



Mission to Secularity.....p. 3

Harley MAPES
OMI Lacombe

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”p. 8

Bernard DULLIER
Provincial of France

Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation.....p. 10

Interview with JPIC Director, Seamus FINN
United States Province

Challenges for Mission: saying farewell to Zimbabwe.....p. 13

Zweli MLOTHSWA
Natal Province

Mission to Secularity

Harley MAPES
OMI Lacombe

Looking out the presbytery window, it was a caricature of industrial England come to life: drear, sodden skies dripping interminable rain onto gray, slate roofs; the only green, living things in sight being a few bushes . . . trees perhaps, but hardly worthy of the name . . . desperately scrabbling for nourishment in the cindered, poisoned soil of an abandoned, factory yard. Dejected, crumbling brick walls, pocked and scaled by time, have an air of weary resignation about them – victims of society’s willful amnesia, they stand as somewhat embarrassing reminders of faded glory. Birmingham. Yet, “Behold I make all things new.” It’s not quite St. John’s vision of the heavenly Jerusalem but, in the distance, beyond the scene of decay, a new urban area is appearing. Millions are being poured into refashioning the old city center – formerly famous for its ugliness – into a vibrant, happening place that serves as a magnet for the young with their seemingly endless energy. It’s a swirl of loud music, shouted greetings, restless, unceasing movement, nose piercings and tattoos, hair in fantastic shapes and lurid colors; it unabashedly proclaims, “Notice me!”

This jarring juxtaposition of urban growth and decay is a metaphor for the state of the Church in much of the Western world; it is seen at best as an anachronism – irrelevant to everyday life and perhaps given attention once a year at Christmas time as a pacifier to still the nattering of Grandma. Old churches with old rituals and increasingly attended by old people stand in contrast to mirror glass, stainless steel, bright lights, iPods, texting, Blackberries, the thumping bass of the latest 50 Cent Rap song and the hypnotic beat of “Buy, buy, buy” pumped out by consumerism. Astrology, dreamy New Age music, angels and CDs featuring Buddhist meditation are downed in an attempt to satiate the inescapable human desire for the sublime. How does one present the Gospel message to a secularized culture that seems to be inoculated against it? Are there entry points where we can slip into the secular city undetected and begin to enter into dialogue with its inhabitants?

The Oblate *Mission to Secularity* team was formed with just that intent – to reflect, speculate, explore, probe and experiment with ways in which the Gospel can be retooled to grasp and be grasped by modern Western culture. In response to the question of secularity, raised at the 1998 General Chapter, five young Oblates wrote a letter expressing an interest in exploring how the Congregation might respond. Frs. Ron ROLHEISER and Eugene KING were given the task of wrestling with the issue and, over the course of a year, developed a vision with enough form and substance to give a starting point to the endeavor. Fr. Ken THORSON (Lacombe), Bro. Noel GARCIA (Philippines), Fr. John STAAK (USA), and Fr. Leo PHILOMIN (Anglo-Irish) were asked to be team members. The team has since grown to include three lay people. Fr. Frank MURRAY, an Oblate from the Anglo-Irish province, also lives with them and takes part in certain aspects of the mission. While a number of places in the world were considered, language barriers helped narrow it to an English speaking country; the enthusiastic response of the Anglo-Irish Province made England a natural choice. London was initially considered but, through a process of discernment, it was decided that Birmingham – with its complex dichotomies of youth/elderly, poverty/wealth, native/immigrant, Christians/Muslims, new/old economies – would best serve for the new mission. The parishes of St. Anne and St. Michael serve as a home base for the team.

A mission to secularity isn’t something we are familiar with as Oblates; a thousand questions cross the mind: What is secularity? Why do we need some special mission to it? How is this different from ministry to the poor and marginalized? How are they doing anything different from me in my parish, school, mission. . . ? They’ve been at this for a few years, what have they learned? In a number of conversations, Ken Thorson did his best to give his perspective to at least some of these questions.

A first step in dealing with a new concept is to define it. The team picked up on an article by the Jesuits, which described secularity as: "...the progressive diminution of religion and its public influence and its confinement to the private sphere." Ken said that while there are many definitions of secularity, the team has slowly worked at developing one of their own:

"When looking at the question of mission in contemporary Western culture, we try to retain a balanced approach – so we don't look at secularity as an attack on the Church. It's an amalgam of things that together are a way of describing what is going on in Western culture.

The secular reality has its positive aspects: creativity of pop culture, development of personal autonomy, the acceptance in society that we have rights because we are human beings and those rights have to be respected.

The definition of secularization has to include both the positive and the negative. Both the Church and the Oblates need to be open to being evangelized by secular culture – the Spirit is also at work in the world."

It's a big step to accept that modern culture has something to teach Christianity and abandon thinking in terms of "Us versus Them".

So, how is the team attempting to avoid standing on a spot named "Truth" and preaching to the world but rather entering into a dialogue? Ken described some of the approaches they have developed:

"We have a couple of structured things and we'll see where they go. One of them is called the Seeker Centre. It's an attempt to reach out to people who have no or little connection with the church but consider themselves on a spiritual journey. It offers people a place, at St. Michaels Parish, where they can journey with someone. Seeker Centre consists of a group of volunteers who are connected with the church. The building itself is open from 2:00 pm – 5:00 pm each day. The volunteers welcome anyone who comes. There's literature around the place inviting people interested in the spiritual journey.

Once every two months or so, we have Seeker Days. These are days for people to come in and have a day of discussion and reflection with others on a spiritual journey. We come together to share our journey and to listen to others tell their stories. We might offer insights on certain aspects of Christian spirituality and prayer such as meditation.

We also offer Seeker Weekends – retreats – so that Seekers can go further into their journey. It will be as non-specifically Catholic as the participants want it to be. Emphasis will be on our stories and on the needs of the people on the weekend. We have already had a couple Seeker Days and one Seeker Weekend, and we have had a few people come. It's admittedly a small beginning but we're not thinking in terms of huge numbers.

We also have what we call the Listening Centre; it's offered three days a week for four hours a day. We've trained people to be there to listen to others who come to share whatever is on their mind. The program motto is: 'Sometimes you just need someone to talk to.' We try to be just a listening ear offered to a busy city center. Literature was sent out to local businesses and we're slowly developing contacts in some of the big shops. We stress that we're not there to offer a Catholic response but to listen, to be empathetic, sympathetic. It's not a counseling service and it's not a tool for proselytizing. There are about twenty-eight volunteers taking part in the Seeker and Listener Centers."

An essential part of what the team does is reflection. A significant amount of time is set aside to share experiences, ideas and insights at gatherings held once a month and referred to as the Council of Mission meetings. These meetings can include anything a member wants to share on how a particular experience has meaning for secularity.

Both a gift and a challenge to the team is the makeup of their community. Four Oblates from four different countries – each with his own cultural wealth and baggage, none of whom knew one another before this endeavor began, working together on a common mission – is certainly a response to the Chapter's call to greater internationality! When asked to talk about community life, Ken alternated between

serious reflection and laughter as he described the rewards and pitfalls of their particular experience.

“We’re now into two years of living together. The first year was good, although some of us struggled a bit with enculturation. Some major questions began to arise at this time last year when we began to deal with questions such as, ‘How do we go forward in the mission? What should be the structure of our meetings? How was what we were doing answering the mandate we were given?’

Some of us felt we were spending too much time on traditional ministries - in parishes with sacramental things, falling into the trap of maintaining traditional parish activities and structures rather than reflecting and being creative. A lot of struggles were connected with community life – learning to live with each other. There ended up being a fair bit of work around how we interacted personally and communally. We jettisoned our way of meeting – it became more informal, more reflective of the personalities of the four of us. Communally we are doing better as time goes on – we are being more honest about how we really are – we are well past the honeymoon stage.

In our community, cultural diversity seeps in and enriches us in all kinds of ways – through discussions at table and in our communal reflections. We can’t help but compare our present situation with what each of us has experienced. There is a danger in this but it’s also part of the process: ‘Here’s how we did things...’ or ‘Here’s an idea from back home.’

Sometimes things intersect smoothly and sometimes they don’t. For example, the North American approach to meetings is very different from how it is done in other cultures. We tend to be very businesslike and put forth ideas readily. Someone from an Eastern culture might refrain from commenting on anything to do with the new culture for quite awhile. This deference to people and the culture is different from what I would bring.

What we are trying to do is live with an awareness of our cultural differences and an attempt to deal with them. Among the five of us, there is a willingness to defer and consider the viewpoint of the other

culture. At the same time, we encourage everyone to more and more speak up and not always defer. It’s not ‘Roll over and forget your own culture!’”

From the experiences and reflection the team has done so far, Ken felt that there were a number of salient points they had learned. First of all, people have a hunger for rituals and while the same ritual doesn’t speak to all people, the hunger is still there. As members of the Church, we have some expertise in that area, so rather than going into social work or trying to invent a new role for ourselves, we need to explore the questions such as “What from our experience might speak to the culture of today? Are there rituals that can be developed to meet the needs of different situations we will meet outside of the church and will speak to their needs?”

Our Church is an expert on beauty – older people might respond to the *Pieta* – but unless you know the gospel stories, the deeper meaning of the *Pieta* may be elusive. So how does the Mission to Secularity team speak to someone raised in the basically post-Christian culture of Birmingham in 2006? Ken’s reply: “We can do things such as developing a PowerPoint with music and photos of young and old people in the Bullring. It takes them back to experiences of the past and connects them to a reality that is bigger than them. It may sound corny but it does something for the parents and the young people there. It inspires. The Church used to do that with sacraments. We can learn to do that in different ways.” [The *Bullring* refers to the redeveloped city center; the large public space contains the bronze sculpture of a bull. The area used to be a cattle market and now symbolizes the city’s optimism about its future.]

Staying true to the vision of being a mission to secularity has not always been easy. With three priests and a Brother in a ministry that can seem somewhat nebulous, the temptation for others is to look at the team as a potential labor pool. In Ken’s words...

“We have been pulled in different directions at times but we have simply said ‘No’ to people at various times. We have said it to the Bishop, university chaplains, and the Episcopal vicar. At this point we say, ‘No...but let’s see what we can do in the fu-

ture.’ Aston University wanted us to take on chaplaincies and at first we thought it would be great; then, upon further reflection, we declined – but now we are thinking about it again. We can begin to explore the possibility of having some limited relationship with a university chaplaincy now that we are more settled and have a better idea of what we want to do. Feedback and evaluation from other people, such as the Provincial of the Anglo-Irish Province, have helped us to clarify our focus. At times we have started down a path and then had to backtrack upon further reflection. What is important is that we ask the question, reflect and are then willing to shift focus. We also are developing a healthy acceptance of failure!”

Part of the “pull” the team experienced was to be drawn into working with the economically marginalized. While the team would be the first to say that working with the materially poor is without doubt excellent Oblate ministry, that is not the intention with which they were formed. “We don’t work directly with the economically poor; they are not the express focus of our mission. We had to make a choice and we felt that working with the economically deprived is something the Church already does and does well. We know how to minister to the poor and broken, how to access services from the government etc. What we are doing is a response to the founder’s phrase, ‘...the poor with their many faces.’ We try to minister to those who have not had the chance to experience the transforming power of Christ.”

Knowing that it is the intention of the Congregation to start other mission teams with the intended purpose of entering into dialogue with secularity, Ken was asked, based on his own experience, what advice he would have for Oblates who were considering such a venture. His response:

- Have a diverse cultural group even though it means a fair bit of extra work. Internationality and cultural diversity is something we have to offer each other. Although not essential, I would recommend it for the richness it brings to the group. It was also good that we didn’t know each other before this started; there were no pre-existing relation-

ships. We came for the mission and not because we wanted to work with a specific person. This is a strength because everyone starts from the same place of not knowing each other. It was the mission that drew us together. Thankfully, we get along pretty well but only because we work at it and we work at it not just for friendship but also for the sake of the mission.

- Bring together different people, with different ideas – with a common interest to talk about what they think a mission to secularity looks like – as a visioning team. Those who will carry it out need to be there for the whole thing.
- Our experience at Aix was very good – was it integral to mission and community? No, but it was a good place to build relationships. What was good was that we took three weeks – which could be stretched longer – and we set a program of readings for ourselves with material Ron Rolheiser and Richard Shriver had helped choose. It would be good even for six weeks and have someone guide people through it. We did our process of reading and reflection in Birmingham and this gave us an idea of what the place was like. What we didn’t have was someone to help guide us through it and give us focus – we just shared on what we had read. An academic rather a process person would be good although it would be even better to have a person with skills in both areas, someone with expertise in culture and religion. What would be ideal would be an academic with some knowledge of process who had lived in the area where the *Mission to Secularity* team intended to function.
- It’s important to work at developing a good relationship with the local church. Having someone in local church leadership who is supportive of what you are doing can make all the difference in the world.
- It’s also important, if you are going into an existing parish or institution, they know what

you are coming to do as that allows you to nip in the bud a lot of frustrations that ended up coming our way. They should have the right to accept or reject what it is you propose to do.

Someone listening to an account of the ministry being done by the Oblates in Birmingham would be tempted to wonder what relevance it has to his ministry or he may find himself saying, "What's so special about them? I'm already doing those sorts of things in my own place!" If one is working in the Western world, secularity is a fact of life. As we have come to experience, the days of the whole town faithfully turning out for Sunday mass are long gone. There's a new game in town and it's giving the Church a lot of competition. As for Oblates feeling that they are already doing many of these things, Ken would emphatically agree. "What we are doing is not unique. Oblates are doing many of the things we are. What might be different about us is the reflection we try to do around secularity. It's a regular part of our work. The intentionality of the mission and the reflection on all that we do through the prism of secularity – all the tensions/dimensions of it – is what makes our ministry somewhat different. Many Oblates do many of the same things as us but perhaps not intentionally or with the same degree of reflection."

As I stood in the temple to commerce - The Bullring - a gleaming collection of stores, mirrors, escalators, colors and bright lights, overflowing with an massive crowd whose average age was less than thirty, I couldn't help but contrast it with the congregation at the earlier Sunday liturgy – faith filled, silver-haired women, rosaries in hand, the effort of eking out a meager existence etched on their faces. They reminded me of the struggling trees in the factory yard behind the presbytery. We have a fair idea of how to respond to the faithful ... but how does one begin to approach this under-thirty crowd? The *Mission to Secularity* team stands in the market place as once did Saint Paul and it may well be that their attempts will also be largely met with scorn. They are explorers in the ministry and the territory into which they have ventured is largely unknown to the rest of us. It's a difficult, frightening journey without obvious signposts indicating the right direction. How much safer it would have been to stay in a nice, safe parish and do respectable parish ministry! We know that all explorers meet with some failure and no doubt so shall they. It is our hope that the team members will come back from this experience with knowledge and insights that will be an enriching experience for the entire congregation.

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

Bernard DULLIER
Provincial of France

“God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27)

June 2006: I’m traveling in the metro with M. . . , an Oblate from Cameroon, visiting France for the ordination of François. We are chatting and it’s clear that we are traveling together. At the RER station “les Halles,” two policemen stop us and addressing him, they say: “Your papers.” (“*Tes papiers!*”) He takes out his papers and I show my identity card. One of the policemen says to me: “Not you, sir.” (*Pas vous, monsieur.*) I have no problem with a police check at the railroad station. But why him and not me? Why did he use the familiar “tes” with him and “monsieur” with me?

But to ask that question means opening the proverbial “can of worms.” Surely “bad-mouthing” does not exist in France, the land of the “rights of man.” It’s just that some people are made more in the image of God than others.

“See, upon the palms of my hands I have written your name...” (Isaiah 49:16)

Wednesday, August 16: at the alien desk at the prefecture in Lille. J. . . , who pronounced his first vows on the evening before, has to renew his residency permit since he is Vietnamese. He has his file in order, his guarantee of support, his proof of residence, his passport, and all the rest. He leaves home in the middle of the night to arrive at 5 a.m. at a door that won’t open until 9 a.m., because only those who arrive first will be able to get into the offices for aliens and have that precious meeting needed to renew the residency permit. The door opens and the race is on, accompanied by insults and fights. If you do not get the precious appointment, you’re thrown out. And the uniformed guards stand by, indifferent. J. . . told me that evening: “I was ashamed: they forced us to act like animals.”

But lack of respect for people of color, that does not exist in France! Everyone is born equal before the law. There are simply some people who are a bit more equal than others.

“For the LORD, your God...executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and befriends the alien, feeding and clothing him. So you too must befriend the alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt.” (Deut. 10:18-19)

August 2006: The Province of France has habitually welcomed scholastics from other provinces during their pastoral regency of one year. A. . . , E. . . , and M. . . applied for their individual visas at the embassies of France in Cameroon, Congo, and Chad. J. . . , who is supposed to come and work with the Youth Service at Lourdes, made his request in Haiti. The files are completed scrupulously (I’ve gotten into the habit now) with invitational letters from the bishops, guarantees of support and insurance. All four visas are turned down, without a word of explanation. When I am finally able to contact the person in charge of visas at the ministry of Foreign Affairs, the response is curt: “We don’t have to tell you why! France does not have to justify itself.”

But everyone knows that France is a land of justice. There are simply some little folks without resources, the “voiceless” who don’t know how to defend themselves and there are those who have resources. The proof: within 48 hours of the intervention of the Apostolic Nuncio, 3 of the 4 visas were granted.

Indeed, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel ... It was to none of these that Elijah was sent, but only to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon. (Luke 4:25-26)

August 2006: an international meeting of Oblate formators in Aix-en-Provence. Oblates from

Cameroon and Congo are refused their visitor's visa for France.

September 2006: the De Mazenod Experience in Aix. Several Oblates cannot come because their request for a 3-month visa is denied.

September 2006: S..., a Pakistani scholastic from the Province of France is refused the residency permit. The reason: he belongs to a recognized Congregation and the guarantee of support by that Congregation are not financially sufficient in the eyes of the Prefecture of the Lower Rhine.

October 2006: religious from Madagascar, Congo and other Central African countries cannot participate in a formation year for masters and mistresses of novices at Chevilly-Larue, again, because the visa was refused.

But everyone knows that it's only Israel and the United States that put up walls to protect themselves from aliens. That could not exist in France, the land of the refugee. It's simply that some aliens are useful and others are not. That's called selective immigration.

Those are a few of the things I've experienced in the past three months. And yet the aliens of whom I speak are lucky. They speak French and they have the Congregation behind them. But what about the others, all the others...?

Our last General Chapter insisted that we take into account the struggle for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC).

—It's not good to put words into the mouths of the dead. But I am convinced that our Father, Saint Eugene, would add a paragraph to his sermon in the Madeleine. "You, the alien, you whose skin is of a different color, you who do not speak my language, you, my brother, my dearest brother, my respectable brother, God alone is on your side."

—It's not good to put words into the mouths of the dead. But I am convinced that our Father, Saint Eugene, who from the throne of his cathedral called to task the prefect and the military commander of Marseille over the violent repression of the "hunger uprisings," would put the question to today's politicians and tomorrow's candidates: "What did you do for your brother, the alien?"

—It's not good to put words into the mouths of the dead. But I am convinced that our Father, Saint Eugene, would scold our passivity, our caution, and would call to our attention the Gospel of Jesus Christ:

Then they will answer and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?' He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.' (Matt. 25:43-46)

Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation

Interview with JPIC Director, Seamus FINN
United States Province

On a recent visit to Dublin, the Washington-based Director of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) for the Oblate U.S. Province and interim Director for the Congregation worldwide, Fr Seamus FINN, talked to *Oblate Missionary Record* (MAMI publication of the Anglo-Irish Province) about the work in which he is involved and some of the challenges facing missionaries as they integrate a JPIC perspective into missionary presence. His work involves a great deal of travel, including about three visits yearly to Rome for meetings with the General Council and with other religious orders that have a JPIC presence in Rome.

Originally from County Cork in Ireland, Seamus' family emigrated to the United States when he was a teenager. Years later, he joined what was then the Eastern U.S. Province.

How are we Oblates generally engaging with the big JPIC issues?

I would have to say somewhat unevenly. While many of us are doing JPIC work and are engaged with the questions, communication remains a barrier. It is difficult to get people to go beyond their own projects and efforts. Over the next 18 months we are putting the focus on Africa, a continent where networking has so far been very difficult.

How is the JPIC office and your work, in particular, helping to change this?

On the one hand, we are trying to show our members and people with whom they work that JPIC is a part of mission. We alert them to resources (books, articles, people) available out there to guide them in their work, and we run regular training sessions.

On the other hand, Oblate JPIC involves itself directly in advocacy as needs arise. We have been working with indigenous groups in Bangladesh, for example. And we are involved in trying to restart

the peace process in Sri Lanka, following the recent breakdown of the cease-fire.

We are also involved globally in trying to mitigate the impact of mining companies on local communities. Oblates are in places where mining is extensive, such as Bolivia, Peru, the Philippines, South Africa and the Congo. The Congo, for example, is rich in natural resources. Now, the country's old mines are being further exploited using new mining technologies. Companies are returning to see how they can get more, regardless of the damaging impact on the environment and human health.

From a JPIC perspective, would you agree that the impact of globalization has been more negative than positive?

Thomas Friedman, one of the architects of globalization, tends to be more optimistic and hopeful about it. He sees the first phase — from Columbus landing in the New World to the year 1800 — as mainly defined by countries. It was the colonial period when those who ruled the seas ruled the world. Countries established colonies elsewhere.

The multi-national corporations have defined the second period — from 1800 to 2000. They are clearly out to make profit and are under owner/shareholder pressure to look for the least expensive way to bring a product to market and thus maximize profit for their owners.

This third period — from 2000 onwards — is, Friedman thinks, being defined by the growth of new communications technologies in particular.

Taking the optimistic view, this is the period when the individual is in charge. You only have to look at the growth of the personal computer in twenty years, or the mobile phone, the video camera or the Internet. Communications tools are now in the hands of ordinary people. People are accessing informa-

tion and making personal choices about what they are doing with that information.

Recently we were at a meeting in the US State Department that was sponsored by the technology companies. The issue was how could their technologies help combat the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Interesting examples were put forward to show how new technology is already helping. For example, test results to track the effects of medication on a person's health, taken in a remote part of Africa, can be monitored on a daily basis through mobile phone/satellite. Instead of writing out data in triplicate and having someone to take it to a centre, medical workers can simply enter into a cell phone and send all that information to the best laboratories. It's just one small example of how technology is helping fight disease.

What about the impact of globalization on the environment?

On the question of the impact of globalization on the limited resources of the planet, it seems to me that we have reached a crucial moment. People are struggling in different ways to reduce the carbon footprint created by the industrial/manufacturing global economy.

I think that positive things are happening, but not nearly enough, nor with sufficient urgency. There are good initiatives in terms of climate change despite the U.S. Government's position. Support for alternative energies is growing, whether solar, wind or geo-thermal, but we don't change wasteful habits quickly or easily.

Some U.S corporations are beginning to put serious thought and resources into re-cycling and re-using, because national governments and local communities are now much more aware of the damaging effects of waste.

It is not unusual to find carpet manufacturers who sell the customer, not the carpet but the use of the carpet for ten or more years. They will then take it back, re-cycle the entire used carpet and incorporate it into a new one. The market is pushing manufacturers of other floor-covering materials to devise similar plans.

Any step taken to use raw materials that can be recycled and used again and again has to be positive.

Progress in recycling paper goods and managing renewable forests is another significant development.

The manufacturers of washing machines and even cars are now clearly looking at end of use and the penalty for disposing of these products. Recycling as much as possible of the product lowers costs and is clearly in their interest.

Immediacy and efficiency are still the driving forces. Change will not happen overnight, but many are beginning to look at use and services more than products when it comes to the things we use in daily life.

And the constantly growing demand for fossil fuel to transport goods in the global economy?

Fossil fuel is the big challenge. The U.S. Government is now willing to subsidize the use of ethanol in cars. In the search for new energy sources, they are looking to plants that previously grew wild on the prairie. We have become used to an abundance of cheap oil, so conversion to other forms of energy will take time.

Of course, we have to be careful, in the search for alternatives, not to overlook the environmental impact of using sensitive land to produce crops/biomass to meet energy needs. It is easy to go from one addiction to another. It strikes me that there is at least some sensitivity to the issue of land use, but it is true that the damaging consequences of doing something new may not emerge for a further twenty years.

How is recent Oblate affiliation to the United Nation helping the work of JPIC?

There has always been a place in the United Nations structure for NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations). In 2002, when we took up affiliation with the Department of Public Information — an entry level relationship with the UN — we joined other religious orders that were much better linked with the UN than we were. Thus far, affiliation has been quite productive.

It is a massive organization spread across the world, with any number of themes, from saving the oceans to preserving ethnic heritage sites. We have to be clear about why we have come here. We work

closely with the other religious groups who understand the system. At the beginning of every year, they take time to identify their priorities.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development is a focal point for discussing the sustainability of life on the planet. Given population trends, living patterns and other projections, the summit has been elevating eco-logical issues.

The Indigenous Peoples' Forum is struggling with a draft resolution on indigenous rights. It meets for two weeks every year in New York and provides a forum where indigenous people can meet, share challenges and opportunities and develop strategies to deal with land rights, cultural rights, language, tradition etc, and to learn from one another.

Almost one-third of Oblate provinces/delegations around the world are working with indigenous groups, so that has been very helpful for us.

Finally, the Millennium Summit talked about millennium development goals and laid out targets for addressing poverty, education, health care, water quality etc. They put in place financing for a process that says: if you are going to halve poverty by 2015, or ensure that everyone on the planet has access to primary education by a certain date, then resources have to be committed to that goal.

Too often governments promise resources but don't deliver. It is important for the development process that NGOs from around the world have a place from where they can monitor what is being achieved and point out failures.

We are slowly creating opportunities for Oblates who are interested in understanding the UN to do internships there. That's probably the best way to get a sense of what it is, how to access it and

how it can help in the mission.

We are hopeful that more people will take the opportunity to attend one of their conferences or go there for some months.

Is the JP1C agenda so wide and complex that it discourages personal effort?

Everybody has a contribution to make. I think of Nelson Mandela's speech about the gospel directive not to hide one's light under a bushel, but to take one's gifts seriously and apply them. It is important to recognize gifts and match the gift to the work someone wants to do.

Taking up this ecological vocation is something that each of us can do. I can try to understand the impact of my daily living on the natural environment around me. I can be quite wasteful; I can be careless about what I pour down the drain, or what I use in my bicycle, car, tractor or whatever. There are now more alternative technologies and materials providing more choices than before. It is important to make informed choices.

People who have the gift of gardening, whether they work with flowers or vegetables, can make a contribution to the bio-diversity that is vital to the health of our planet. We understand more clearly than in the past that a natural process links the photosynthesis of trees, plants, insects and animals.

Insects should be controlled in a way that is sensitive to the fact that we share our time on earth with plants and animals. We must search for ways to do as little permanent damage as possible. The natural recycling that happens in nature has much to teach us. Waste is taken in and recycled. We need to be observant of that process and apply it. (*Oblate Missionary Record*, Spring, Summer, Autumn 2006)

Challenges for Mission: saying farewell to Zimbabwe

Zweli MLOTSHWA

Natal Province

Father Zweli MLOTSHWA says farewell to Zimbabwe after three years ministry in that country. He recently gave a reflection on his ministry at an Oblate monthly retreat in Zimbabwe.

In 2003 when I was being commissioned for Zimbabwe, Fr. John PATTERSON told me that there is nothing much which they can promise me in Zimbabwe, but what he can be sure of is that I can be guaranteed much blood and sweat. I looked at the old man, laughed a bit and thought: "I must be crazy."

Then I came and I realized that one of the most striking things about being in this place is the naked poverty that one sees. Over here, poverty is not shy at all; it shows its ugly face in every corner. After viewing this ugly face, the words of Fr. John became true, not only because the people work so hard and their hands are so hard and smelling of sweat, but because by sharing in their life, their sweat becomes mingled in yours and you find yourself sweating with them. One is covered with blood, not because you go around checking for people's blood, but because, through visitation and contact, one touches the wounds and sores and so is covered in their blood. And then there is the third element, the tears of the poor, who come and cry in the priest's house from early morning. Thus, when the day ends, one is soaked in blood, tears and sweat; one is soaked in the life of the poor.

By being here, one has a serious encounter with the poor. This leads to anger; when one encounters the poor you cannot but be angry. This anger comes from many different angles. One is angry because, when one is a priest, a man and a South African, people just assume that you are rich. So the day is filled with people coming in to ask for all sorts of different favors, from transport money to borrowing the bicycle or asking for food. At the beginning you try to be polite and courteous, but after you have dealt with three or five cases in the morning, irritation and anger come in and so, when the per-

son comes to ask, all I say is: "What do you want!!!" And timidly, the old man will say: "Father I need money for transport to town, because my daughter or son or grandmother or ..." I then do not even wait to listen to the whole story because I have heard it before, so I just quickly get into the house and give him \$2000 (ZWD) which is about 2 Rands and politely show him out, only to go back inside to curse because that was the last 2000 in the house. Now I have to eagerly wait for Sunday, not to preach the Word, but to get another supply of 1000 dollars for distribution.

In this encounter, anger arises because this man assumes that I have money and that I can solve all his problems. Not only is he asking for transport money but he is also asking for school fees for his children, doctors fees for his wife and a litany of other needs. This makes me angry because I feel that this man is now trying to put all his burdens upon me. It makes me angry because even though I may want to help, I cannot because I too have no money. After saying three Masses on Sunday, I only got 6000\$, enough to buy three loaves of bread, one for me, one for Fr. Charles and one for Bro. Denardo.

I get angry with myself because I realize that this man does not really want to ask from me, that if he could, he would do all these things for himself, but now he has to go and beg from a rude young man, and so I get angry with myself for realizing that I failed to treat this man with the dignity he deserves. I also get angry with myself for agreeing to come to this place, and angry with the Oblates for sending me here in the first place. I get angry with myself because, as a young man, I had visions of changing the world, but over here, one is overwhelmed by such powerlessness and a realization that the world is much more complex, and so the dream dies. Thus at the end of the day, a shower is needed to rid one self of all the sweat.

I get angry because I realize that these people are

poor because they are being treated unjustly by a corrupt government, lead by an even more corrupt leader. I get angry at the people and the system that supports this oppressive government and so allows the people to suffer even more. I get angry at the people because they too seem unwilling to do something to bring about change, and so when you meet a man who has walked 40 km to the hospital and needs a lift, you are tempted to say to him "Go and ask a lift from Mr. Mugabe."

One of the major social aspects in this place is the belief in witchcraft and the power of curses. When you stay here it is easy to see why the people believe in these stories, and it is easy to believe that to be poor is to be cursed.

Why, the evidence is there right in front of you: Why is it that bad things only happen to the poor?: It is the children of the poor who will disappoint their parents by not doing well in school; it is the children of the poor who will die young because of HIV/AIDS; it is the daughters of the poor who will drop their children in "blair toilets" for fear of raising them in a hopeless situation. It is the children of the poor who will go to South Africa and come back, not with a car but in a coffin; it is the husband of the poor who will be the village drunk and laughing stock; it is the husband of the poor who will infect their wives with HIV. It is the poor women who will get old before their time because they have to work all day and sometimes all night in the fields, and it is to the fields of the poor that the neighbor's cattle or a herd of passing elephants will come and ravage.

To encounter the poor one encounters their aloneness. To go and cry from door to door, hoping against all hope that some one will hear you: it is like being in a bad dream, whereby you see the danger that is upon you but you cannot do any thing. You try to run but your legs are immovable; you try to cry but your voice cannot come out; people are passing just next to you and they do not notice you, so you begin to sweat, and tears run down to wet your cheeks, and you cannot even wipe them off because your hands won't move. In that dream, you hope that something should happen, that somebody, something will notice. You are lucky because it is only a dream; in the morning you will be awake. For the poor, this is not a dream; they will not wake up

because they are awake; this is reality at its most real. Job had the same experience. (cfr Chap. 6).

This leads to another experience, an encounter with God. Thus to encounter the poor is to encounter God. I get angry because I know that the God I serve does not want people to live like this. That God is not happy when there are children who are born with no chance whatsoever in this world, because their path of misery is there in front of them. They will go to school, but will not finish because along the way, the parents will either die of AIDS, or will run out of money to pay their school fees, or they will drop out because it is too far to walk a 15 km journey to school on an empty stomach. Thus, looking at the face of a new born baby, one cannot help but see misery and not beauty, smell pain and suffering and not the sweet distinct smell of a new born, and so when a baby cries, it is as if they can see what lies ahead of them and they are saying: Why the hell was I born?!!! And they cry the cry of Job: Oh may that day when I was born be cursed and doomed!!! (Job: 3: 3-4)

There is no doubt in my mind that poverty is sinful. However it is not the sin of the poor; it is the sin of those who perpetuate this evil. So why is it that the poor have to suffer? Why does the all powerful, all-knowing and ever-loving God allow the poor to be like this?!!! Or has God forgotten them? If he has not, then maybe he is punishing them for their sins???

To be with the poor, one sees that they are not angels at all. Thus you get angry at the cliché: 'The poor are so good.' 'The poor are so joyful.' Rubbish. The poor are just as bad and as good as the rest of us. Why then is God taking such an interest in them? Why is he so much aware of them that he begins to punish them: And so they cry like Job: "You, God, why can you not look away for just a moment; you are always there in my face so that I can not even swallow my spittle!!! Is my sin really that bad!!!" (cfr Job Chapter 7).

However, encountering God and the poor leads to a realization that God is not close to the poor because they are sinful, but rather because they are God's chosen. Thus, woe unto any one who does not see this and treats them without respect, for God hears the cry of the poor. And to those who cause

those tears, may the womb that shaped them forget them and may their name never be remembered; may their downfall be greeted with applause; may their fine clothes be worn by a good man; may they be turned into a target for all to shoot at, and may they have no one to mourn them. (cfr Job Chapter 27)

I leave St Luke's a poor man. Poor because by being with the poor, I too have had to live a life with very little. Yes, in the eyes of the poor around here, I was one of the richest men in the village. I had two cars. I had a choice of whether to skip breakfast and have an early lunch. Not only do I have a TV and a stove in my house, I also have the luxury of drinking water from the refrigerator.

In taking a closer look at our life, one will be surprised and ask: How can three people, with 16 outstations, the farthest being 95 km away, survive on a 1000 Rand monthly budget? When one takes a look at our non-existent bank account, and realize

how paying for 20 liters of fuel is a headache, then one will realize that to be one of the richest men in the village is not very rich at all!

I leave St Luke's a poor man because the poor have set their mark on me. My conscience has been touched and touched for life. I now move and carry within me the dirty and scrawny faces of the malnourished children; the sweat of the man who has walked 40 km to the hospital, only to be told there is no medication; the blood of the youth dying from AIDS; the cries of a mother burdened by work and the shattered dreams of her children.

I leave St Luke's a rich man because through living with the poor, I have come to see the face of God and I have been moved for life. I am thankful that God gave me this privilege to see this other side, to walk on this path and in a small way give hope to God's chosen, the poor. (NATAL NEWSLETTER, OCT-DEC. 2006)

OMI DOCUMENTATION is an unofficial publication
of the General Administration of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate
C.P. 9061, 00100 ROMA-AURELIO, Italy
Téléphone (39) 06 39 87 71 Fax: (39) 06 39 37 53 22
E-mail : information@omigen.org
<http://www.omeworld.org>