vow of poverty we tell the world about ways to become rich before God. Celibate chastity is meant to speak to others about Christ’s love. Similarly our oblation through the vow of obedience contains a hidden treasure for the evangelization of the world: we consecrate the dimension of time, the here and now and every moment, to God’s design of salvation, and we do it together, led by our superiors.

In the present letter I also wish to deal with the vow of perseverance, as it is easy to relate perseverance to obedience. Perseverance stresses the perpetuity in time of our obedience to God’s will, emulating Christ’s obedience until death. The fourth vow says that our choice of vowed obedience does not apply only within a given and known situation, but its aim is to have us entrust our whole future to God instead of trying to construct it ourselves.

As a fellow-missionary I am inviting you to reflect together with me in four steps. Firstly, I relate obedience to the human quest for freedom. Secondly, I propose a theological reflection on the vow and then a third step brings us to look at the Oblate spirituality of obedience. Having recognized the foundations on which our vow is built, I conclude with a fourth step inviting each of us to live our obedience by responding in a practical and realistic way to the joys, hopes and difficulties of our personal and community lives. Doing so, we will become better missionaries of hope among the most abandoned.

I. The human quest for freedom

We can safely say: Christian obedience exists only in order to open the door of Gospel *freedom* in our own lives and thus enable us to proclaim it to others. Constitution 25 expresses this link with few words: “Religious obedience is our way of making real the freedom of the Gospel.”

1. How can I become a free person?

Who does not want to achieve freedom? “Free at last”, is a desire that a person longs to cry out at a certain moment of his or her life. It is a human longing that has inspired many books and films. A sense of freedom is the drive behind many of our decisions. We want to choose by ourselves without coercion and we seek to achieve a state of greater freedom through our choices.

This has probably also been a motive for our choice of Oblate religious life; to an extent our option was made for the sake of freedom. Humanly speaking, have we not achieved a greater freedom from things that may have held us back, and for projects we ardently wanted to do? By becoming members of a missionary congregation we were detached from many ties, freed from many worries. In exchange we have gained the freedom to work for the poor and to have nothing to hold us back in our announcing the Gospel to them. In function of this goal we can freely take our time to reflect, to pray, to prepare ourselves and then to go anywhere in the world with a light heart. As Oblates we actually do enjoy a wonderful freedom to fulfill our mission! It is good to remember this from time to time, simply so that we do not become too spoiled.

It would be shortsighted, however, to concentrate only on the human perspective in order to value the freedom that can be achieved through obedience. If we remain only on the human level we are unable to respond to other perceptions of the vow that we must recognize around us and in ourselves.

2. What about discipline?

We have to admit that upon hearing the word “obedience” we hardly think of freedom. Most people would not associate it with freedom at all. Spontaneously many of our acquaintances would rather associate “obedience and perseverance” with “discipline and order”. They would even see it as something rather opposed to enjoying a free and happy life, or at best a price we have to pay. From a simply human perspective it is easy to see religious obedience merely as a function that regulates the relationships in an organization like ours.

Let us also acknowledge that discipline and order are necessary for a religious congregation in order for it to function as a missionary body. As in any large association of people, God’s “corps” too, needs a straightforward organizational structure and clear lines of leadership and cooperation. Our first Constitutions and Rules in 1818 pointed out that “obedience is the bond of union in every well-regulated society.” We can still argue that at least indirectly the vow would serve our longing for freedom. The price of a certain discipline needs to be paid. Unlimited freedom does not exist in this world, and the freedom we can have depends on and builds on our acceptance of boundaries.

When we relate obedience to discipline we are left with a sense of uneasiness. Why should a community, a superior have a say in my life-plan? What if they act out of a limited vision or for selfish motives? Therefore the question we need to ask is: does merely human, philosophical reasoning suffice to understand obedience, or do we need to go deeper? I submit that the mere fact that religious obedience brings about a certain amount of freedom and necessarily includes discipline does not suffice to understand or explain it. Such reasoning would not justify the high rank that the spiritual tradition gives to the vow. To understand, and I would say, to love the vow of obedience we

need to vitally discover its faith dimension. Only through faith does an opposition between obedience and freedom cease. How can this faith dimension be described?

II. Following Christ, the Son, in his obedience

The section on obedience in our Constitutions and Rules starts off with Christ and quotes Scripture. “Christ’s food was ‘to do the will of the one who sent him’ (Jn 4:34). He ‘became obedient unto death, even death on the cross’ (Phil 2: 8).” (C 24) As in the case of the other vows, Christ is the model of our consecration.

1. Christ the Son, listening to his Father

The obedient Christ listens to the Father’s will and is totally submitted to it. With this attitude Christ is deeply inserted in Israel’s faith, which is expressed in the *Schema Israel*: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! ... Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today.” (Dt 6:4-5)

Christ is open to the Father’s will with a listening heart. One can go further and say that such a relationship constitutes the core of his identity. In John’s gospel, Christ often describes himself as the one who has been sent, or he calls himself plainly the Son. Later theological reflection will come to describe him as the second person in the Trinity. In the context of the vow of obedience what strikes me is the simple fact that he is the second person, not the first! Even being God and equal to the Father, even in heaven: he is not the Father but the Son! He is the Word of the Father, not his own word. While on earth, in his human, limited existence this obedience finds its expression through being the Father’s missionary whose food it is to do the will of the Father. His obedience leads him to the cross; “Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered.” (Heb 5:8)

A further thing we should point out is that Jesus’ listening and obedience is permeated with love. Only with the Spirit of Love is the Holy Trinity complete. When there is love, obedience cannot become slavery but will free a person instead. Slavery is found in heeding the voice of sin, but where there is the Spirit, there is freedom.

2. Becoming sons and daughters in the Son

Through his incarnation into a human existence Christ has shown us a way we all should go. As we follow Jesus through the vows, the Gospel value of obedience invites us to become similar to “Christ the Son”.

It strikes me that our Constitutions tell us that our vow of obedience is grounded in Christ’s own loving and listening relationship with the Father. Constitution 2 points out this similarity with Christ: “We strive to reproduce in ourselves the pattern of his life.” It concludes: “Thus, we give ourselves to the Father in obedience even unto death and dedicate ourselves to God’s people in unselfish love.” How can this find its articulation in our lives?

- ◆ Faith-obedience begins with the attitude of **listening**. Many biblical persons show us how to live as listeners: Abraham and Sara, Moses, and above all, Mary of Nazareth. She listens, asks questions and obeys the will of God; we venerate her as “the faithful handmaid of the Lord.” (C 36)
- ◆ Faith-obedience continues by being conformed to the image of the **Son**. As creatures that are “made little less than a god” (Ps 8:5) we are easily tempted to put ourselves in the first place because of a false image of God. To act in defiance of God’s will is the original sin:

eating from the tree of life we want to become gods of our own accord. Jesus' teaching and action lets us realize that our divinization will not be achieved taking this road. He warns us: Do not let yourselves be called fathers, or masters. This is a warning to all Christians, even to all human beings. It is true that we have been created in the image of God. God is Trinity. Concretely, we are "predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29). It is only through the Son and becoming like him that we can have access to God the Father and that our divinization can take place.

- ✦ We will not become an image of the Son without the Spirit of **love**. The first commandment is: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment." (Mt 22:37-38) We "obey" this "commandment" but here the words "obedience" and "commandment" change their meaning. All becomes love, and this love spills over to our neighbors: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

As leaders in the Church we may find it particularly difficult to accept that we should be on the side of obedience like all the other disciples of Christ. Practically every priest and brother in ministry, in one or other way, holds some authority in missions and parishes, schools and institutions, be it as superior or by certain privileges. Do not those who are priests sacramentally represent Christ, head of the Church? It is good to recall that even through the sacrament of Holy Orders priests still represent Christ, the Son – and not God the Father. The same is true for those of us considered as missionaries: our vocation is to reproduce the pattern of Christ, the one who has been sent, the one who depends on the will of his Father.

3. The path to freedom

I hope that these faith-based reflections on obedience might show us the way to achieve true happiness and freedom. That way consists in living our lives according to the pattern of Christ. Human beings are not made to live like pagan gods or demi-gods, understood as superman or superwoman; we are made to live like sons and daughters of God. We are destined to reproduce the pattern of Christ, and therefore here on earth and above in heaven, there is no way of escaping a relationship with God, which the Bible describes as obedience. The way to freedom has three parts.

- ✦ The first: **Obedience makes the relationship with God our primary relationship**. "You shall love God with all your heart..." As obedience binds us to God's will alone, it makes us free from other ties. Oblation, total submission, and radical obedience – these three are due only to God.

There is an old story that illustrates this: a man has decided to serve only the one who is the most powerful. He soon gives up his job with a landowner to serve the prince. Then he moves on to the king. Since the king is afraid of the devil the man decides to work for Satan. At the end he discovers that God is more powerful than even Satan and ends up consecrating his life to God alone in the service to the poor.

- ✦ The second: **Obedience brings truth**. It lets us recognize who we really are as limited human beings. We would never find fulfillment without conforming to reality. Obedience lets us respond to our condition of creatures, as finite human beings. We can feel strongly encouraged to do this since Christ himself accepted such a condition. Accepting the truth of our existence will make us free. If we persist in the fantasies of omnipotence typical of childhood or adolescence we will find ourselves locked into a world of fantasy. If we know

how to limit ourselves and to obey the truth of our existence we paradoxically can attain freedom.

- ◆ Thirdly, **obedience makes us come to terms with human authority**. Obeying God alone, accepting the truth of our human existence, we will also be able to accept those indications of God's will that are mediated through human persons. We follow them in interior freedom because we know how relative they are.

There exists a false obedience, which enslaves. Blind, total obedience, which might be due to God and to God alone, has been demanded in abusive ways by authorities that pretended to speak in the name of God but pursued only their own agendas. Secularism has an anti-authoritarian side and up to a certain point this rebellion is justified. The person who has vowed obedience needs to take this into account; he must know that "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29) Thus, obedience to God can lead to rebellion. In other situations the believer may take the advice of Paul who asks slaves to obey their masters as if they were Christ. (Eph 6:5) This also is a way of living freedom, even if we were to be in jail.

True obedience accepts legitimate authority. "In the Superior we will see a sign of our unity in Christ Jesus; through faith we accept the authority he has been given." (C 26) Formation leads the new Oblate "to relate in a mature way to his brothers and to those in authority." (R 65b) Based on faith, we will find freedom and fulfillment in obeying the many just laws that regulate our civil societies, or in listening to the Church and its authorities, in following the guidance of our communities and their superiors.

III. Obedience in Oblate spirituality

1. From the Founder to our days

For St. Eugene, obedience is central to religious life. He calls it "the main vow, the most basic of all the vows." Eugene's first step in approaching religious life is the private vow of obedience that he and Tempier make to each other in 1816. He frequently uses the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas for whom the vow of obedience is the one through which "we offer more to God than through the other vows." [...] "It includes all the others".¹

It is a vow that Eugene lives profoundly himself. I quote a longer paragraph that he writes in 1814 after a time of rest imposed on him by a life-threatening illness.

"May the Savior's obedience not only with respect to his heavenly Father, but also in respect of Mary and Joseph serve me as a rule to submit myself willingly, not only to events, but also to the wishes of others even when they are opposed to my own. It is not enough to submit oneself to superiors: perfection would lie in giving way to one's equals or inferiors. In this voluntary obedience, one should not be content with not grumbling, with not putting off doing it promptly, but it would be necessary for the will to submit interiorly. I must certainly not forget that what made me suffer most at the time I was ill was finding myself in a position where I was acting wholly autonomously, in such a way that I did not know if my works, which lacked the merit of obedience, were agreeable to God."²

¹ "Constitutions et Règles de la Société des Missionnaires de Provence", Part Two, Chapter One, par. 2. See Frank Demers, Obedience, in *Dictionary of Oblate Values*, Rome, 2000.

² Spiritual Writings in *Oblate Writings I*, vol. 15, no. 130, p. 104.

He suffers from the fact, that prior to being ill, his position had been too autonomous!

Not only does our Founder embrace enthusiastic obedience for himself, but he also recommends it to his fellow religious because he is convinced that they will find their true joy in it. To Father Mille, he writes that he should be “finding contentment in all things and a real happiness under the gentle yoke of obedience.”³

On occasions he becomes very demanding and sounds categorical: “...complaints. I am decided not to listen to them.”⁴ But he also makes it clear that his demand of obedience has nothing to do with despotism. He shows himself flexible and open to suggestions, and includes the following in the 1818 Rule: “Nevertheless, it is permitted to state the reasons which one might have for being disinclined to undertake a certain duty.” Once having said that he adds: “But when this has been done, with all modesty and submission, the Superior’s decision ought to be accepted as a manifestation of God’s will.”

One of St. Eugene’s favorite exhortations is about regularity. He praises the community of Notre Dame de l’Osier in this regard: “People vie with one another in their admiration for the regularity, good order, piety that reign in the house.... They find edification in everything: the silence that reigns in the house, the punctuality at all the exercises, the office...”⁵ He defines regularity as, “fidelity in shaping one’s life according to the spirit and the letter of the Rule.”⁶ – Note that he does not forget the spirit!

During the Founder’s time and after it, most of the General Chapters dealt in one way or another with obedience. Fr. Joseph Fabre complains about “the profusion of external works”, which has become “one of the great obstacles to the observance of the Rule.”⁷ To remedy such a situation, he reminds his Oblates: “In a Congregation, there cannot be and there must not be any personal works.” Does this not sound as something of actuality today? He goes on: “All works must be carried out according to the Rule, that is, according to obedience [...]”⁸

It is interesting to see that already in these early years, Fr. Fabre values something that we would call the principle of subsidiarity. He asks that a superior should “allow each one, within the confines of the Rule, the necessary freedom to do good in holy ministry and also to fulfill the tasks for which he may be responsible in the house or outside it. [...] It is not fitting that he should intervene directly in everything and get personally involved in everything. Let him keep his place.”⁹

However, in other aspects, obedience often seems to have had a certain military undertone until Vatican II. Today it probably still suffers from an image problem due to past practices and certain expressions of the spiritual tradition, like the famous cadaver-obedience of St. Ignatius, quoted by St. Eugene.¹⁰ From this we might be able to understand the strong quest for freedom that emerged as a reaction soon after Vatican II.

³ May 21, 1836 letter, in *Oblate Writings* I, vol. 8, no. 573, p. 232.

⁴ August 17, 1847 letter to Father Tempier, in *Oblate Writings* I, vol. 10, no. 939, p. 174.

⁵ October 8, 1835 letter to Father Eugene Bruno Guigues in *Oblate Writings* I, vol. 8, no. 547, p. 178.

⁶ January 10, 1831 letter to Father Courtès in *Oblate Writings* I, vol. 8, no. 378, p. 2.

⁷ Circular letter no. 42, June 29, 1887, in *Circ. adm.* II (1886-1900) p. 46.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 47.

⁹ Fabre, Circular Letter no. 24 “To Reverend Fathers local superiors and directors of residences”, March 5, 1872, in *Circ. adm.* I, (1850-1885), p. 261.

¹⁰ In his February 2, 1857 circular letter St. Eugene makes his own the famous words of Saint Ignatius: “In their hands, we should be like soft wax which takes on the form they wish. We should consider ourselves as lifeless corpses which have no power to move of themselves.”

The Council enriched us with a new vision of obedience, which led the 1966 Chapter to make substantial changes to our Rule. Since then many important aspects have come to occupy their just place in the presentation of the vow: the call of those in need and of the Church, community discernment, adult co-responsibility and authority understood as service. Let me put before us this new language as it now reads in our 1980 Constitutions:

“By obedience, we become the servants of all. Challenging the spirit of domination, we stand as a sign of that new world wherein persons recognize their close interdependence. ... Our life is governed by the demands of our apostolic mission and by the calls of the Spirit already dwelling in those to whom we are sent. Our work makes us dependent on others in many ways; it requires real detachment from our own will and a deep sense of the Church.” (C 25)

“Our Superiors are a sign of the Lord’s loving and guiding presence in our midst. They call us to live up to our Oblate vocation and provide us with the support we need. In a spirit of coresponsibility, they lead the community, making decisions, supporting initiatives and implementing policies...” (C 81)

“Superiors, and all among us in authority, are called to service as men of faith and prayer. In humility and true obedience, they will seek enlightenment from God and from their brothers’ counsel.” (C 82)

2. The General Chapters since 1986

Our 2004 General Chapter chose not to produce a major reflection document; we have only a short letter on “Witnessing to Hope” and an abundance of practical proposals. The capitulants felt that the essentials had been clarified and expressed well in the three previous assemblies, 1986, 1992 and 1998, and indeed since the 1980 Rule. What emerged as necessary was the need to identify the areas where we must put our ideals into practice. The Immense Hope project has already been an attempt to make our choices operational; it needs to be pursued further and brought to fruition in each Province and Delegation.

Allow me to recall some of the direct or indirect references to our vow in the recent Chapters, made in different contexts:

- “Thus it is the community which sends, and the **mission** is received in obedience and guaranteed by perseverance.” (MTW 115)
- “... Our community life offers grounds for hope to this world, which is struggling to overcome its disintegration and fragmentation. ... We can build such apostolic communities only if we again choose as our centre the person of Jesus **Christ**, ‘who was chaste and poor and who redeemed mankind by his obedience’ (C 12).” (WAC 8; 9)
- “We truly believe that **community** is a great value ... and we invite you to make it both a source of, and place for, integral growth. And it will be that, a place for real growth, ... if we, its members, have the courage to live a healthy transparency; if our lifestyles are simple and conformed to the vows that we profess; ... if the ministry of each of us is shared and reviewed with the others ...” (EPM 28)
- “One of the major challenges this Chapter sets before every Oblate is the challenge that God gave to Abraham and Sarah ... Like them, we too are called to set aside our own cherished strategies, languages, politics, and personal agendas, and, like pilgrims, leave behind all unnecessary baggage that can slow us down. We must be **open to the unpredictability of God’s plan.**” (2004 Chapter letter)

In our Oblate history and in recent texts we can find much inspiration for living our vow of obedience. We should meditate on it and also put it into practice. In my letter after the Chapter, I tried to identify the overall areas where we need to put our vision into practice: a) “Respond to the thirst of our **world** for hope”; b) “nurturing of the Oblate in his **community** and religious life, and the formation of Superiors”; c) “the **crossing of ... borders**” (WTH).

In a particular way the last two have a practical connection to the vow of obedience, and I will make some suggestions on these areas of Oblate life in what follows.

IV. Living obedience today

As we have seen, some of the deepest aspects of Christian and Oblate spirituality come together in this vow. Practical and organizational elements are likewise necessary. Our obedience is to the will of God but we find this will mediated through the Church and through the charism and the structures of our Congregation. I will limit myself to the aspects of obedience that concern our being members of the Oblate Congregation.

In the concrete application of our love of God’s will, what we will have to come to terms with is today’s culture. Certain present-day values might help us in our religious life, like the fact that the plurality of religious convictions is treated with a certain respect. But we also will have to fight attitudes that strongly contradict religious life and in particular today obedience. In this last part of my letter I will describe, under three topics, three of those attitudes, which are around us and in us:

1. Personal spirituality: Modern culture finds listening to the indications from other persons suspicious and promotes an ethos of **autonomy and self-fulfillment**.

2. Community witness: The present world cherishes an **individualistic approach** and discourages communitarian thinking.

3. Esprit de corps: Today’s post-modern mentality prefers creating **islands of wellbeing** rather than promoting concern for the common good and looking at the larger picture.

Of course, to a certain measure autonomy is good, as are individualism and wellbeing. But these values can make us sin against obedience to God’s will if we make the wrong use of them and make them absolutes, in uncritical accordance with the global culture we are immersed in.

So, being practical, what deserves our special attention today?

1. A personal spirituality grounded on the Oblate Rule

“The Constitutions and Rules set out a privileged means for each Oblate to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. They are inspired by the charism lived by the Founder and his first companions; also, they have received the approval of the Church. Thus, they allow each Oblate to evaluate the quality of his response to his vocation and to become a saint.” (C 163)

Modern autonomy and its search for self-fulfillment can become so strong in us that we lose our points of reference and orientation, and our lives go adrift. The vow of obedience is a remedy against this; it does not exclude self-actualization but puts our hierarchy of values in the right order. We have entered the Congregation to be missioned and to commit ourselves to losing our life for the benefit of others; a religious will find his self-fulfillment here and not through an autonomous life-plan.

a) The Rule as our special Oblate translation of the Gospel

After professing our vows, we heard the words: “*Do this and you will live!*” as we were receiving the book of the Constitutions and Rules. This is in keeping with Eugene’s desire that each Oblate live the value of regularity, that he be faithful in shaping his life according to the spirit and the letter of the Rule. Did not St. Pius X underline the same when he declared himself ready to canonize any religious who would faithfully live according to the Rule?

Our traditional understanding of regularity and strict observance certainly are not magic potions that assure us of salvation. The danger of rigidity and self-righteousness remains. On the other hand, the Rule can truly be called a special translation of the Gospel for Oblates. Re-interpreted by each General Chapter it gives us the parameters for a religious life that can be considered right and healthy at the present time in history.

As vowed persons we do not have access to the graces that most Christians have through the sacrament of marriage and through the daily struggle to remain faithful in hostile environments. As religious our need for intimacy and our call to faithfulness is lived in a different way. A sure means of experiencing the intimate friendship of Christ and the fraternity of religious community, and of living the cross and the resurrection according to the very pattern of his life, can be found in our Rule.

Considering the importance of our Constitutions and Rules, should we not find a moment each day in our communities to read together one of its articles?

b) Living the presence of God: overcoming the tension between personal charism and community charism

Entering the path of obedience and persevering in it is not possible without a strong spiritual life. A spiritual path recommended by our Oblate tradition is that of cultivating a constant awareness that we walk in God’s presence. The Rule recommends that “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) It even mentions the “call and the presence of the Lord among us today” (C 3) as the constitutive element of our vocation.

In my experience as Superior General I sometimes wonder about our basic values when it comes to accepting the discernment of the community and an obedience given by a superior. It is true that personal charism and health reasons need to be respected, and that nobody should be forced into a situation where he will be profoundly unhappy. Abuses of authority are also possible, and for some things there is the right of appeal. But beyond all that, we also have vowed obedience and perseverance, answering freely to a very special call coming from a community charism.

When we live in God’s presence obedience will show its richness and its many facets to us. We will be brought to listen to the demands of the mission and to our community, as well as to our own conscience and to the authorities. (cf. C 25) For Christ and his followers, obedience sometimes also means the cross. “We become the servants of all” (C 25) and we follow the one who “became obedient unto death, even death on the cross” (Phil 2: 8). “Called to follow Jesus, we too listen attentively for the Father’s voice so that we may spend ourselves without reserve to accomplish his plan of salvation.” (C 24) Living in God’s presence this way, our personal spirituality will be strong enough to overcome the tension between the call of the personal charism and the call of our community.

c) Obedience leads to renewing the Oblate

It is not without reason that the last General Chapter asked the Congregation to focus on supporting the person of the Oblate who is the minister of hope. Under the heading *Oblate community and religious life* it recommends that “the General Council develop an animation process throughout the Congregation, the focus of which would be the needs of the person of the Oblate as a minister of hope.” One dimension of this animation is to be: “the nurturing of the Oblate in his community and religious life.” It should include “such elements as ... personal and communal integrity; ... the fostering of transparency and accountability on all levels; ... the examination of life-giving structures for community life.” (WTH 8) Many things fall under this: professional conduct in our ministry, the way we handle finances, and the community structures we need to create and respect. Our vow of obedience leads us to focus on renewal in these practical aspects of life.

In this context an increased contact with members of our lay associations and friends of our communities is also mentioned. The Chapter asks us to “discover the rich potential of the presence of associates who strengthen us in the Oblate vocation and mission”. (WTH 9) They will put us more closely in touch with some of the realities not always accessible to us. As in the case of poverty, the laity often might live obedience more than we do. Accepting the leadership roles appropriate to the laity in the Church can help us discover more deeply Christ’s spirit of sonship and brother and sisterhood, and help us to discover new dimensions of obedience.

2. A mission based on community witness

“The call and the presence of the Lord among us today bind us together in charity and obedience to create anew in our own lives the Apostles’ unity with him and their common mission in his Spirit.” (C 3)

Individualism is a characteristic of modern culture and, if it becomes strong, it makes community life impossible. Complaints about this are often heard among Oblates. The spirit of obedience has the power to overcome individualism and to build community. “Our lives of sharing, graciousness and our discernment in community contest the ways of individualism.” (EPM 30)

a) The spirit of obedience builds community, and adds a new quality to our mission.

In many places our mission has added a special flavor to the local Church because it is carried out in community and according to the proverbial family spirit of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. As I said above, obedience adds to our life and mission much more than mere discipline can do. It is meant to be an expression of our faith through which people should be able to see Christ, the obedient one. Through this vow we are painting an icon of the Most Holy Trinity, we are proclaiming the liberating truth that humans are essentially sons and daughters of God.¹¹

b) Quality community life depends not only on the membership but also on its leaders.

The Chapter clearly mentions these two elements: if we want to respond to the “needs of the person of the Oblate as a minister of hope” it is not enough to nurture the individual Oblate in his

¹¹ “Indeed, the Son’s attitude discloses the mystery of human freedom as the path of obedience to the Father’s will, and the mystery of obedience as the path to the gradual conquest of true freedom. It is precisely this mystery that consecrated persons wish to acknowledge by this particular vow. ... “The lovers of your law have great peace; they never stumble” (Ps 118:165).” (*Vita Consacrata* 91)

community and religious life; we need also to attend to “the formation of Superiors and others sharing in leadership”. (WTH 8)

A good number of situations of obedience crisis may be caused by weakness or inadequacy of leadership. There is a noticeable difference between a province where people are only asked: “What would you like to do?” – in order that they can work to the best of their individual abilities – and one where the question is: “Could you help us in a specific place?” – Here they are expected to contribute to a common mission. This does not come without hard work on the part of our leaders. They need to stimulate and assist us to become one mind and heart, and they need to shape us into a united missionary corps. The result of this unity will then be a renewed sense of the urgency of the mission we Oblates have to accomplish in the present world. In such a clearly articulated mission each one will be eager to collaborate in obedience, even if one or the other concrete task would not have been his personal choice.

For this reason the recent Chapter, like the two previous ones, recommends again that there be “formation for Superiors and others sharing in leadership, which would propose different models and practical skills needed for its exercise at all levels.”¹²

There was interesting discussion in the assembly around the terms “leader” and “leadership”! Some found it appropriate to use these words while others felt this was too secular a way of speaking. In a sense they are right. We should not forget that a superior is more a spiritual figure than a coordinator or a president. The Oblates call him a “sign of the Lord’s loving and guiding presence in our midst” (C 81) and “the pastor of his brothers.” (WAC 23,6) Imitating Christ’s authority, his is a servant leadership, which our Rule expresses well: “Superiors, and all among us in authority, are called to service as men of faith and prayer. In humility and true obedience, they will seek enlightenment from God and from their brothers’ counsel.” (C 82)

For this service, however, people with certain qualities are needed and they should be prepared to receive some training. Leadership is not a post of honor or a reward for merits. We need capable superiors who can be true leaders. This is the third time that a General Chapter asks for their training. Something has been done in several provinces but we must go further. The vow of obedience will only find its full expression and bear witness to the world, through missionary communities that enjoy quality leadership. Our superiors are meant to be God’s instruments to shape us into a united missionary corps.

3. An “esprit de corps” that holds the Congregation together

The postmodern mentality seeks wellness individually and in one’s own small world. Why bother about the many problems out there which are brought to us through the media and which we will never be able to solve? Our charism contradicts this mindset, as it already pushed St. Eugene beyond Aix and beyond the mission in Provence, and let him embrace the world. He did not hesitate to take some of his best men and send them to other continents. Are we still obedient to this charism?

This brings us to look at the broader picture of the Congregation. When St. Eugene founded his second community at Notre Dame de Laus, he realized that the enthusiasm of the beginnings would not be sufficient to hold the Oblates together. Besides the desire to proclaim the Good News and a strong family spirit, a Rule and appropriate structures were also needed to ensure that the initial

¹² WTH 8; see WAC 23,6; EPM 32

spirit would not be lost.¹³ Thanks to these first steps made by St. Eugene himself, the Congregation has been able to grow strong and to expand throughout the whole world. From then on it indeed grew for 150 years, until 1967. Obedience to God's plans, but also the expression of this obedience through a Rule and an organization that were adequate and flexible, must have been the secret of this marvelous growth.

How do we see the Congregation today? Does it still continue to be what it was in the beginning: "solidarity of compassion ... a single heart that can be food for the life of the world" and a "united missionary corps"¹⁴ that works for a concrete common purpose? It must not become a "loose coalition of free-lance" provinces, delegations and missions¹⁵ that share nothing more than a common ideal, and have no organic unity. I am using, of course, recent expressions from the 1992 General Chapter.

At our 2004 Chapter assembly, we recognized that the steady growth of 150 years has been followed by almost 40 years of numeric decline particularly in our traditional western strongholds. There is, however, realistic hope for a springtime, with the growing sectors shifting to other parts of the world. In obedience to God's design we somehow must do again what St. Eugene did in setting the first structures in the 1818 Rule. Here again our vow of obedience must find its expression in the courageous response to a new reality. We need a courageous obedience to reality! I see especially two areas that ask of us an act of faith: internationality and consolidation.

a) The challenge of internationality

Taking "internationality" seriously means that cooperation across borders is needed and that our readiness to receive and give will be challenged. Provinces were never meant to become something like "Oblate dioceses", restricted by their boundaries. How could we take some steps towards a substantial increase in international cooperation? Personally I encourage each Oblate Unit to prepare itself to receive help from outside and / or to ask for it if this would serve its mission. I also encourage each individual Oblate to ask himself whether it might be God's will that he goes on foreign mission. For those who discern a vocation to an international mission I make my own the words of Fr. J. Fabre, first successor of St. Eugene: "Those who are truly called to it by God can rest assured that they will be sent to the missions." [...] "A person's personal inclinations will never be absolutely thwarted because they are never entirely separated from the natural giftedness of a person."¹⁶ This applies also to the first obediences. It might sometimes be convenient that Oblates take their first steps in ministry in their own country but after that they can still ask to be sent to a mission *ad extra*.

b) The challenge of consolidation

During our period of steady growth we generously stretched ourselves and our resources to respond to many missionary needs. Now we find ourselves too scattered in some of those places and situations, and consolidation is needed. We have too many small communities and too many Oblates who habitually live alone in contradiction of our Rule¹⁷; we run too many small formation houses and we are organized into too many Oblate Units.

¹³ Cf. Frank Santucci's book, *Eugene de Mazenod, Cooperator of Christ the Saviour, Communicates His Spirit*.

¹⁴ WAC 6.

¹⁵ Adaptation of an expression in WAC 7.

¹⁶ Fabre, Circular letter no. 57, March 26, 1894, in *Circ. adm.* II (1886-1900), p. 185-186

¹⁷ R 92d

Do we have the courage to recognize the signs of the times and to obey God's call to move towards whatever structures might best serve our mission? If we are flexible, this will be life-giving both to the growing sectors and to the shrinking Units. As always in things related to obedience, this is not only a question of effective organization but it has to do with our faith in Christ and our participation in *his* life-giving mission. He was glorified as the "author of life" (Ac 3:15) because he was obedient. "He was heard because of his reverence." (Heb 5:7) Because he "emptied himself ... becoming obedient to death ... God greatly exalted him." (Phil 2:7-9)

Conclusion

Obedience, lived in a spirit of following Christ, the Son, is a path to personal freedom. Recognizing Christ's mission as ours we discover the true dimensions of our evangelizing efforts. Obedience makes it look small compared to God's design and on the other hand renders it fruitful beyond our human means. This becomes patent in the mother of all apostles, Mary. Besides Christ, there is no one on earth who has lived obedience more than Mary, handmaid of the Lord through whom God has done great things. "Open to the Spirit, she consecrated herself totally as lowly handmaid to the person and work of the Savior." (C 10)

The vow of obedience gives life to us Oblates and it will bear fruit in liberating others as well. Through the vow we proclaim Christ as the Son and "The Son's attitude discloses the mystery of human freedom." In the mystery of obedience we discover "the path to the gradual conquest of true freedom!"¹⁸ This must be lived by ourselves, first. It benefits, then, all those whom we are sent to evangelize. If we will have brought people to the "obedience of faith" (Rm 1:4) we will have liberated them.

Rome, April 17, 2005

Fr. Wilhelm Steckling, OMI
Superior General

¹⁸ "Indeed, the Son's attitude discloses the mystery of human freedom as the path of obedience to the Father's will, and the mystery of obedience as the path to the gradual conquest of true freedom." (*Vita Consacrata* 91)