



OMI INFORMATION OMI INFORMACION OMI INFORMAZIONE OMI NACHRICHTEN OMI WIADOMOŚĆ

Documentation No. 277 (English)

May 2007

Our Oblate mission in a secularized world

Marcel Dumais, OMI
General Councillor

Foreword

The following text flows from an invitation of the last General Chapter: “That Oblate Units develop a program of continuing reflection on mission and secularity in order to engage this complex and pervasive reality...” (*Witnessing to Hope*, # 3). In the last edition of *OMI Documentation* (No. 276, March 2007, pp. 3-7), Harley Mapes, OMI, offered some reflections on the Oblate international experience in Birmingham, under the title, “Mission to Secularity.” The author of the text which follows hopes that other Oblates will write about the Mission, beginning with their own experience, in their own Region, of Oblate presence or other situations in our world

Our Oblate mission in a secularized world

(Presentation made by Marcel Dumais to the members of the Central Government, January 2007)

To begin the discussion of our mission, I would like to relate some of my personal reflections, beginning with my own experience, in relation to the mission in the Northern Hemisphere, in a world considered to be secularized. My reflections will also be shaped by the biblical dimension, since that has been my area of expertise and my personal ministry in service to the Congregation's mission for almost my entire Oblate life. But I think that the biblical references which I will make could also be food for reflection in other social and cultural situations.

My reflection will have three parts: I. A brief presentation on the secularized world. II. The goal of our Oblate mission. III. The different approaches in our Oblate mission.

I. My world has changed from being religious to being secularized

It is widely recognized that the society and culture of the countries of Western Europe and North America has become progressively secularized. Our present pope often mentions this reality in his own observations. I quote an excerpt from one of his speeches to help us better understand what we mean by secularization. Speaking to a group of German bishops, he stated, on November 10, 2006: "The Federal Republic of Germany shares with the whole of the Western world a culture marked by secularization, in which God is increasingly disappearing from the public conscience, in which the uniqueness of the figure of Christ is fading and the values formed by the tradition of the Church are becoming less and less effective."¹

Secularization is a complex reality, in its causes and in its makeup. For our purposes, I will simply say this: a secularized world is a world in which culture and society are no longer religious...that is to say "Christian" or "Catholic." We are no longer part of "Catholicity," that is to say, a Catholic society and culture.

A secularized society is one that is not, of itself, open to the Transcendent...to God. It is a society where the option for the Transcendent, for God – a society where religion – becomes a matter of choice.² Whatever is considered religious is relegated to the private sphere.³ Therefore, why choose to believe in God? In particular, why choose to believe in Jesus Christ? That is not at all evident when considering the choice of beliefs that are available.

In effect, one of the characteristics of secular society is pluralism. Several factors lead to secularity. It is not simply due to the development of a consumer society, but especially is a result of the advance of science and technology, and the diffusion of information...leading to a pluralism which makes possible a pluralism of views about the world, society, religion, etc., and which leads to a freedom of choice for individuals. Becoming a Christian, therefore, is a choice, a personal option.

Thus, from the moment when the "Catholic" society in which I grew up became pluralistic, Catholicism became more and more a minority, even though a majority of the people still have their children baptized because they have a vague belief in God and

¹ If fewer and fewer Westerners opt for faith in Jesus Christ and for the God of Jesus Christ, any reference to the Gospel and, consequently, values considered "Christian", will lose their societal importance in the West.

² One can speak of a secular society, but also of secular culture. One would say, therefore, that the reality of secularization in many countries in the West is a culture that no longer leads to the Transcendent, to God. The culture is no longer Christian whereas before, it had been.

³ There are many nuances to the expansion of secular culture in the West. For example, in the Canada-United States Region to which I am assigned as General Councillor, as I see it, Quebec is the most secularized and the United States is much less so than Canada. For example, in the United States, publicly mentioning God and admitting that one belongs to a Church are normal and have political weight; in Canada, such public comments by leaders are very rare and are usually considered politically counterproductive. In Canada, one must make separate mention of the Aborigines and the groups of immigrants whose culture includes a relationship to the Transcendent.

the Catholic Church is their point of reference.

To illustrate the progressive societal dwindling of the “Catholic” component in a number of Western societies, I will mention the case of France. I will present the results of a recent extensive poll, published in the January-February 2007 edition of *Le Monde des Religions*. Some of the results of this poll are compared with those of another poll taken in 1994: only one out of two French (51%) call themselves “Catholic” (it was 67% in 1994); only 52% of those who call themselves Catholic say that the existence of God is “certain” or “probable;” a minority of self-declared Catholics, namely only 18%, believe in “a personal God with whom one can have a relationship,” a belief that is nonetheless at the heart of the Christian faith.⁴ Furthermore, if there are fewer “Catholics from birth,” “adult conversions” are still quite numerous. In 2006, there were nearly ten thousand catechumens, the majority of whom were between 25 and 40 years old.

A point of clarification is needed here: the distinction between “secularity” and “secularism.” Secularism is the decision by individuals or by groups to deny the existence of the Transcendent (God). The secular mentality in itself does not exclude that existence, but that existence has no bearing on how one explains the world.⁵

Before looking at the challenges which this situation brings to our mission, I have a reflection to share. This situation in our Western world is similar to that of our Founder’s day in France: a majority of people had left the Church, or at least the practice of religion, after the French Revolution. But I see a major difference: the world of de Mazenod’s era remained “religious” in its mentality, even though it did not practice its religion. It was not “secularized.”⁶

II. The goal of our Oblate mission

The growth of the secularization in the social and cultural environment that formed me – where I live and which lives in me – has progressively brought me to want to center my faith life on the essential. I will make my own that remark of Benedict XVI during the visit of the German bishops mentioned above: secularization is a “providential challenge” for the Church. For the Oblates as well, could it not be the occasion to center – or re-center – ourselves on that which constitutes the heart of our Oblate mission and of our Oblate charism?

1. The heart of our charism and of our mission according to our Founder

The theme of our retreat last September, under the direction of Frank Santucci, was the Oblate charism, as found in the life and writings of the Founder. From my own reading and reflection on the Founder in his day, I will mention a few brief points, subject to correction by specialists in the matter.

—I believe that the heart of our charism and our mission can be defined beginning with the Good Friday experience which, according to tradition, our Founder had in 1807, that is two hundred years ago.⁷ In his retreat notes for 1814, Eugene de Mazenod begins and ends his Good Friday experience by confession: “I sought happiness outside of God.” When he encountered Jesus Christ crucified, he encountered God. He had an experience of God when he became aware that Jesus had given His life for him, for his salvation, because He loved him. From that moment on, his whole life would be centered on this one goal: to encounter Jesus more deeply, to let himself be transformed by the love of Jesus for him.⁸ This personal experience led him little by little to a mission: to help others have this

⁴ A majority (79%) consider God to be instead a “force, an energy or a spirit.” At the same time, 58% of those who consider themselves “Catholics” believe in the resurrection of Christ and 74% think that death is not the final stage of human existence (of these, 10% believe in the resurrection of the dead and 8% think in terms of reincarnation on earth in another life.) The majority of French Catholics have a good opinion of the Catholic Church (76%) and of the present pope (71%).

⁵ The fundamental issue of the mission in the secular world is, therefore, theological (=a relationship with God) and not of the moral order (=human values).

⁶ For further consideration of the progression of secularity in the world and its impact on the Church, see the two questions posed in the Appendix.

⁷ This year of 2007, we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the experience of the Founder. Nevertheless, specialists in Oblate history, such as Fr. Jozef Pielorz, refuse to fix a precise year for this experience. (see “Good Friday of 1807, Myth or Reality” in *Vie Oblate Life*, 1997, pp. 47-78)

⁸ One should read the excellent article, “Jesus Christ,” by Fr. Fernand Jetté, in the Dictionary of Oblate Values, Rome, 1996, p. 462ff.

same experience of God's love for them in Jesus Christ, so that they too might find the path to freedom and true happiness.⁹

—“To evangelize the poor,” for our Founder, meant to announce the good news of Jesus, the liberator, to the abandoned, that is to say, to those to whom no one was speaking about God and about Jesus Christ, to whom no one was providing this human and spiritual food to which they had a right. Their poverty was that they were being kept ignorant, not having access to these human and spiritual riches. At the *Madeleine*, he brought together the most abandoned, the most mistreated (servants, laborers, peasants, beggars) to teach them in their own language (Provençal) “who Christ is” and thus, reveal to them their great human dignity since they are beloved of God.

—The Founder did not work to change the social and economic situation of these poor, these mistreated persons. He did not try to change the political and social structures of his time, which were to blame for the class structures and economic inequalities. Christian “theology” of his time was rather dualistic – the two distinct realms, with their own proper structures, the spiritual and the temporal – and had not considered the social, and thus political, implications of the Gospel.

—Today, because of a theology better founded in Sacred Scripture, the socio-political aspect of the Kingdom presented by Jesus is recognized. Consequently, this Rule has been introduced into our Constitutions and Rules: “Action on behalf of justice, peace and the integrity of creation is an integral part of evangelization.”¹⁰ (Rule 9a)

2. The mission of Jesus Christ and the Apostles

Our Founder wanted to carry on the mission which Jesus had entrusted to his apostles. To better grasp the heart of our Oblate mission today – to better appropriate its deep and permanent focus – we need to “revisit” the essential content of the missionary witness of the apostles. This content is synthesized in the missionary discourses of the Acts of the Apostles, called kerygmas.¹¹

For this presentation, I will quote (in italics) two excerpts taken from a work I published on the Acts of the Apostles.¹²

Chapters 2 through 13 of Acts offer six résumés of what one could call the first gospel preached in the Church (2:22-39; 3:12-26; 4:9-12; 5:29-32; 10:34-43; 13:16-41). These prototypes of primitive preaching are put into the mouth of Peter, except the last one which is attributed to Paul. All of the discourses are similar. We find, in one after the other, the same themes, according to the same outline. As far as what is essential is concerned, one could express the proclamation of the missionary disciples in this way. During his lifetime, Jesus of Nazareth has manifested himself, through his unique words and actions, as being sent by God. Nevertheless, people did not recognize Him as such. Rather, He was rejected and put to death. But God has raised Him up, and we are witnesses of this fact. Therefore, Jesus is the Christ, the liberator announced in the Scriptures. Therefore, there is hope for everyone: hope of being freed from sin, that is to say from the evil which attacks from within and from without; hope to enter a new life which will never cease to grow in intensity and in quality; hope of belonging to a new people called by God. Convert, therefore; that is to say,

⁹ The Founder's Good Friday experience seems to me to be similar to what Saint Paul experienced, as described by Luke in a detailed passage (Acts 9:1-19), and expressed more succinctly by Paul himself: “But when (God), who from my mother's womb had set me apart and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles...” (Gal 1:16) Thus, Christ became for Paul his *raison d'être* and the focus of his mission. As for Eugene, for Paul, his spiritual life and his mission to give witness developed together (see Phil 3:10-12). For us who participate in the charism received by St. Eugene, life and mission are a lifelong experience.

¹⁰ In our Oblate history, we have always had a preference for the mission to those of more modest means, rather than for the higher socio-economic classes. But one should not identify this option with the heart of our charism and mission.

¹¹ There are six discourses constructed in the same way. The same kerygma is found also in St. Paul (cf. 1 Cor 15)

¹² M. Dumais, *Communauté et mission. Une lecture des Actes des Apôtres pour aujourd'hui*, Montréal, Bellarmin, nouvelle édition, 2000, p. 20-21 et 26-27. The first edition appeared in Éditions Desclée (Paris, 1992).

change your way of living; welcome Jesus; allow yourselves to be transformed by Him and by his Spirit of life.

It is quite plain: first evangelization does not consist of doctrinal or moral teaching. Christian faith is not primarily the acceptance of doctrinal content and moral values. Christian faith is essentially a Someone with whom one enters a relationship and by whom one lets himself/herself be transformed. Of course, to accept the person of Jesus Christ has doctrinal and moral consequences. But these come into play only as a second step, in catechesis and in theology.

This missionary witness of the apostles is very relevant today. We need to find once again the same enthusiasm as those first witnesses and express essentially the same content as their foundational testimony, but in a language adapted to our cultures and in reference to our own situations. One aspect merits special attention. Today's disciple of Jesus is someone who gives meaning, who is a witness of hope, in a world which the media tend usually to present as disenchanting and without a future.

[...]

This challenge of Acts today leads us to speak of the poor and the rejects of our societies. Are we not now touching upon the Gospel of Luke? Perhaps. Jesus' evangelization project, according to the third Gospel, is characterized by the preaching of the Good News to the poor, that is to the marginalized and the outcasts of the society of his days, some of which were not totally deprived of material wealth (Luke 4:16-21; 6:20-22; 7:19-23; 14:15-24; etc.) This preaching of Jesus to the poor clarifies and spells out the mission received from his Father, that is, the establishment of the Kingdom of God (Luke 4:43). Since everyone is called to have a full share in the Kingdom (Luke 2:14; 2:30-31), Jesus addressed Himself especially to those whom the civil and religious society of his day excluded from

participation in its benefits. It is to them that He especially preached His Good News by word and by deed.

While proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ the Savior on the days after Pentecost, the disciples did not cease announcing the coming of the Kingdom (Acts 23:31), but they let it be clearly understood that the Kingdom was henceforth present in the person of the risen Jesus. It is through Him and in Him that the life of the Kingdom can be lived, that is to say, total and definitive liberation and full communion of humans among themselves and with God.¹³

The testimony of Jesus in the Gospel and that of his apostles in Acts are, therefore, to be taken as complementary, just as in the case of the literary and theological unity of the two parts of the diptych which is Luke's gospel. In order to be completely faithful to the Jesus of history and to the post-Easter Christ acting through His apostle-witnesses, evangelization must be especially attentive to the outcasts and the oppressed, who must be given back their dignity and whose sufferings must be relieved as much as possible, but this evangelization must also have as its primary goal the possibility that every person – and therefore also the poor – might encounter the God of love and forgiveness, preached by Jesus, and encounter the risen Lord, the definitive source of liberation, both personal and collective.

3. A few reflections and applications for today

1) The first chapter of our Constitutions and Rules, which speaks of our Mission, is for me more up-to-date than ever. Almost all of the articles are centered on Jesus Christ and his Kingdom to be revealed to the most abandoned (see especially articles 2, 5 and 7, and meditate on them again and again). In my opinion, the heart of our Oblate mission today, everywhere in the world, is very well expressed in this line from article 7: "We will spare no effort to awaken or to reawaken the faith in the

¹³ Jesus never gave a "definition" of the Kingdom that he was going to establish. In its deepest reality, the Kingdom can be defined as the communion of all human beings among themselves and with God. To say "communion" is to say "love. The fundamental revelation of Jesus, by his entire being and his entire life, is, therefore, that of the God who is Love.

people to whom we are sent, and we will help them to discover who Christ is.”

2) “To evangelize the poor.” Application to a secularized world

a) *To evangelize*. It seems to me that today it is necessary to focus on basic evangelization. . . just like the apostles, who, according to our Founder, are our models.

This is a little reminder of the Church’s mission at its beginnings: 1) first, the *kerygma* (basic evangelization); 2) afterwards, there came the *catechesis* that gave rise to the Gospels; 3) then, the *sacraments*.

After the fact, I realize that, in the world of my childhood, we were *catechized* (we knew by heart our little catechism); we were also sacramentalized (all of the sacraments of initiation were received very young; we went to Mass regularly; there were numerous devotions). But had we really been evangelized? Had we made a personal option for Jesus, living today? Yes, to a certain point, for a great many, through the witness of faith given by their parents (or their teachers), especially family prayer (a prayer addressed to a *You*, a *Living Being*, not to a *He* . . .). But the Church of the pastors? Their ministry was not centered on evangelization.

Today, in Western society, who gives witness of Jesus Christ (and of God) as a Living Being (a *You*) with whom one has a personal relationship?¹⁴

b) *The poor*. Who are the *poor* today? In his Letter *At the beginning of the new millennium (Novo Millennio Ineunte)*, John Paul II wrote: “The scenario of poverty can extend indefinitely, if in addition to its traditional forms we think of its newer patterns. These latter often affect financially affluent sec-

tors and groups which are nevertheless threatened by despair at the lack of meaning in their lives, by drug addiction, by fear of abandonment in old age or sickness, by marginalization or social discrimination.” (No. 50) *The despair at a lack of meaning: what a contemporary poverty today in the West!*¹⁵

3) I conclude this section on “The Goal of our Oblate Mission” with this personal reflection: this common goal of the mission, it is that which unifies us as Oblates in the great diversity of our activities, that is to say in the great diversity of situations in our world and thus, of the missionary styles in our Provinces and Delegations. Our mission is our *raison d’être*. It is our deepest motivation. The degree of our “Oblate” belonging to the Congregation is measured by the intensity of our participation in this missionary goal and, therefore, in the charism we have received. Together we need to clarify our common goal. If our Congregation does not focus itself – or refocus itself – on a common goal, I think she will not last very long as worldwide Congregation. On what else would our unity be founded?

Questions for sharing in small groups:

1. When I think of “my mission in today’s world,” what is it that wells up from my heart to my mind?

N.B.: There are several ways to describe, in modern terms, the same mission as that of the Founder. For example, in the secularized world, I could speak of it in terms of “integral humanism,” that is to say, a humanism that includes the spiritual and a relationship with God. . .

2. What surprises me or leaves me with questions after reading this presentation?

III. The different approaches in our Oblate mission (or: the “how” of our mission). Some biblical models.

¹⁴ There are consequences to truly return to the mission, to basic evangelization. When we accept pastoral assignments, for example in parishes, let these parishes be missionary, which means that we engage ourselves in preparing the parishioners to become missionaries in their own milieu: to give witness in their families, wherever they live or work, places not touched by the Gospel, and which make up the majority in our societies. Furthermore, it is clear that our mission in the dechristianized West cannot survive except with the laity (and let us think first of all of our Lay Associates who have taken up the missionary charism of Saint Eugene). Let us return to the First Church of the Acts of the Apostles: all those who became Christians became “missionaries;” they all received the Spirit of Pentecost, the prophetic Spirit, to be witnesses. To be a Christian is to be a witness.

¹⁵ In reading this passage of John Paul II, there comes to mind an expression from our Oblate tradition, repeated in article 5 of our *Constitutions and Rules*: “the poor with their many faces.” They are there as “those whose condition calls out loudly for a hope and a salvation that only Christ can fully bring them.” *Witnesses to Hope*. That is the mandate we received from our last General Chapter!

After unity, there is diversity. In the unity of the same purpose, of the same goal, there is room for different means... according to those whom one is addressing, and according to who one is personally. There are different ways to live the common mission.

To be a witness of Jesus Christ and of the Gospel before the people, one must first of all know where they are in their own discovery of God and of Jesus Christ and which approach is best for them.

A mission centered on Jesus Christ does not necessarily mean a direct approach – far from it. It is interesting to look at different biblical models of evangelization. I will briefly present four biblical models, four approaches to evangelization that could motivate us. Concerning each one, I will make some personal comments on its usefulness for mission in the secularized world. I call these approaches: 1. the kerygmatic model; 2. the Athenian model; 3. the evangelical model; 4. the Emmaus model.¹⁶

1. The kerygmatic model

This is the direct proclamation of Jesus Christ and the Gospel. It is that which the Acts of the Apostles presents us. They are the evangelical discourses of Peter and Paul to their fellow Jews, whose content I presented above. The apostles directly proclaim Jesus Christ as risen from the dead. For example, Peter, after having received the Spirit on Pentecost, immediately begins his discourse by speaking of Jesus (Acts 2:22). These discourses are not historical reports of specific facts. They are outlines that present what is the essential message of evangelization for the use of missionaries in the primitive Church.

—This direct proclamation of the kerygma is being done today, but not all of the examples we have are to be followed.

—It is the preferred approach of fundamentalist preachers (for example, on American TV every

Sunday morning). Everything is centered on “Jesus saves you. Recognize that you are a sinner.” The use of the Bible is fundamentalist, and the interpretation is subjective. But many of these preachers are successful!¹⁷

—In the Catholic Church, the international *Evangelization 2000* movement took up this direct proclamation in the media. Undoubtedly, there is both good and less good in this crusade. Its success depends on where it is done.

—A Catholic missionary in Africa, Vincent Donovan, used the kerygmatic approach in Africa. He went to a village with “traditional” religion, brought the people together at regular times to speak of Jesus Christ, and he let the community reflect and discuss on what choice to make. Many of the villages opted for Jesus Christ and became Christian. You can read his fascinating account: *Christianity Rediscovered* (there is also a French translation).

—Some individuals in the secularized world will be touched by this direct proclamation (kerygmatic), but most people in this world are indifferent, indeed appalled.

—What I would hold onto from this direct proclamation of the kerygma: at a certain moment in the process of evangelization, one should not be afraid to speak of Jesus Christ and the Gospel. People have the right to hear the Word of the Gospel. We cannot be witnesses only with our lives. The Words of the Gospel go beyond our human words and have their own efficacy, their own richness!

—The witness of the Word and the lived witness are complementary. In the Acts of the Apostles, the proclamation of the Word made real sense to the people because it was accompanied by a lived witness. The quality of life of the first communities had great appeal. (read again the accounts in Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:13-14).¹⁸

¹⁶ One could go on at length about the pedagogy of God in all of biblical revelation. I think that, often even today, people by and large unconsciously follow the same path toward a discovery of God as the Chosen People. They pass through “the God of the Old Testament” before arriving, often after a long faith journey, at the “God of Jesus” (the God of Love).

¹⁷ Pastor Billy Graham was one of the first to use this kerygmatic proclamation in large assemblies and in the media. His approach is more balanced than many of the “stars” who followed him.

¹⁸ Our Founder often referred to these accounts of the life of the first Christians as models for our Oblate missionary life.

—What can we conclude from all of this? The kerygmatic discourses present the missionary *goal*, but not a missionary *pedagogy* that would be generally adaptable in today's world, especially the secularized world. This world seems allergic to persons who claim to hold the truth and want to proclaim it to them. Those of this world, in general, are not ready to hear about Jesus as Christ, Lord, Savior and Son of God. A different approach is called for if one wants to reach them, touch their mind, and especially their heart: a step-by-step approach, departing from where they are, from their own search, from what they are able to accept. It is necessary to both wait and take advantage of the *kairos*, that favorable moment for proclaiming the *Risen Jesus, Christ and Lord*.

Let's speak about this step-by-step evangelization. And for that, I see not just one model in the New Testament, but several.

2. The Athenian Model (Acts 17:22-31)

In the Acts of the Apostles, when Paul left the Jewish world to begin his mission in the Greek world, he radically changed his missionary approach, as one can see in the two discourse-models that Luke presents to us: that of Lystra (Acts 14:15-17), and especially that of Athens (Acts 17:22-31). In addressing the Jews, the apostles began by addressing their expectation, their desire – of a Messiah – to proclaim Jesus as the expected Messiah. The Greeks were not expecting a Messiah (and we are the Greeks!). But they were looking for something else. At Athens, Paul took his start from their quest: that of the “unknown” God. He addressed his discourse on the public square (where the people were). To speak about God, he used the language of the popular philosophy (stoicism); he quotes a Greek poet. His evangelization is truly placed within the people's culture. It is inculturated. I would like to emphasize, in particular, the following points in his approach: he begins by recognizing their strengths (“you are very religious” v. 22); he begins with their desire to know about the God who for them is “unknown” (v.

23); he proclaims God as “the Creator” (v. 24) who “is not far from each one of you” (v. 27); finally, he talks about Jesus who most fully reveals who the true God is whom they seek from the depth of their being. Some reject him; others want to know more; others become believers (v. 32-34).

—Today, many in our secularized societies are receptive of a language which departs from the divine dimension of the human person, or a language that speaks of a cosmic God, as Paul did at Athens. This sort of approach will touch a good number of people in the secularized world of today who are part of the New Age movement.¹⁹

Let us begin with them and their desire to encounter God, in the depth of their own being (even if they identify Him with the Self, according to the idea of the psychologist Jung). “God is closer to me than I am to myself,” said St. Augustine.

—The inner journey today is widely traveled. We come back to the French poll: 25% of those who call themselves “Catholics” say they pray at least once a week, three times more than the 8% who say that they go to Sunday Mass each week.²⁰

—This thirst for the spiritual has its source in the fact that we are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26), and therefore, deeply in search of God. The missionary is called to awaken this deep quest in each person and to nourish it.

—But like Paul, the missionary helps the people discover that the answer to their quest of the divine is not found only within themselves. It is found in openness to the God who is Other, the Personal God with whom one can have a relationship, who alone really fulfills our desire to live and to love.

—The Athenian approach is a point of departure. It must be followed up with another approach, primarily the “Johannine” approach: helping others to discover, step by step, that “God is Love” (1 John 4:8,16).

¹⁹ We recall the poll taken in France and mentioned above in footnote 3: 79% of those who call themselves “Catholic” identify God as a “force, and energy, or a spirit.” The influence of the New Age is strong, even among Catholics

²⁰ A poll taken of young people in Quebec (Canada) revealed that seven out of ten say that they pray from time to time. See *Proposer aujourd'hui la foi aux jeunes*, Assemblée des Évêques du Québec, 2000, p. 28.

—But it is in knowing Jesus that we can know that God is Love (John 14:9). In effect, how does one really know God as He is? To make himself known, God assumed a human face. He became flesh. It is in the person and the life of Jesus that one can really know God.²¹ This leads us to what I call the gospel method.²²

3. The gospel model

This is the way followed by the disciples of Jesus, according to the Gospels. It is found in the Synoptic Gospels.²³ One can call this model “the pedagogy of Jesus with his disciples.” It’s at the end of a long journey, a long voyage with Jesus, that the apostles arrived at a faith in Him as Christ and Lord.²⁴ They came to that point progressively, and even with difficulty. In the beginning, they put their faith (their trust) in Jesus, the man. They were struck by the exceptional quality of his humanity, especially his compassion for those who were suffering. Then they saw him as “rabbi,” a wise man. Later on, they recognized him as a prophet, that is to say, they realized that his person and his word were of God. Then the question was posed – it’s found at the middle of the three synoptic Gospels – “Is He the Messiah, namely, the liberator, they had been waiting for?”²⁵ As you know, the idea of Messiah that the disciples had needed to be purified and deepened. It would be only after the resurrection of Jesus that they would recognize him as Messiah and Son of God.

—I think that in today’s secularized world, many are attracted by this approach, especially if it’s realized by witnesses who testify by their life of a compassion like that of Jesus. Just think of the attraction of well-known witnesses such as Mother Theresa and Abbé Pierre who recently died (Janu-

ary 22, 2007) – the “most admired of all the French” according to the polls – for whom all of France rendered touching homage. To make of it a trio, we can add a great living witness: Jean Vanier. Three compassionate persons, signs and witnesses of the immense compassion of Jesus, of the immense compassion of God.

—Among documents published following recent Regional Synods, I was particularly struck by that of the bishops of Asia. According to a report presented at the Synod by Cardinal Paul Shan Kuo-hsi of Taiwan: “All the Synod Fathers agreed that there must be a new way of presenting Jesus Christ to the peoples of Asia. It is the person of Jesus Christ who needs to be presented and not doctrines about him.”²⁶ The apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, released in November 1999, states: “The presentation of Jesus Christ as the only Savior needs to follow a pedagogy that will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery [...] The synod fathers stressed many times the need to evangelize in a way that appeals to the sensibilities of Asian peoples, and they suggested images of Jesus that would be intelligible to the Asian minds and cultures and, at the same time, faithful to sacred Scripture and tradition. Among them were «Jesus Christ as the teacher of wisdom», the «healer», the «liberator», the «spiritual guide», the «enlightened one», the «compassionate friend of the poor», the «good Samaritan», the «Good Shepherd», the «obedient one». Jesus could be presented as the incarnate wisdom of God whose grace brings to fruition the «seeds» of divine wisdom already present in the lives, religions and peoples of Asia.” (No. 20)

—The reference to the Asian Synod shows that this approach by way of “Jesus the man” touches worlds that can be defined as “religious,” and not as “secu-

²¹ An eminent French intellectual, Jean d’Ormesson, who calls himself agnostic, states: “I have a thirst for God, an immense longing for God. I have difficulty believing, and yet I believe there is something out there. In all of that, the figure of the Christ fascinates me. The incarnation, it’s God becoming man: he had to do it to make himself known, and as a consequence, if he became man, man becomes God! That’s where lies the power and the beauty of the Christian religion.” (*Le Monde des Religions*, janvier-février 2007, p. 81)

²² The Athenian discourse can be studied from another angle. One can see it as a model for interreligious dialogue.

²³ The Gospel of John presents rather a Christology called “descendant” (from God to man): the Word became flesh (John 1). The Christology of the synoptic Gospels is considered “ascendant”: in Jesus the man, one progressively discovers the presence of God, the Person of God.

²⁴ “He appointed Twelve that they *might be with him* and he might send them out to preach.” (Mark 3:14) The mission has meaning if it is preceded by a “*being with*.”

²⁵ Mark 1:27-30; Matt. 16:13-20; Luke 9:18-21.

²⁶ Quotation comes from *Sedos Magazine*, 1999, vol. 31, no 8-9, p. 99.

larized.” Whatever the case may be, it seems to me to be the most fitting approach for the secularized world that is my own.

—In secularity, everything is centered on the human person and on this world. A “secularized” person will be drawn in if he begins to see that Christianity is a humanistic way, a way that allows one to become fully human.²⁷ It’s a question of showing that, by knowing Jesus Christ, we learn what it means “to be human” and what it means to love, for all are looking for genuine love. The Gospel must once again be “Good News” for the people of today.

—A variation, our rather an approach within this Gospel model, is the model of the beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-10). It is presenting the Gospel as the way to happiness. It’s astonishing to see in book stores the number of books dedicated to the pursuit of happiness, to the paths to take to get there.²⁸ Everyone wants to be happy! The beatitudes of the Gospel present us with the program that can lead to success in life: that which gives happiness and meaning to human existence.²⁹ Nevertheless, one must be honest in presenting the meaning of the beatitudes. For example, the first one (the “poor in spirit”) is an invitation to recognize a need, a “hole” in one’s existence, which cannot be filled but by God. The path to happiness consists in both an openness to others and an openness to God.

—A final word on this model. Jesus, by his words and especially by his life, teaches us that the love of God and the love of others grow together. To really love others, to work for their human growth and their happiness, these are signs that we are placing ourselves within the Love of God, that we are receiving that Love, and that we are truly encountering God. “Whoever does not love his brother whom he sees cannot love the God whom he does not see.” (*1 John 4:20; see*

also 4:8) The same goes for the encounter with Jesus Christ. The great text of *Matt. 25:31-46* reminds us that one of the privileged places for this encounter is the brother and the sister who are suffering and for whom we have an active compassion.³⁰

4. The Emmaus model (Luke 24:13-35)

What a magnificent story! Luke puts this story as the turning point between the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. The Risen Jesus himself is the model of the evangelizer.³¹ In a narrative form, Luke offers us a little treatise on the mission, well adapted for our world of today.

—How does Jesus proceed? Here are some notes to introduce each reader to a personal reading and practice of such a rich story.

1) *Jesus takes the initiative to go and accompany on their journey these travelers who had lost all hope (v. 13-16).*

He approaches them (v. 15), he does not identify himself (v. 18), he walks at their pace, without saying a thing (v. 15). So he listens to their conversation.

—An invitation for the missionary: approach the people where they are and listen to them express their own concerns.

2) *Jesus asks some questions...and listens to their answers (v.17-24)*

At a certain moment, Jesus becomes involved in their conversation by asking a question. In fact, he asks two: “What are you discussing as you walk along?” (v. 17); “What sort of things?” (v. 19) These are very simple questions which invite the other to express and put into words what he is experiencing.³²

²⁷ *Integral Humanism*: that was already the title which the great Christian philosopher Jacques Maritain had given to his work published 70 years ago and now considered a classic

²⁸ Over the past few years, the Dalai Lama has published two bestsellers in English on *The Way of Happiness*. In France, philosophers and psychologists publish, one more than the other, on the subject.

²⁹ I was invited to speak about the beatitudes to youth groups. They are fascinated by these beatitudes, especially if they are presented in connection with the life of Jesus. He lived the beatitudes which He taught.

³⁰ Therefore, evangelization has as its goal: to accept God, the God who is Love (the “theological”) and to love one another (the “moral”). That is what it means “to become fully human.”

³¹ The story has its parallel in the Acts of the Apostles: Philip “evangelizes” after the manner of Jesus, first of all accompanying the Ethiopian on the road of life, etc... See Acts 8:26-39.

³² The pedagogical question: that is Jesus’ way of teaching throughout the Gospel. In fact, the parables are, in a sense, questions.

In questioning them, Jesus asks these travelers 1) to tell about the events they were experiencing, but especially 2) to express their deep feelings: their despair (v. 21); their confusion (v. 22).

Jesus invites them to express themselves and he listens to their entire story. He accepts them with respect for what they have experienced. His listening lets the two travelers progressively free themselves from a burden, a sorry that is overwhelming them and blinding them. Thus freed, they can then be open to the words of Jesus. For listening makes one ready for the word! The person who has been heard, who has been allowed express herself freely, is then ready to listen to the words of the other.

After having caught up with them, questioned them, and listened to them, Jesus can now speak to them for he has their trust. The two travelers expect something from their companion on the road.

—The invitation for us who are evangelizers is clear, formed as we are to be “men of the word” ... and not for listening!

3) *Jesus speaks* (v. 25-27)

One can divide Jesus' intervention into two moments:

1st: He begins by shaking up his companions (v. 25: “Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe...”). Jesus has the courage to “shake them” and “wake them up.” He invites them to move beyond their narrow views and interests... those which they had revealed to him when they were speaking (cf. 21: they were trying to use Christ to meet their needs as a political liberator). Jesus makes them realize that the desires of their hearts are limited.

2nd: Jesus gives them the key to interpret what is happening (v. 26-27). The travelers were stymied by the sad events they were living. Jesus has them discover a meaning to the events by placing them in the perspective of the greater plan of God.

—The invitation for us who are evangelizers, as followers of Jesus: we must first of all listen to the people (their anguish, their suffering, their despair), but we cannot stop there. They have the right to hear

the Word of the Gospel, the Word of hope and of life.

4) *Jesus lets them invite him* (v. 28-29)

This is the first time that Jesus does not take the initiative. He had taken the initiative in approaching the travelers on the road, in inviting them to speak and then in enlightening them.

Jesus opens the door to longing. He gives meaning to what they have lived, but he always leaves them free to accept his word and his person. He proposes, but he does not impose himself. That's the meaning of v. 28: “...he gave the impression that he was going on farther.”

It is the two travelers now who speak up. They insist that he stay with them. (v. 29) They had been approached, touched. They want to hear more. They invite. They choose hospitality. It's their first step in accepting the message of Jesus, and therefore, Jesus himself.

Jesus consents to stay with them (v. 29b). Jesus (and, therefore, the missionary) never forces his way into the home of anyone. But he also never refuses an invitation!

5) *Jesus once again takes the initiative* (v. 30-32)

“He took the bread, he blessed it, he broke it and he gave it to them” (v. 30). At this sign, the disciples recognized him: “their eyes were opened” (v. 31). This sign “speaks” to them because it is located at the end of long journey. Jesus has prepared them for this high point, recognizing him in the breaking of the bread. Reflection for today: the encounter in the Eucharist takes on meaning when Jesus has been encountered first of all in his own life, and then in the Word of the Gospel.

Conclusion: The approach to mission for which Jesus offers the model is composed of two dimensions:

1st Solidarity: presence to the people, to their lives, to their sufferings.

2nd Arousing and enlightening: upsetting old ways of

thinking to awaken to a “more,” a “better,” followed by enlightenment by the Word.

To be one with and to awaken. Is it necessary to add anything else to show how modern this Emmaus model of mission is, especially in the secularized world?

Questions for sharing in small groups:

1. **What is the biblical approach that says the most to me personally, that is to say, which corresponds to my personality, my formation, my missionary practice?**
2. **Which biblical approach seems to me to best respond to the situation in the world that is most familiar to me? (Asia, Africa, Western or Eastern Europe, Latin America, North America)**

Appendix

Two questions related to the expansion of secularization in the world and its consequences for Church membership. They are open questions to which I do not have an answer ... just a few brief comments.

1) The rest of the world (outside of the dechristianized West), that is to say the other continents where the Oblates are found, are they going to experience a similar movement toward secularization?

—The impression I had after brief visits to Latin America, Africa and Asia: these are religious worlds, religious cultures. Therefore, they are open to the Transcendent.

Is this culture deeply rooted in the nature of the people who live there? Will they one day be secularized like Canada, Ireland, and Belgium/Holland, to name but a few countries of the West?

—Is Polish culture different as far as Christianity is concerned? Poland has been Catholic for more than a thousand years, during which she has had to defend herself against her neighbors. Will she hold on? Are social and religious pluralism inevitable, even for Poland?

—Whatever the future holds, it seems to me that the Southern hemisphere and Poland as well could draw some helpful conclusions from the history of the Oblate mission in North America and in Western Europe. This would imply, it seems to me, that they focus on basic evangelization (that is to say, the kerygma, the encounter with Jesus Christ and with the God of Jesus Christ). Basic evangelization should always be at the very heart of celebrating the sacraments, catechesis and pastoral activities.

2) A minority Church?

Did Jesus foresee a Church that would be the majority? In the Gospel, he speaks of his disciples as a “little flock” ... needing to be the “salt of the earth”, the “light of the world.” (Matt. 5:13-16)

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in his book *Salt of the Earth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), asks this same question. Here are some excerpts from his reflections:

“I had foreseen then, if one may put it that way, that the Church would become small, that one day she would become a Church comprising a minority of society and that she could then no longer continue with the large institutions and organizations that she has but would have to organize herself on a more modest scale. [...] ... the Church has to adjust herself gradually to a minority position, to another position in society.” (p. 256)

“I think it would be misguided, indeed, presumptuous, to design now a more or less finished model of the Church of tomorrow, which, more clearly than today, will be a Church of a minority.” (p. 265)

“Precisely an age in which Christianity is quantitatively reduced can bring this more conscious Christianity to a new vitality.” (p. 269)

“The biblical images of the salt of the earth, of the light of the world, suggest something of the fact that the Church has a representative function. Salt of the earth presupposes that not the whole earth is salt. [...] She must be aware of

her quite specific mission: to be the world's escape from itself into the light of God and to keep open this possibility so that the air we breathe can penetrate into the world." (p. 272)

One must, nevertheless, refrain from wanting to set

up a "Church of the pure." Conversion to Jesus Christ and to the Gospel is always imperfect, always needing to be redone. The faith expressions of people of very modest means and those of the well-educated must each have their place, in a rich diversity.

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.omiworld.org>