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REFLECTION ON THE MISSION TODAY IN LATIN AMERICA

**The Mission Committee of the Interprovincial Conference of Latin America
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**REFLECTIONS FLOWING FROM THE DRAMATIC EVENTS
IN COCHABAMBA**

Fr. Gregorio Iriarte, OMI

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Introduction

The Mission Committee grew out of a proposal of the 2006 ICLA Assembly in Cartagena, with the goal of helping to reflect and to raise issues, questions and suggestions about the Oblate missionary task in Latin America and the Caribbean. Our task is not only to collaborate with the provincial superiors, but is also meant to be of service to all the Oblates on the continent.

We are not a group of specialists; most of us are pastorally engaged in different countries. We would like to share with you, in all humility, some reflections on our mission at the present time. Our hope is to bring forth dialogue and, why not?...some discussion around our work in the Region.

We will use the SEE-JUDGE-ACT method. This method, so valued on our continent, allows us begin

by reflecting on our reality. We are encouraged to use this method by the very experience of that great follower of Christ, Saint Eugene, who, in his missionary activity, was always motivated by the reality of the world that cried out to him.

As background, we have the recent letter of our Superior General and the preparation for the CELAM Assembly in Aparecida.

We take this opportunity to offer some helpful material for use in our communities.

As for SEEING AND JUDGING, for a reality as large and diverse as our continent, it would be necessary to do a more concrete analysis in each country and in each community. We are including some material that could help you in that task. Our committee will be pointing out only some general ideas.

TO SEE

1) Poverty

The first and most striking thing that any visitor to our Latin American Region notices is the poverty: an inhuman poverty, sweeping and continually spreading. But what is most surprising is to see that this poverty is born and reproduces itself side by side with affluence and is the very reason for that affluence. There is poverty because there is wealth.

Thus, the problem is not poverty in itself, but the lack of distribution of resources, the injustice. There is an interminable transfer of the goods of everyone over to the rich, and our continent is the worst in equity and distribution. This has devastating results: emigration, unemployment, violence, and death. The difference between the poor and the rich classes is ever more evident. Money generates only more money, not work and not production. When the primary view of the person is financial, there is a

constant devaluing of the human person which is, by the way, antichristian.

In 1998, poverty affected 200 million Latin Americans. Today, 224 million persons are considered poor among a total population of 530 million.

Financial and economic policies have created some economic growth in some of our countries. Nevertheless, in all of them, resources have been progressively concentrated in the hands of very few in virtue of the neo-liberal-globalizing model.

2) Globalization

Economic globalization is taking on unimaginable and profoundly antihuman proportions. Above all, it is a new phase of capitalism. Capital has been transnationalized. Its most negative characteristics

are based on speculation, on instability, and on its capacity to cross national boundaries with no respect for the sovereignty of states, and imposing, from above, its conditions and its purely financial and money-making interests.

Global capital develops itself through speculation (often in clandestine markets) without generating or creating genuine opportunities for work. Unemployment is one of its most devastating effects.

3) The political and ethical situation

The democratic-liberal-representative system operative in all of our countries is in crisis and, within that, the entire system of political parties. Democracy in the region has come to be a democracy of the comfortable. The statistics of administrative corruption have reached unimaginable proportions. In Latin American public opinion, we are seeing a total loss of credibility vis-à-vis the parties and the political class in general.

The most serious thing is that political life has distanced itself from ethical values. A generalized and poorly understood political pragmatism is leading the parties and many politicians to abandon any moral norms. Ethics have been abandoned in national as well as in international policies. The challenge is how to move from a formal democracy to a participative democracy; how to restore rights and the practical concept of citizenship; how to raise consciousness, without falling into paternalism; for they are the “the primary actors.”

4) Glocalization and the hopes of the poorest

As a response to the globalizing phenomenon that seems to want to absorb and dominate everything, there is a new movement, a sort of alternative response, just in its beginning stages, but with interest worldwide; it is being called *glocalization*.

This new word is coined from two others: *global* and *local*. It is an attempt to point out a new social phenomenon that is showing up everywhere, even though to different degrees and with somewhat different characteristics.

In this new experience of solidarity, persons are the actors. The local scene becomes all the more significant in the totality of the region, with great diversity of expressions.

The local scene, the grassroots, civil society... these are becoming the power centers, while the idea and the conviction that another world is possible is growing stronger.

There are new actors on the societal stage: women, the landless, indigenous groups, local assemblies, consumer advocates, micro-businesses, micro-credit, etc. A new voice, a new expression, a new activity rises from below. What is local, what is our own, takes on new value. That which is ours, that which we have produced, our handiwork... these are growing in importance.

With this attitude, once again solidarity is growing on our continent along with social movements that rise up from among the poorest. There are signs of hope that indicate that the least favored social groups are acquiring greater presence and importance in our societies. The very crisis within democracy is giving rise to new forms of participation for society and the poor.

5) The world of religiosity

Christian identity is one of the most important elements in pulling together our region, even though this identity can no longer be considered synonymous with Catholic identity: the presence of other religious confessions renders even more urgent an ecumenical commitment. In this regard, one of the major difficulties is the aggressiveness and the proselytism of a good number of religious groups.

Nevertheless, a peculiar characteristic on the continent continues to be the presence, and even the growth, of popular religiosity in contrast to the secularist spirit of our times. Devotion to the Virgin Mary, pilgrimages to shrines, love of the sacraments, and other religious expressions, offer an excellent opportunity for an inculturated evangelization (indigenous and Afro-American cultures).

6) The Oblates in Latin America

The majority of Oblates are working in urban and rural parishes. Many of these are mission areas, very isolated and vast, made up of indigenous communities.

There is a great abundance and diversity of works: schools, centers for education, health, and social concerns, formation of the laity, youth work, prison ministry, communications media, parish mission preaching, etc. There are some initiatives that flow from personal decisions rather than from the

necessary discernment called for by our charism. Therefore, there is a danger of individualism in ministry and in the resources that have a bearing on Oblate life. There is also a noticeable aging in some Units of the region, as well as a certain weakening of the missionary spirit.

It is positive to note that there is more and more a Latin American look among the Oblates. Traditionally, there has been a leaning toward internationality and exchange of personnel among the provinces. There still remains to be accomplished a greater integration and collaboration in the region.

TO SEE: QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE

- 1) What other political, social, economic and religious realities exist in our countries? In our region?
- 2) What progress do we see in the mission field of our Provinces? And in Latin America?
- 3) How do we Oblates live our charism within this reality?

TO JUDGE/TO DISCERN

In order to be able to judge our reality, we must take into account the causes behind it. Questions such as: Why are things the way they are? What good is there and what is bad in this situation? Why does the situation not change? What are the positive or negative aspects of our missionary presence? We are not including answers in this reflection because we believe that is the job of each Unit and each community.

One should not forget that these causes are a combination of interrelated historical, cultural, religious, social, familial, racial, political, economic, and other aspects that influence one another and that overshadow reality and, within it, the mission. That would be a motivating factor for an enriching dialogue in our communities and a great help toward choosing our missionary preferences.

Having been gifted with the same charism of Saint Eugene, we cannot sit with our arms crossed in face of the reality that besets our people. Like our Founder, we ask ourselves: “*And how should men who want to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ conduct themselves?*” In his love for Christ, Eugene saw the world through the eyes of the Crucified One, answering with all the fervor of his

loving heart: “*They must wholly renounce themselves...living in the state of habitual self-denial...ready to sacrifice goods...self, even their life, for the love of Jesus Christ...and to fight, even unto death...*” (Preface)

How do we come to know reality? Do we really know it? Do we look for the causes of poverty and injustice? Do we make the poor aware of their dignity and of their abilities? Do we offer opportunities and leadership roles to the poor in our missionary lives?

Eugene and his compassion. What would De Mazenod say about today’s poverty and the new social classes? Undoubtedly he would refer to that which he had again and again concluded from the gospel: “*I am in your midst as one who serves.*” Paraphrasing the famous sermon at the Madeleine (Lent 1813), the “Mazenods,” today’s Oblates, his sons, should we not cry out: “*Street children, who are you in the eyes of the world? You who are without land, who are you in the eyes of the world? Indigenous peoples, who are you in the eyes of the world? Marginalized and exploited, migrants and unemployed, who are you in the eyes of the world?*” More loudly than ever we

must respond in unison with Eugene: *“My brothers, my dear brothers, my respectable brothers...”* For us, our relationship with the poor is part of our faith. The poor evangelize us.

All of this has consequences in our attitudes toward life: we cannot judge reality with the eyes of Christ Crucified – with those with which the Founder looked – unless we live simply. This means, in terms of today’s mission and our religious self, that we must leave behind anything that has to do with or imposes the domination of this pragmatic-consumerist-individualist culture. It is the work of being poor while confronting poverty. The path of the Kingdom begins with poverty, and we must not forget that the Kingdom is at the heart of the mission of Jesus. Is there no viable alternative to the economic path on which we are moving? Doesn’t that reveal a somewhat greater insecurity?

Immersed as we are at times in the cyber world of personal computers, cellular telephones, personal automobiles, credit cards, large houses and properties (formation houses), and schools for the rich, we live in evident contradiction to what we

generally preach about the evils that generate this consumer society.

Don’t we justify as “part of the bishop’s plans” all sorts of ministries, especially in the associations, that have nothing to do with the mission to and from the poor?

Only if we have as our point of departure our Trinitarian being, the Trinitarian root of mankind and the world, will our missionary activity be a dying to ourselves in order to discover our true selves, and thus, confront the individualistic world. Perhaps we need to empty ourselves in order to rethink the mission.

With this revelation of Christ, the wonderful news that God is community, and with our awareness of Eugene’s insistence on community life, it is vital that we reflect on this: God who is communion cannot be at the same time both one and three without a mutual kenosis, without a mutual emptying of self. We are being invited to a never-ending task: to reflect the Trinity in our own communities and in those that we serve. That is the only way that we will be true disciples of the missionary Jesus Christ.

TO JUDGE/TO DISCERN: QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE

- 1) What are the causes of the reality that directly affect your own missionary commitment?
- 2) How do you see the Oblate mission when you look at it through the eyes of Christ Crucified?
- 3) What values do you assume as related to the poor and the spread of the Kingdom in our missions?

TO ACT

To what are we being called as the Oblates of Latin America?

A) To be completely with the poor in order to walk with them and to be witnesses of God through a simple lifestyle.

- We are called to share with the poor that which we are and that which we have.
- We are compelled to reduce our expenses of every kind. That will help us identify with the poor and respect their dignity.
- We must give support to the new social actors: women, the landless, and the indigenous. We are with the poor against poverty.

B) Recover the prophetic nature of religious life, which implies that, going against the prevailing system, we confront the consumerism that makes the poor even poorer.

- We must be witnesses to the Kingdom of God, in solidarity with the abandoned, in the inculturation of the Gospel, in an open dialogue with local cultures, and in ecology.
- We must die to ourselves in order to give life to God’s people.
- We must recover the missionary potential of the Oblate community, confronting the individualism inherent in the system and which affects our ministry itself (lone rangers). Community is to be understood as a life project: the community

builds the person and the personal builds the community.

-We must recover our Oblate story: it is from there that we will make our plans for the missionary task.

C) We are called to be missionaries of mercy and place our emphasis on unconditional service and the valorization of the other, individuals and the group.

TO ACT: QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE

- 1) In your ministry, do you have poor friends?
- 2) The community is the point of departure for the mission. Does your community reflect the renewal of the Oblate mission? Is it a place of discernment, reflection and evaluation of the mission?
- 3) In what measure is your missionary endeavor changing the situation of the poor with whom you work?
- 4) Based on this reflection, how do you judge the works of your Unit? Do you believe they are faithful to our charism? What works should be begun or abandoned?

REFLECTIONS FLOWING FROM THE DRAMATIC EVENTS IN COCHABAMBA

Fr. Gregorio Iriarte, OMI

On January 11, 2007, at least two persons were killed and more than a hundred wounded in Cochabamba, Bolivia, as a result of clashes between groups that support the governing party, MAS, and were demanding the resignation of the Prefect of Cochabamba, and groups that support the Prefect and demands for more regional autonomy. The protests, which had begun on January 8, had already produced 20 wounded, including journalists who were covering the event. Father Gregorio IRIARTE offers some personal reflections on these events.

We can analyze, judge, and evaluate poverty and the poor from different angles and with different criteria. We can look at them from the following viewpoints: sociological, political, anthropological, cultural and religious.

Following the sad and shocking events that took place in the city of Cochabamba for twelve long days in the middle of last January, we would like to express some related ideas, not on the sad and shameful events themselves, but rather on the *attitudes* and the *criteria for interpreting* these events.

Accepting the poor as human beings with all their rights

Our assessment of the poor, be they indigenous, coca growers, peasants or the poor from the outskirts of the city, must take, as its priority point of departure, the anthropological question, and then move on to the political, economic, social and cultural consideration.

This means that, in the first place, the poor must be accepted and valued as persons, with all their rights and duties. Poverty, considered in itself as a serious lack of goods, is something negative, but rather than fix all our attention on the struggle so that the poor might be no longer poor, we should put all of our

efforts into helping the poor recover their dignity as persons with all of their rights.

The ideal of creating a nation without poor people and getting rid of all poverty in the world is a distant utopia that goes far beyond what we can and should do.

To express their commitment and their option for the poor, the majority of advocates start with the sociological reality of the poor, giving it a markedly political character: organization, recruitment, commitment to a political party, following orders, submission to leaders, etc.

When we speak of the anthropological point of view, we first of all attach importance to an education which goes far beyond mere academic knowledge: formation in the values of democracy, citizenship, development of personal and cultural self-esteem, cultural identity, etc.

The most negative idea an advocate or a political leader can have is to think that the poor, the peasants, are incompetent. That would be to render powerlessness and ignorance unchangeable. That would lead those who assume the role of advocates, whether as persons or as institutions, to fall easily into practices of paternalism and the easy handout. In the political sphere, this false sort of promotion expresses itself in dictatorship, in false leadership, in the domination of the "bosses," in patronage hiring, in obligatory membership in organizations, without any respect for personal choices. This sort of authoritarianism of the leaders is often exercised through pressures based on punishments and fines, with no respect for different ways of thinking.

The poor as subjects of their own development

Dictatorships and the manipulation of organizations

always lead to a *recessive human and political process*. When people are not considered the *subjects of their own development*, they are removed from any truly liberating course of action. Any person or institution that wants to work in rural areas must realize that it is from and with the poor, considered as *agents of their own social changes*, that things should begin. Otherwise, they will lose their awareness of power, and when a bad activist or a bad political leader takes away from the people their *awareness of power*, in reality, they are *taking away* their power.

Real development is in persons, not in things, however necessary they might be such as roads, schools, hospitals, etc. Authentic development is always from within. Easily enough, things are turned around and persons are treated as if they were objects, and objects are treated as if they were the perfect expression of development. This serious distortion often generates greater dependence. Laws, as well as projects and organizations, must be at the service of persons and not vice versa.

The poor have lost the sense of their own dignity. This is the greatest and the most dangerous of the thefts they have endured in the course of history. Until the poor totally recover their active role as persons and as groups, they will be a dependent mass, submissive and manipulated, with no real political-social role.

This anthropological view of the poor must be reinforced and enlightened with an authentic religious notion, based on the fact that we are all equally children of the same God and Father; we have all been created “in His image and likeness,” and Christ came to save absolutely everyone equally. On the other hand, the poor, the marginalized, the outcasts of society were and are the privileged of the Kingdom and the recipients of its preference.

Almost always, we look at the poor from the material point of view. The lack of goods and essential resources for a respectable life is something that must be overcome quickly. But it should not come at the price of a loss of identity, nor much less at the loss of one’s ancestral values. A socio-political plan that gets rid of all class distinctions is a false plan. A

person or a people who have lost their own identity cannot achieve becoming subjects of their own development.

The poor have been robbed of their dignity and their identity. There are those who believe that the disappearance of class distinctions is a normal process. But much to the contrary, we believe that this process is always forced. To prove this, I will mention a personal experience:

I arrived in the mining district of Catavi in 1964. In a few months, I found myself in charge of Radio Pio XII, at the Siglo XX mine. Besides all the problems and the union struggles for greater social justice and the confrontations with the various governments, something else really struck me: how the miners had a clear idea of their own dignity and how they had class consciousness. In spite of the difficulties and problems, in spite of so many struggles and persecutions, no one succeeded in robbing them of the idea of their own dignity as persons and as a social class.

***So that the hope of the poor
will not be in vain***

At the present moment, we are living a new and very important situation: the indigenous, the peasants and the poor have, in general, reclaimed their hope. They believe in and they desire change: *a profound and radical change*, which the present government of Evo Morales is going to bring about. Let’s hope it happens!

Nevertheless, big changes do not just happen. One must decide how to act politically so that this change becomes an authentic reality. Change will not come about simply with the recruitment of the masses, with confrontations, with vengeful slogans, or with inspiring meetings. The people need to rediscover complete self-confidence while accepting the reality and the rights of the “others.”

On the other hand, every organization and recruitment of the masses must be accompanied by a real consciousness that involves the *taking ownership*, on the part of the people, of all the rights and duties that they have as persons and as socio-cultural groups.

If one does not start there, everything else that is done will not lead to a deep change, that is to say, it will not lead to a *real change*. It will be a new version of what the country already experienced with the former “*Peasant Militias*” or with the “*Military-Peasant Pact*,” in as much as the peasantry was made to be instruments of outside interests. They should never accept being recruited *without knowing the facts and without conviction*.

From confrontation to complementarity

The country must move beyond its diversity toward a *true complementarity*. As always happens in life, an authentic nationality is built on the *full acceptance of diversity, not seeing the other as an adversary or an enemy*.

The great geographic, linguistic, social, and cultural diversity which characterize Bolivia is one of its greatest riches, and as such, it must be defended and promoted. One needs to seek a brotherhood between city and country, between rural culture and city culture, between the values of modern civilization and the ancestral values of our peoples. It is not a question of fomenting bitterness but of establishing norms of *justice and equality* that were always denied the great majorities of the nation.

The plan for change that the government is pushing must overcome the excessive centralization that the country has lived since its beginnings. This plan for change has, as one of its most important aspects, *the autonomous departmental and municipal administrations*. It must be part of a great decentralizing scheme. But in no way should it be contrary to the unity of the country. It must find maximum unity within maximum diversity. True unity springs from the complementarity of opposites. The *aymara* and *quechua* cultures have always developed a sense of respect of “others” and solidarity with all. Community values have been the heart of these cultures.

It is necessary to seek balance, not mere confrontation; integration, not domination; solidarity, not individualism; mutual help, not the exploitation of others.

Gandhi said: “I want the cultures of other people to move through my house freely, but I will not let myself be dominated by any of them.”

Let us dream and struggle so that all of us, peoples and regions and persons, might be builders of brotherhood and solidarity. (*Nosotros OMI*, March 2007)

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