# community



## community

MISSIONARY OBLATES OF MARY IMMACULATE

#### Dear Fellow Oblates,

The General Chapter of 1972 issued a mandate to me to send a message to all Oblates underscoring "our renewed determination to give high priority to revitalizing our communities ". The following letter, written by your General Council team, is our humble attempt to fulfil that mandate. It is my hope that it will promote the renewal of our apostolic communities in our service of the Kingdom of God.

Fraternally
Richard Hanley one

Superior General -

- Rome, October 12, 1972.

#### COMMUNITY

Dear Fellow Oblates,

In this letter, written in answer to the request of the Chapter, we would like to restore confidence in Oblate Community. Community and mission were inseparable in the thinking and planning of Bishop de Mazenod. They have retained their close association throughout our life as a Congregation. As was said at the Chapter, "Without the apostolic community the missionary outlook is a mirage..." Also the sociological survey showed that 79-90% of Oblates think community is essential

to the Oblate life style and also essential as a means of apostolic commitment. We would like to encourage new experiments in community living. Where Oblate community does not exist we would like to foster the development of fraternal living.

#### I. OBLATE COMMUNITY TODAY

1. For a good number of Oblates the present situation is one of insecurity and even agony. Many of the former elements of our life style are no longer present: a daily schedule, including set times for prayer; the physical presence of many Oblates under the same roof; a large measure of separation from the world; an accent on the vertical relations of the individual toward the Superior, the regulations, the rule. The disappearance of these elements has brought confusion and suffering to older Oblates who greatly valued such structures

Insecurity

because they found them beneficial. Many of our younger Oblates seek a style of community built around a more intimate degree of inter-personal sharing. They value spontaneity and shared spiritual experiences more than external order and conformity to a rule. They also suffer much from what appears to them as artificiality, impersonalism and a tendency to subordinate the person to the system.

Fluidity

2. The present situation, moreover, is also one of great fluidity. Large communities are breaking up and being replaced by new groupings of multifunctional communities wherein groups and individuals are engaged in different apostolates. In some provinces there is a freedom of choice to join a common missionary project. Again, some Oblates have left the traditional community to live among the people they serve. Many communities are growing more and more open to other religious, to diocesan

priests and to lay co-operators. If these developments have undoubted advantages, they have also caused confusion and called into doubt the precise form our Oblate life should assume.

3. Because this situation causes unhappiness and confusion, it is harmful to our missionary life. We of the General Council, aware of this situation, would like to remove completely these obstacles, but we cannot. We are convinced that renewal of community cannot come immediately nor from letters. A long period of time will be needed as well as much patience on our part. Renewal will require personal and collective action on the part of all, for our present difficulties with community are part of a universal phenomenon which touches the whole of modern society as well as the Church. Our Oblate community does not exist in isolation but is always part of the larger process of the search for community in world and Church. The Oblate is conOur Attitude

cerned with community problems in two ways: first because his missionary and pastoral work is largely connected with formation and growth of human and Christian communities: second, because he himself lives his religious life in the normal milieu of community. Solutions to the problems of Oblate community can only come if they are situated in the wider context of our missionary work of community formation. What is expected of us is that we discern well the signs of the times and take seriously the message of the gospel. Guided by this double light we can confidently set about developing a style of community which will correspond to the needs of today and will express in contemporary form our vocation to mission ad community.

## II. CHALLENGES PUT TO US BY THE WORLD AND OUR FAITH

Signs of the Times

4. In modern society many of man's contacts are superficial and casual. Man

feels that his life is being shaped by social forces too big for him to control—by the primal forces of money, greed, power and the abuse of pleasure. The consumer society and the powers-that-be in our urban civilization have little or no place for the little ones on the earth—the poor, the oppressed, the marginal and those who possess no economic and social power. As a result, man is today in a situation of alienation, isolation and collective neurosis. Security and identity are jeopardized and consequently sought in material possessions and false social prestige.

5. Our fellow men are reacting against this society in both East and West. They want to restore the great values which community has always promoted. Each person wants to be himself or herself, wants to have an **identity** and to let his unique personality grow in self-fulfilment. Each person wants to feel he is useful and **accepted** in his uniqueness

by others. He wants to be protected from hostile forces in the relatively safe haven of community. People want to **share** what they have: talents, education, sentiments, material goods. They want to share what they are in an intimate communion of values. They want to be **coresponsible** for their social groups, taking part in the decision-making process. They want, besides their personal identity, to have a **group identity**. As a crown to all of this, they desire profoundly to experience an **integration** and unity in their lives.

Union in Christ

6. The core of the Good News which Jesus announced is that community is necessary and possible among men. The Kingdom he inaugurated is one where love — note fear, violence or injustice — is the basic relationship among men: "...Jesus was to die...to gather together in unity the scattered children of God" (Jn. 11:52). At Pentecost he sent his Spirit as the agent of unity among men.

Do we not see in the infant Church the spontaneous growth of communities as an organic part of the Christian experience? (Acts, 2:42; 4:32). Is not the mission and the life of the Church the continual formation of community? Christ wants us to manifest, by living together in spite of difficulties involved, that his love and his Spirit are stronger than all the forces of disruption. He wants us to manifest through our lives that the liberation of man is already begun.

7. Fraternal life is meant to be an experience of salvation. At the root of this fraternal communion is acceptance of the spiritual poverty of Christ and the desire to share our lives with others as Christ shares his life with us. His commandment is that we "have love one for another". Where there is love, there is community; where there is community, there is the Kingdom of God in process; and where there is the Kingdom, there is salvation. Sure enough, salvation is

An Experience of Salvation

not yet definitely won. The idyllic style of Acts should give us no illusions. Sometimes the forces of separation are violent and seem legitimate. But we are called to welcome Christ who makes us return to our brothers and travel the same road with them once again. Community may be interrupted by moments of separation and disharmony but it can also rise to heights of pardon and reconciliation. This is its normal itinerary and the basis of our hope.

Evangelical Witness 8. In this manner we can show the world that the hidden mainspring of our lives is the unity that Ghrist gives us, to which we bear witness. This is a sign that the world may believe (Jn. 17:21). Although we hesitate to pretend that we are examples for others, we wish in all simplicity and firmness to offer them "the sign of discipleship" (Jn. 13:15). Because we are sure that the power of Christ's love is stonger than egoism and cupidity, we can contest the world's false absolutes.

money, power and exploitation. This we do by our manner of life, not confiding in ourselves but seeking to live the poverty and availability of Jesus as radically as possible (Lk. 9:57-62).

9. A missionary is not a silent witness. Community has an apostolic orientation. Jesus set up around his person a community of disciples to found a new Israel. After Pentecost apostolic groups were formed. Soon apostolic communities extend over the Mediterranean world. St. Paul insists on the bond which must exist between community and mission. He cannot describe an authentic Christian community without envisaging its missionary aspect (I Thess. 1:8 ff). He can never speak of mission without evoking community. He himself is never alone but always with a team (Col. 4:10-14). In all of this we have a sure pattern for our own missionary work.

Community and Mission

#### III. WHAT ARE WE TO DO?

10. We must first of all preserve a positive attitude and refuse to lapse into senseless complaining. God has called us to live in these times and we should do so with confidence and joy. Considering the challenges put to us by the world and by our faith, we can discern some of the principal elements we must develop in our community living.

Freedom to find Personal Fulfilment

11. For us community should be more than a mere clerical club or a refuge from prying eyes. It should be more than a boarding house or a mailing address. It should be a live communion of persons, an atmosphere for personal growth and self-realization. Whether Oblates live together or are scattered through a district, the individual's presence within the community should be for him a circumstance leading to growth and fulfilment in life's human, Christian and missionary dimension. Any type of community struc-

ture which sacrifices the individual person to something external to himself is not a genuine community, for "man is the end of institutions" (Gaudium et Spes, n. 25).

12. There can be no growth unless there is respect for one's uniqueness, unless one is free to respond to his personal graces and charism. True, we have bound ourselves by vow and we have, as a community, accepted commitments. We must therefore respect the common good. But our obedience does not condemn us to a life of passivity. The Spirit will give rise to a diversity of interests within the community. We must respond to his invitations with liberty, even when the changes suggested are radical. This will at times put a strain on our institutions and the commitments we have. In such situations it should not be immediately concluded that it is the freedom of the individual that must give way. Rather, the community as a whole, together with the Superior, should seek a solution through prayer, dialogue, a discernment of spirits, a reevaluation of our commitments and a realistic appraisal of needs and our capacity to meet them.

Personal Acceptance and Communion 13. Community should signify a web of relationships within which we are "at home". This means that we are accepted as we are. The charity of which we speak as the bond of community is scarcely charity if it remains cold, distant and intermittent, always questioning and nearly always criticizing. Is acceptance really present if all affective sharing is perpetually banished from among us? Although a healthy measure of privacy is necessary, are not many today seeking a degree of human sharing that goes beyond mere sociability? Many seek the type of relationships which are going to support them in their difficulties, challenge them in their convictions, forgive them their faults and provide that measure of opposition which alone brings

out that which is most authentic. In short, the growth of the individual is sought through his life in community, through interaction on the human and spiritual plane with others.

14 Our communities need not be all of

the same kind. They can vary in lifestyles, works and structure according to missionary need and the desires of the persons involved. What is necessary is that each individual feel at home in the Congregation. Each must know that he can contribute to promoting the values of community. Certainly our more experienced Oblates have much to contribute out of their wisdom and years of dedication. The young also have their particular views and should know they are gladly received. Thus there may be communities which correspond to the tra-

ditional structures, others which are

composed of men doing the same work

and sharing the same sentiments and

values, still others which are multifunc-

Plurality

tional. But in each community there must be a serious effort to respond to the challenges the world and our faith present us.

15. Simplicity in our lifestyle has become absolutely necessary. Has not our mode of life brought upon us the reproach of over-institutionalization? If we cannot become poor in fact as well as in spirit, can we not at least become more simple in our way of life? This is necessary if we are to demonstrate that degree of detachment from material things which alone can provide the antidote to the rampant materialism of the day.

### Simplicity and Sharing

16. The sharing of goods is a venerable Christian custom. The Chapter discussed sharing on the general level and steps are being taken to implement this directive and deepen the degree of sharing between provinces and regions. While we work towards this, we must keep in mind that the most important part

of our sharing is with the poor and the needy. We must guard against the temptation to spread more and more of our resources on ourselves and our institutions. If our resources and institutions are open to the needs of the communities around us and are freely made available to them, we will not excite envy and jealousy; our goods and equipment moreover, will be properly used along the lines of our missionary thrust.

17. The Sociological Survey showed that 76% of Oblates place a high value on community prayer. Other studies reinforce this and show in addition that this is an area about which there is a great deal of dissatisfaction. Certainly one of the more intense moments in the apostolic community's existence is the time when it turns itself collectively towards the Lord to seek his guidance, sing his praises, implore his forgiveness and ask for the strength to continue in his service. Much evolution has taken place

Community Prayer

in the form of prayer, both liturgical and otherwise. Concelebration of the liturgy with group evangelical reflections is assuming a central role and is by all means to be fostered. In addition, prayer sessions which consist in general reflections on the gospel have proved valuable for some; others like charismatic prayer meetings or prayerful discussions of the apostolate. Apart from the liturgy, should not the other forms of community prayer and the time of prayer emerge from the community's life? What is absolutely necessary is that the community be prayerful. For this to be so, the individual must be prayerful and must maintain a healthy personal relation with God:

#### IV. FACING THE FUTURE

## New Forms of Community

18. Before and during the Chapter there was much talk about new forms of community and new ways of belonging to

the community. The discussion did not proceed sufficiently for any clear orientation to be taken. We must carefully distinguish two things:

- a. New styles of Oblate community living;
- New ways of belonging to and cooperating with the Congregation without necessarily involving community living.

There are already many experiments in progress of new styles of community. In all of these the Oblate community should be concerned with retaining its identity so that it may continue to be the leaven of the Christian community. Thus the Oblate way of life necessarily includes community, along with the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. These vows have as their purpose the liberation of the individual to facilitate his ability to love and share. Our community also necessarily includes priesthood since its mission is the full evan-

gelization of the People of God, in the hope of presiding over an assembly gathered to celebrate the Eucharist.

19. The other questions of non-juridical belonging to the Congregation must be faced also. The Chapter has strongly recommended the Missionary Association of Mary Immaculate as an eventual means of affiliation to the Congregation. (Adm. Structures, No. 42). Here we should also place such matters as the membership of catechists working in our missions, of lay missionary co-operators whether married or celibate, of young persons orientated toward our life, of those wishing to be associated for a limited time, and of those who have left our institute but ask to maintain some link with us in order to continue their missionary vocation. If we see our Oblate community as a core community with other communities grouped around it, such forms of affiliation can be useful. This is, indeed, a far reaching and

complex question but we should not be timid in facing it.

20. The incorporation of younger Oblates into existing communities will require delicate care. While they have much to learn, they have much to give. We should not be offended if they come with a questioning attitude, for in considering their questions we can learn much about ourselves. By way of example, here are some questions worked out by a group of young religious as points they would like to ask before joining a community:

- How do you specifically involve the community in social problems peculiar to your area? (drugs, crisis centres, unwed mothers, dropouts)
- 2. In what specific ways does your community provide for its members to share and deepen their faith with others? (laity, nuns, etc)
- 3. How does your community speci-

The Young

fically confront the issue of poverty? (Is simplicity a high priority? Are goods and salaries shared?)

### Oblates living Alone

21. To fulfil the proclamation of the gospel, many Oblates must live alone or in small groups. This makes it difficult for them to express their solidarity in community living. We must not forget that the Oblate community is a fellowship of sharing in faith, values, goods and works. This can take place in a vital communion even if there is no living together under a common roof. The community of spirit is encouraged by the "Cor unum" rather than by simple physical proximity. Bonds can be strongly knit between such Oblates who should be encouraged to meet often in district and sector meetings, who should be served with Oblate information and who should take their part in decision making. Better communications today render all this possible and the needs of the missions make it imperative. Let these isolated Oblates also draw strength from forming real communities with their flocks while attaching themselves with strong ties to neighboring Oblate core communities.

#### CONCLUSION

- 22. Mission and Community: that is our vocation at a time when the pursuit of neither the one nor the other is easy. Community renewal, it seems to us, is a task that calls for action on all levels. All of us must pull together in this effort. The central government, the provincial and local authorities must be deeply concerned and consider themselves at the service of community in a particular fashion.
- 23. All renewal of community must be mission oriented. Such renewal is not a panecea for all ills but none can deny it is a powerful agent of rebirth. We

must never forget that the revitalizing of our communities cannot be divorced from their apostolic function as living cells for the formation of communities on a broader front both in the Church and in the world. It is in this context alone that we can face the domestic problems that now disturb us. In the measure that our communities embody the substance and not just the appearance of true fraternity, we prepare in a modest but real way for the coming of the universal community of all men that is the Kingdom of God (Rev. c. 21).

24. On the last day of the Chapter, Father Deschâtelets, in a spirited burst, predicted that the Holy Spirit would perform wonders through the Congregation in the years to come. There is no reason why this cannot be true. We possess a magnificent heritage. With the examples of our predecessors before us, courageous and forceful, with our hearts open to what the Spirit wants

to accomplish through us, with "unbounded confidence" as de Mazenod had, "united in prayer with Mary the Mother of Apostles", we can play our part in bringing the Kingdom of God to his poor through our apostolic communities.

Your Brothers in the General Council

— Rome, October 1972.

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