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## Contemporary Christological Trends

Bishop de Mazenod took pains to make the Gospel known to his contemporaries in a language that they understood. He felt it was important and urgent that "we teach those degenerate Christians who Jesus Christ is".<sup>1</sup> At that time, theologians and preachers securely shared the same heritage in regard to knowledge of Jesus Christ. They were far removed from the idea of distinguishing in the gospels that which could be admitted as historical and that which belonged to an expression of faith. They entertained no second thoughts as they read the gospel narratives which brought to them the words and deeds of the Incarnate Word. Historical criticism and rationalism had not yet shaken theology: theology was passed on from one generation to the other by the repetition of unchangeable formulae. They were fully at ease with the sequence of scholastic theology that was in vogue: Trinity, Creation, the Fall (original sin), Incarnation of the Word, God and completely Man, who through his death restored the whole of humanity to its original state before sin in order to endow it with eternal life.

The reference to Jesus Christ is the original feature of every Christian faith. But for some decades now, we have been asking: which Jesus? In our age of cultural and theological pluralism, with its renewal of exegetical studies and development of critical thought, images and statements about Jesus abound, among Christians and elsewhere. Even among Christians we note a large spectrum of opinions, to such a point that some speak of "the galaxy of Jesus".<sup>2</sup> There are those who identify the Church's teaching with that of Jesus; others oppose the two; others stress Jesus' message and attitude towards social and political liberation, others are attracted to his mysticism; some see Christ as the only Lord present and acting in all religions and cultures, others see him as one Saviour among several others. Thus there is a diversity of the portraits of Jesus and of Christologies; on a deeper level, however, we must admit a new questioning that leads to a "deconstruction" of the traditional Christological discourses of the Church.<sup>3</sup>

In our media-permeated culture, so keen on "scoops", we are from time to time informed about a major discovery regarding Jesus. TIME magazine (January 10, 1994) and the well-known program "The Larry King Show" of CNN told their mass audience that, according to the serious and rigorously scientific research of the "Jesus Seminar", 82% of the Jesus' words in the gospels were not spoken by him in that form and therefore have nothing to do with the Jesus of History.<sup>4</sup> J. Crossan, one of the members of this seminar, calmly presumes to offer us the first complete expose of what Jesus was, what he did and what he said.<sup>5</sup> Specialists have reacted little to these works because for them it is something "déjà vu" that has already been studied much more seriously. The public at large, however, is amazed at learning so many new things about Jesus.

Moreover, we note that theologians and exegetes are not the only ones to speak about Jesus. More and more he escapes them. In a world which loudly asserts its reserve in regard to the traditional Churches, Jesus still remains no. 1. People are still interested in him. In 1994, the "Jesus" (Paris, Flammarion/Desclée de Brouwer) of Jacques Duquesne, a journalist and novelist, became a bookstore success, selling 200, 000 copies in a few months. His work is a popularization of the research into Jesus reserved to specialists and the most educated believers. Duquesne is teaching nothing new to theologians; but he has put into the hands of many readers a work which gives them the feeling that they are finally discovering the truth about Jesus. A few years ago many were taken by the great work of Gerard Messadie<sup>6</sup> who, under the guise of erudition, pretended to reveal new things about Jesus which the Churches had always hidden from ordinary believers. Forgetting that they had in hand at best a novel with some biblical and historical coloring, many Christian readers were wondering whether the Churches had shown them the real Jesus.

Let us also note that the cinema has replaced painting when it comes to showing

us the face of Jesus. Recent films about Jesus<sup>7</sup> have sparked the interest and debate in Catholic milieux. There is also a whole quantity of literature, generally ignored by theologians, which is propagating a "christosophy" and penetrates every level of society so that it infiltrates even the Christian conscience. This is esoteric literature which in our day is invading the public sphere and enjoys an astonishing popularity.<sup>8</sup> And so we can no longer do Christology without knowing that other discourses and portraits of Jesus exist which are not of the Churches. There is often an abyss between the Jesus of these groups and that of the theologians. We must therefore admit that Jesus is more and more eluding the control of the Churches and the experts. Many feel qualified to speak about readers and listeners because they offer "fantasy" aspects about him and because they claim that the Churches have been hiding the truth for centuries. This is a fact that has taken the Churches by surprise: from now on they have to cope with competition.

Before Vatican II and during the Council period, Christology was in the forefront of the questions that interested theologians. Among Catholics, the issue of the Church, its nature, structures, as well as its relationship to present-day society, was the first concern. Then it was Christology that became the central issue of theological reflection. Several reasons explain this shift of focus. In seeking to adapt to the modern world, the Church ran the risk of losing her identity. It was therefore important to return to the basis of the Church's mystery, namely, Jesus Christ. It is also surprising to note that the debates around the death of God and secularization gave Jesus of Nazareth a favoured position. Finally, the fruitful discussions on the topic of the Jesus of history, undertaken mainly by protestant exegesis, were attentively followed by Catholic exegetes and theologians. Thus there resulted in theology a "Christological concentration", not to say a "Christological imperialism", which occasioned the publication of a great variety of essays and a renewal of Christological questions. Recently we note an exhaustion in the "Christological domination" and we must admit that the many studies on Jesus have not erased the massive phenomenon of religious indifference in the West and have not replied to the challenge of modernity.

The framework of this paper does not allow me to present a panorama of the contemporary Christological research, and even less a resume of the many Christologies. I will limit myself to selecting certain major trends or the most noteworthy perspectives which have become an established acquisition in the theology about Jesus Christ. These trends can be improved and even corrected, for we would be wrong to see them as "new dogmas" that have come to paralyze theological reflection.

## **I. Beyond Chalcedon, a return to the Jesus of the Gospels**

From the time of the great Christological Councils until recently, the theology about Jesus started from on high, with the Trinitarian God from whom everything flows. Its starting point was not the words and deeds of the historical Jesus, but of the eternal Son who became man. This theology was entirely centered on the Incarnation and, in second place, on Jesus' redemptive death. These two poles resulted as the topic of two treatises: "De Verbo Incarnato" and "De Redemptore". The study of the Person of Jesus was done independently of his salvation work. The dogmas of the great Councils, especially Chalcedon, was the starting point and the source for the theology about Christ. Theologians employed the concepts of "nature", "person", "hypostatical union". Let us not forget that these concepts belong to a certain period and that their use in theology represents a valid effort that still gives inspiration when one ponders the mystery of Christ. According to the intellectual needs of the time, theologies concentrated on the being itself of Jesus Christ and on the conditions required to make possible the union of two natures, each infinitely removed from the other, in one single Person. Interest for ontological questions finally absorbed the whole field of theology which became more at ease, during the course of time, in using philosophical and abstract categories, rather than biblical and existential categories, to comprehend and express the meaning of God's intervention through Jesus Christ.

Contemporary Christologies no longer build on the foundation of the confessions of faith and conciliar definitions; they tend rather to found the confessions of faith on the history

and destiny of Jesus and to show that God revealed himself, in this man. The "true man" of the dogmatic formula becomes "Jesus of Nazareth". One tries to show that the "Christ of faith", or the Christ that the Church proclaims, is indeed this Jesus of the Gospels. Thus contemporary Christologies are concerned with telling the story of Jesus, reporting his deeds, words, attitudes, to show that he is the Messiah and the Son of God. In this sense we speak of "narrative Christology", that is to say, a Christology that seeks to preserve and actualize a concrete remembrance. The deeds and behaviour of Jesus are not only edifying facts but revealing actions of God. His death is no longer seen as the exemplary sacrifice that God demands to make reparation for Mankind's sins, but the logical result of a risk taken by the Prophet of the Kingdom in his oppositions to the powers of the place. Contemporary Christologies strive to underline the concrete way that led Jesus to the cross. Thus Jesus the blasphemer of Pannenberg, the seditious Jesus abandoned by all and by God that Moltmann presents, Küng's Jesus contesting the religious and political powers: all become necessary historical data in the elaboration of the Christological discourse. Let us also note the newness and quality of Latin American Christologies which spring, for a great part, from a contextual reading of the gospels and also from a more attentive interest in the unique and liberating words and deeds of Jesus relevant to countries that are becoming aware of their oppression.

Contemporary Christologies, then, no longer focus on the ontical and static aspect of the Man-God reality of Jesus Christ, but rather on the dimension of the human and historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth who has been acknowledged to be the Christ and the Son of God. The ancient Christologies were centered upon the Incarnation which was seen as the punctual and constitutive event of Jesus' existence; whereas recent Christologies show that the Incarnation that happened once for all comprises a history. Hence, more freely than in other times, they speak of Jesus' development, of progress even in his knowledge of the Father's will, of a progressive awareness of his mission and identity. Thus we can better comprehend that Jesus has become like us in all things save for the fact of sin (Hebrews 4:15).

This rediscovery of the Jesus of the Gospels springs, for a good part, from exegetical studies which made it possible for us to grasp better the complexity and richness of the gospel testimonies on Jesus and the diversity of the New Testament Christologies. Though with reservations, theologians have benefited from the daring thought of R. Bultmann who contributed to renewing the Christological discourse. They have learned from the discussions exegetes had with each other, notably E. Kaesemann and J. Ebeling, about the relationship between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith. The rediscovery of the historical existence of Jesus owes much to the studies published on the occasion of the celebration in 1951 of the 15<sup>th</sup> centenary of the Council of Chalcedon. While recognizing the role and value of Chalcedon's definition in expressing the Church's faith in a moment of grave crisis, the theologians also became aware of its limitations.

They addressed two main criticisms to it: one that the historical dimension proper to Jesus was not taken into consideration, the other concerned the significance of the conceptual scheme resulting from the expression "in two natures" being applied to two orders of immeasurable greatness. Chalcedon proclaimed the Church's faith in a language adapted to the culture of a given period and in view of the errors of the time.<sup>9</sup> Theologians over the course of years were wrong in taking the definition of Chalcedon as the source and norm for the Christological discourse. K. Rahner has shown well that the definition of Chalcedon ought to be understood "both as a point of arrival and as a point of departure".<sup>10</sup> To speak of Christ today in fidelity to Chalcedon we must not limit ourselves to simply repeating it; rather, to the contrary, we must search for a new language. That is what most contemporary theologians have done: K. Rahner, O. Schoonenberg, E. Schillebeeckx, H. Küng, W. Pannenberg, J. Moltmann, E. Jünger, Ch. Duquoc, J. Moingt, W. Kasper, B. Sesboue, J. Segundo, L. Boff, B. Forte.

Recent Christologies are very dependent on biblical studies and historical research about Jesus. The balance sheet of historical research about Jesus risks being seen as disappointing, at least as being disproportionate to the effort put forth during these last one hundred and fifty years. Large areas of Jesus' history remain obscure, so much that no one

pretends to write a "life of Jesus". Several questions receive only controversial answers: the institution of the Eucharist at Jesus' last supper, his attitude in regard to his death, the miracles of resurrection such as that of Lazarus, the founding of the Church, Jesus' awareness concerning his identity as Messiah and Son of God. We must always maintain that faith bases itself on God's Word to which the Bible gives witness, and not on the results of historical research. In this sense, Bultmann is right in reminding us that there is a transcendence in God's intervention in the Jesus event that is accessible only to faith. Nevertheless, historians and exegetes will not renounce constantly to continue their search for the Jesus of history.<sup>11</sup> And they do so motivated not only by a healthy curiosity that is at the root of all science, but first of all in the interest of faith itself. Even if faith does not rest on the data of history established by historical science, it remains true in a concrete history and especially in a "certain Jesus", whom we reach again with certitude through serious historical research.

No matter how modest the results of historical research are, it is true that Christians have in these last fifty years learned a great deal about the milieu of Jesus. Historical research enables us to perceive better Jesus' originality and to be aware of the mystery of his identity. We see more clearly how the kerygma and the Christologies of the New Testament writings are already contained "in nuce" in the teaching, attitudes and deeds of Jesus. Through the discontinuity that the death and the resurrection introduce appears the continuity between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. In fact, the Church proclaims Christ, the Savior of the world and the Son of God, who is indeed the very same who authoritatively proclaimed the coming of God's Kingdom, who forgave sins, who interpreted the Law and healed the sick. We speak of Jesus because we believe in him, not because of a historical interest. But our confession of faith is related to Jesus of Nazareth who is situated in our history and historical science enables us to reach him. Contemporary Christologies have a historical foundation and this appeal to history avoids ideological abuse in the name of Jesus Christ.

## **II. The Resurrection of Jesus, Source and Organizing Principle of Christology**

Contemporary theologians have rediscovered the central place that the resurrection of Jesus holds in Christology. We now understand better that faith in Jesus the Messiah and Lord was born from a unique experience of a revelation from God of which the disciples were witnesses. The latter are certain that Jesus did not remain a captive of Death, that he conquered it and continues to be present among his own. The writings of the New Testament show that the resurrection which made the crucified One to be Messiah and Lord is the content and the norm of the Christian faith. In the light of the resurrection, it is clear that it is not an out-of-time myth that is believed and told to others, but the concrete history of a Person, Jesus of Nazareth, that is transmitted through a variety of narrations. The resurrection of Jesus is the starting point for every confession of Christological faith and the matrix of the New Testament Christologies.

We know that the importance of the resurrection of Jesus was somewhat eclipsed from the beginning of the patristic period onwards. Liturgical practice does not forget it, however, for during the first centuries there is only one feast, that of Easter, celebrated on the first day of each week and then in a solemn way once every year. During the first centuries, the resurrection of Jesus is not discussed and does not spark any new theological discourse. The concern is above all to elaborate a theological discourse on the Trinity, on the theandric constitution of Christ and on the redemption. The doctrine of salvation is related mainly to the Incarnation or to the death of Jesus. In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries the debate centres above all on the hypostatic union in the framework of aristotelian philosophy. There is hardly any consideration of the salvific meaning of the resurrection, for the stress is put on the death of Jesus understood from the perspective of the explanatory theory of "satisfaction" that St. Anselm had elaborated. With the development of apologetics, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and until towards 1960, the resurrection, as well as the prophecies and miracles, is more or less reduced to being a proof of Jesus' divinity. The effort was to show we must believe because of the

resurrection, as though one did not have to believe in it. In the classical treatises of "De Verbo Incarnato" the theological significance of the resurrection is practically hidden.<sup>12</sup>

The liturgical movement contributed a great deal to rediscovering the central place of the paschal mystery in the celebration of the Eucharist and in the liturgical year.<sup>13</sup> For their part, the exegetes tried to point out the importance of the resurrection as a source of light in expressing the relationship between the pre-Easter Jesus and the Christ of faith and they have studied it as an event and as language.<sup>14</sup> They have shown that the event of Jesus' resurrection can be reached only through the confessions of faith of the first Christian communities and that by means of a diversity of languages such as the resurrection from the death, the exaltation, and life. Basing themselves on the work of the exegetes, the theologians then tried to give to the resurrection the place that it deserves in Christology.<sup>15</sup>

Contemporary Christologies stress that the resurrection of Jesus is an eschatological event that already marks our history. While its reality is part of the prolonging of salvation events of the first Covenant, particularly the Exodus, and especially the liberating activity of Jesus, the resurrection is an event that is totally new and unique which opens up the existence of Jesus and, through him, the movement of history to the definitive fulfillment of God's plan of salvation. The resurrection makes clear that which was veiled in the life and death of Jesus and thus it allows us to grasp the meaning of his deeds and words. Furthermore, in as much as an anticipation of the end of history or the eschatological fulfillment, the resurrection illuminates the whole of history and reveals its meaning and direction. Recent studies on the resurrection of Jesus have contributed to changing the whole landscape of Christology.

However, we can say that this new insight into the resurrection of Jesus is still reserved to the specialists and that has not yet deeply touched the faith of Christians and those who hold posts of responsibility within the Church. Too often we forget that Easter opens up a vast space of freedom and creativity for Christian communities. In many cases, fear of change and suspicion in regard to novelty are practical denials of the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit. This explains the resistance to modifying certain ecclesial practices, such as the organization of ministries and the access of women to the ordained ministries: there is too strict a fidelity to the pre-Jesus Easter that does not take into account the contingency implied in every historical event, nor the gift of the risen One's Spirit. By the resurrection, Jesus became "invisible" (Lk 24:31) so that his historical uniqueness, which certainly does mark his paschal messianity, does not become an absolute which would close the history of the relationship of God to man. "It is good for you that I go away," Jesus says in his farewell discourse, "for the Spirit will be given to you" (Jn 16:7). Those who believe in Jesus are called to do great things: "Whoever believes in me shall also do the works that I do; he will even do greater ones, for I am going to the Father" (Jn 14:12). Living faith in the risen Jesus gives a whole dynamism and depth to our pastoral work. Thus, if we really believe in the resurrection of Jesus, the gospel that we proclaim is the word of someone who is alive, the sacraments that we celebrate are the personal actions of the Good Shepherd, the Church that we are part of is the living body of Christ. Because of that, we must not remain in our cenacles behind closed doors, but go out into the great Wind of the risen One, the Spirit who freed the body of the crucified One from its wrappings and brought out the fearful disciples from the cenacle in order to proclaim to the whole world the good news of the Kingdom. One of the merits of contemporary Christology is pointing out concrete implications of Jesus' resurrection for our pastoral and missionary activity.

### **III. The Discourse on God from the Starting Point of Jesus Christ**

The theologian who wants to express Jesus Christ today has to take into account the present-day culture, One of the traits of western culture, steeped in modernity, is the absence of God. The name of God has pretty well disappeared from the language of culture, art, philosophy, ethics, the sciences. In our secularized world that is so concerned with effectiveness, the idea of God has lost its being in evidence and its usefulness, and we have even come to

question the possibility today of a discourse on God. In the ancient world God had his place, whereas in the modern world he is so absent that we speak of the "death of God". We have even come to the point of making a theology of the death of God and of speaking of an atheistic christianity. The adherents to this movement of the death of God are nevertheless interested in Jesus and find in his messianism and death something that we can give hope today and thus allow him to occupy the place vacated by God. The movement of the death of God has disappeared and still one continues to talk about God: it is now recognized that from now on Christology must take in hand the issue of God.

In classic theology, Christology leaned on "De Deo Uno" and "De Deo Trino" from which treatises it borrowed most of its concepts and reasoning. Thus the treatise "De Verbo Incarnato" was not burdened with the issue of God. Theology worked out its discourse on God practically without listening to the words and deeds of Jesus. It preferred to place its confidence in reason and philosophy. But for some decades now, the theologians are speaking of the "God of the Christians"<sup>16</sup>, of the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. Because they think that the reply to atheism can only be the knowledge of the God of Jesus Christ, Christology has become the locus "par excellence" where the discourse on God is worked out. In Jesus the "different God"<sup>17</sup> reveals himself, a God different from that of the religions and philosophers, for God is not an impassive being, nor a solitary being jealous of his glory, still less an all powerful capricious being, but the loving Father of Jesus and in him all mankind. Christologies are striving to show the face of the true God who reveals himself in Jesus' deeds, in the beatitudes and parables, and in a special way in his death and resurrection. Thus they are promoting a new discourse on God. They speak of God differently than philosophical theism does, even than strict monotheism, for they show the Trinitarian God who is at work and reveals himself in Jesus. It is therefore the task of Christologies to present the Jesus in such a way that the name of God can have its place in their discourse and find its meaning.

Some contemporary Christologies, particularly those of J. Moltmann, E. Jüngel, J. Moingt and J. Sobrino, have shown that God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit reveals himself in the passion and death of Jesus. They point out that the Trinitarian God did not remain indifferent and absent in regard to the death of his Son Jesus, but rather that he is involved and reveals himself in this event. In fact, God the Father manifests himself on the cross by his refusal to intervene with power and by his silence. By refusing to save his Son Jesus from death through some spectacular action, God the Father destroys the advantageous images we spontaneously entertain in his regard and he manifests his sovereign freedom in the total respect for our own. According to this approach, it is not possible that God abandon his Son to death without being affected in his very being. The cross is not only an affair between human beings and Jesus; it is an event whereby God the Father shows that He is a God of Love, a love that is completely free and gratuitous. The revelation of the true God is achieved on the cross.<sup>18</sup> To be sure, Christologies must speak of God's suffering with sobriety, must avoid a "dolorism" which could make us think that God is trying to make us pity his lot. God does not suffer the way we finite beings do:

When God suffers, he suffers in a divine way, that is to say that his suffering is the expression of freedom; God is not affected by it. He does not suffer like the creature from a lack of being; he suffers through and in his love, which is the super-abundance of his being.<sup>19</sup>

Contemporary Christologies have the merit of drawing attention to the novelty of God who reveals himself not only in the beauty of his creation, not only in the victories of his chosen people, but in the passion and death of Jesus. For the Christian, Jesus, especially Jesus crucified, is the definition of God. It is in the crucified One's presence that Jesus' word to Philip takes on its full meaning: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). The Christian discourse on God can no longer avoid the suffering of human beings and the cross of Jesus. We have here a revolution in the idea of God: "Either Jesus abandoned by God is the end of all theology, or it is the beginning of a theology and a specifically Christian existence that are both

critical and creative".<sup>20</sup> These orientations given to Christology are new and precious. They are often forgetting that the mission of Jesus is completely oriented by the revelation of the true God and the actualization of his salvation plan for man. The issue of God is no longer separable from the Jesus event. Even if the Christologies have benefited much from the schooling of biblical exegesis, they must not, however, enclose themselves in a hermeneutical task or in a systematization of conclusions of exegesis. They have the responsibility of pondering Jesus Christ in the totality of his historical, anthropological and cosmic dimensions and to open themselves to the mystery of the Trinitarian God, for the Jesus of the New Testament does not take the place of God but shows him to us and leads us to him. The more we welcome the God Jesus is showing to us, the more we will grasp the divinity of his Envoy. The divinity of Jesus is not a doubling of the divinity of God the Father, nor its substitution, but communion with him. Jesus is the whole of divinity as received. He has his being from God the Father and exists only from him. That is precisely what the title of Son suggests.

#### **IV. The Saving Death of the Crucified One on Golgotha**

After having paid much attention to the resurrection, contemporary Christologies take care not to establish a gap between the death of Jesus and his resurrection. They hold on to the two poles of the pascal mystery and they do not want salvation to be based only on one of them. Christologies are sensitive to the malaise felt by our contemporaries in regard to theological interpretations of Jesus' death that employ concepts and images which refer to no experience or reality of our day and which can even contribute to distorting the face of God. A whole vocabulary inherited from a long theological and liturgical tradition is called into question and sometimes rejected: sacrifice, expiation, substitution, satisfaction, redemption. The preference now is to speak of liberation, reconciliation, a life given, radical fidelity, revelation, solidarity.<sup>21</sup> We must acknowledge that all theologies, ancient as well as new, strive to grasp and to express the saving significance of the death of Jesus that is attested to by the Christian faith.

Contemporary Christologies insist on situating the death of Jesus as being in continuity with his life understood as an "existence for", or a life for others. Thus, one avoids presenting the death of Jesus seen as sacrifice demanded by God for the salvation of mankind; rather, one sees therein a consequence of his concrete commitment in our history in establishing the Kingdom. His death is situated in the logic of his life and in solidarity with the suffering and death of the innocent and vanquished people of history. Giving one's life for others is the sign of supreme love, but only in the case where every other solution is concretely impossible. God did not destine Jesus to the cross, for God, according to Leviticus (18:21; 20:1-5) abhors human sacrifice. It is men who killed Jesus. In a world dominated by the powers of evil, any commitment for justice and freedom can lead to a violent death. But in spite of the human malice and even the refusal of God's Kingdom, Jesus freely makes of his death the ultimate testimony of his fidelity to God and of his love for human beings. His death is in line with his fundamental option, for he had refused to enter into the messianic ideologies of the people and religious authorities of his time. And God's silence at the hour of his death on the cross responds to the idea of a God who respects human freedom and who does not use constraining power, even against those who want the death of his Messiah.

The death of Jesus has received a number of interpretations in theology and in preaching. While they do close the road to mythic conceptions, the writings of the New Testament do not impose one sole normative model of interpreting this death. We can note that the theologies of Jesus' death developed in the course of centuries from categories or concepts which were generally admitted in mankind's tradition and in the daily relations between human persons. And so we have theologies elaborated on the basis of juridical categories: punishment, expiation, satisfaction, substitution. Other explanations favour ritual categories: sacrifice, victime, altar, priest. They are also theologies which underline merit, the ransom to be paid, victory over the powers of evil. All these theologies, which must be situated within their context, aim to show that the death of Jesus has an impact on us and concerns our salvation. The theologies of



Today, however, shy away from these explanations and invite us not to accept them without asking whether the idea of God and of human responsibility that they imply are compatible with the whole of the Christian message.

Recent Christologies explain the meaning of Jesus' death from the facts and circumstances that concretely characterize it. It is a matter of the death of this Jesus who proclaimed the Kingdom, healed lepers, ate with sinners. These Christologies strive to see how Jesus understood his own death by studying the last supper of Jesus with his disciples, a ritual prophetic meal during which he revealed to them the fruitful meaning of his imminent death. They attentively study the grounds for his condemnation presented at his trial, where the Roman authorities, under pressure from the Jewish authorities, condemn Jesus to be crucified, a penalty ordinarily reserved to foreigners and slaves. These Christologies stress Jesus pardoning his executioners. By pardoning them, Jesus gives witness that he refuses to be part of the usual practice whereby violence leads to more violence. Thus he gives witness to God's pardon which is already the victory over sin which leads to death. These Christologies stop at the cry of Jesus, which is interpreted as a cry of confidence or faith in God who is apparently absent.

In present-day theology we take care not to affirm that Jesus saved us by his passion and death as though it is to be understood that suffering has a redemptive value in itself. We refuse a theology that makes an apologia of suffering and which claims that God wants suffering for the expiation of sin. Without explaining the reason for suffering, Jesus nevertheless freely placed himself in solidarity with all human suffering and wanted to share with us the experience of being betrayed, rejected, of the darkness of faith and of death itself. In Jesus, God came to dwell in our suffering to which he is not a stranger. The present trend in Christologies is to see the death of Jesus as the tangible expression of his love, of his obedience and of the total giving of self in a well-determined social, political and religious context. Thus Jesus' death is the end result of a whole life that is given, which God approves by the resurrection. His death is the passage to Easter, or the coming to birth of a new life. Therefore it is not a suffering which comes from punishment for the expiation of men's sins, but rather the painful explosion, like that of giving birth, of the human limitations of the present situation, that allows a new world to be born (cf. Jn 16:21). With Jesus, suffering and death remain; but until he came they had an unknown face and now they can have a meaning for us. For those who follow after Jesus, they are the expression of love for their neighbour and of their faith in God.<sup>22</sup>

We cannot avoid speaking of the death of Jesus as a sacrifice, even though this notion is often contested in contemporary theology because in the mentality of many it implies violence. The theology of sacrifice of the cross, however, is well rooted in the New Testament and also in the theological and liturgical tradition. Jesus is the Lamb of God, the spotless Victim, the only High Priest. The theology of sacrifice, well expressed in the letter to the Hebrews, is a language which allows us to affirm that in the death of Jesus access to God, to which all sacrifices tended, was perfectly achieved. In Jesus, the idea of sacrifice is transformed. It is no longer a matter of immolating a victim and of blood shed which makes God favorable to us, but the offering of a life given to the end out of love. When current Christologies speak of the death of Jesus as a sacrifice, they take care to clarify this notion, even to exorcise it, and to show how it is transformed by him who out of love for God and mankind gave his life.

Recent theologies on the death of Jesus have an impact on Christian activity and on the expression of piety by mobilizing believers in the service of those conquered by history, the oppressed and victims of every form of injustice. Here we recognize the inspiration of the various theologies of liberation. We can also note the mentality change of many Christians. Christians of the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries expressed their faith in devotions and vocations of reparation, whereas today a good number of them are taken up with joining their suffering brothers and sisters in the struggle for justice and therein they sense that they are in communion, though them, with Christ who is suffering in them. This new form of faith expression shows that Christianity is in the process of swinging from a sacrificial vision of religion to a vision that is more and more an ethical one.<sup>23</sup>

## V. Jesus, the One and Only Saviour of All Mankind

How can the unique history of Jesus have a universal significance? Is Jesus one saviour among others? Rarer are the works of Christology which were concerned, explicitly and with some elaboration, to situate the mystery of Christ in the broader context of the religious traditions of mankind. Studies on the theology of the world religions and of inter-religious dialogue have recognized the importance of Christological issues.<sup>24</sup> From now on, Christology cannot escape the issue of the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ.

By way of example, let us see briefly how the question of the universality of salvation in Jesus Christ is posed today in the context of the theology of the world religions. R. Pannakar<sup>25</sup> acknowledges that Christ, the universal Logos, became incarnate in Jesus. But he refuses to accept this incarnation as unique, definitive and normative. No historical incarnation can be considered as the final expression of the universal Christ. Christians, while confessing Jesus as the Christ, ought to recognize that this same universal Christ also reveals himself and is incarnate in other historical figures and receives other names: Rama, Krishna, Isvara, Pasrusa. In other words, the reality of the universal Christ, according to Pannakar, cannot be attributed to Jesus of Nazareth only. As for Paul Kittner, he certainly admits the revealing and saving presence of God in Jesus who is the Christ, but he states that "the totality of Christ is not Jesus and cannot be contained in him nor be limited to him".<sup>26</sup> To achieve an authentic dialogue between religions, he calls into question the Christological base of Christianity's universal claims and he promotes a theocentrism or an opening to the universal God in various particular revelations, one of which is Jesus of Nazareth.

In order to articulate the question of the uniqueness and the universality of Christ, theologians have elaborated the "theory of fulfillment".<sup>27</sup> This theory holds that the religions, in the cultures and different geographical zones of the world, express an innate aspiration of the human being to union with the divine. Jesus Christ and Christianity are presented as God's response to the human quest for the divine and for the transcendent. According to this approach, the religions can be considered as a preparation or as pedagogues to the Jesus Christ event wherein they find their fulfillment. But since Jesus Christ and the promulgation of the Gospel, they are abrogated as religions, for otherwise they would be voices parallel to Christianity.

The question of the uniqueness and universality of Christ is broached differently by the theologies of the presence of Christ in these religions.<sup>28</sup> According to this approach, the religions are not purely human and they are in some way marked by the saving grace of God, and thus they play an effective role in the order of salvation. These theologies stress that the auto-communication of God is accomplished in a singular way in the one and only Jesus and that it becomes universal through the Spirit. The same mystery of Jesus Christ is present and acting in the Church and in the religions. In the Church, the mystery is present in an open and explicit way, whereas in the religions it is present in a hidden, implicit and anonymous way. The mystery of salvation is one and the same for all mankind: Jesus Christ, the personal presence of God. Through the Spirit, he becomes present in the heart of each human being and also in the religions which are in some way legitimate ways of salvation, because they are related to the Christ mystery.

Christologies can no longer avoid the question of the uniqueness and universality of salvation in Jesus Christ. We can assert that a Christian theology of religions is a Christology, because "Christian Christocentrism is able to integrate, in their differences, all religious experiences in a theology that is truly catholic, that is to say, inclusive and universal".<sup>29</sup> Without forgetting the historical and singular character of Jesus, the Christologies have to develop a pneumatology that shows that the work of Jesus Christ becomes universal through the Spirit in the Church and also in the world.

## Conclusion

Our Constitutions and Rules and General Chapters affirm the missionary identity of our Congregation. This mission consists first of all in making Jesus Christ known: "Our principal service in the Church is to proclaim Christ and his Kingdom to the most abandoned" (C 5). This service is to be performed by all Oblates, priests and brothers: "We will spare no effort to awaken or reawaken the faith in the people to whom we are sent and we will help them to discover 'who Christ is'"(C 7). Bishop de Mazenod and the Oblate tradition have underlined the role of the cross in the heart of our mission. Our Constitutions have the courage to make more precise the object of our preaching: "Like the Apostle Paul, we 'preach Christ and him crucified'". But Jesus is no longer closed in the past, even less in his death, for the power of the resurrection is at work in those who follow his passion (cf. C 4) and his call and presence among the Oblates today "bind them together in charity" (C 3). In order to proclaim the Gospel and to be Christ's co-workers, Oblates "strive to reproduce in themselves the pattern of his life" (C 2).

Evangelization requires a serious knowledge of Today's world and the different cultures, but also of Christ. Without being called to commit ourselves full-time to theological research, we ought at least to know the broad orientations of current Christologies and to draw profit from what they have achieved. We proclaim Jesus Christ to a world which has intellectual requirements other than those of the past. Our world has entered modernity which is marked by a critical spirit, a need for verification, an awareness of the irreversible distance of the present from the past and by the quest for the existential in preference to the metaphysical. Now, contemporary Christologies strive to take modernity into account by taking care to rejoin in a critical manner the Jesus of History who is acknowledge to be the Messiah and the Son of God by the Church. They caution us in our way of speaking of Jesus, his works and above all of his death and resurrection, so that an idea of God that is in conformity to the Gospel message may emerge. We note that the West, especially Europe, no longer has a monopoly of the theological discourse in the Church and we can learn a great deal from the contextual Christologies that are being elaborated in Latin America, Asia and Africa. The cultures of these continents make it possible for theologians to grasp and express new aspects of the face of Christ. We need no less than this diversity in expressions of faith and Christologies to become aware of the full richness of the mystery of the risen Christ.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, theology cannot be satisfied with abstract and out-of-time debate about Christ. Among other questions, it must answer this one:

Who is Christ really for the poor of the Third World, for the masses of 'useless' men and women in the world of science and technology, for all those innocent people who die because of armaments which make some richer in our own countries, for Nature that our feverish development is destroying?

Though it expresses itself in the category of science, Christology is nevertheless a discourse that is born and takes its justification and consistency from the confession of faith of Christian communities. Living faith is there where men and women recognize and confess that Jesus is Messiah and Lord. It is not a simple saying so, but also something lived and put into practice. Christology presupposes the confession of faith and also "Christopraxis"<sup>31</sup>, that is to say, concrete commitment in the following of Jesus. Knowing Jesus does not mean simply learning and repeating the Christological dogmas, but living concretely in his following and going to the poor, the sick, and to those who are socially useless and oppressed. By confessing that Jesus is Messiah and Lord, Christian communities involve themselves in an activity inspired by the Gospel. They do not limit themselves to transmitting a historical statement about Jesus by repeating the apostolic testimonies; on the contrary, they acknowledge and proclaim in the present time that Jesus is actually alive and makes them live. To know Jesus and to elaborate Christologies, theologians cannot limit themselves to the books of our well-stocked libraries; they have to insert themselves into communities where persons have chosen to walk in the following of Jesus and to live fully from his Gospel in the world of today. In their own way, Oblate communities across the world are missionaries and give their answer to Jesus' question: "Who am I for you?", by giving the simple and always new answer of the faith as well as the reflected and articulated answer of a Christology.

Normand Provencher, o.m.i.

## Notes:

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- 1 Oblate CC & RR: Preface.
- 2 E. POULAT, "La Galaxie de Jésus", Paris, Éditions de l'Atelier/ Éditions Ouvrières, 1994.
- 3 J. MOINGT, «L'homme qui venait de Dieu», Paris, Cerf, 1993, p. 221-281. Moingt's book is one of the recent great studies about Jesus. It is an imposing work (725 pages) dense in content.
- 4 *The Five Gospels. The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus. What did Jesus really Say?*, New-York, A Polebridge Press Book, MacMillan Publ. Co., 1993.
- 5 J. D. CROSSAN, *The Historical Jesus: The life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, San Francisco, Harper, 1991; IDEM, *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*, San Francisco, Harper. On the "Jesus Seminar", see J. P. MICHAUD, "Jésus a-t-il prononcé les paroles que les évangiles lui prêtent?", in *Église Canadienne*, 27(1994), p. 347-354.
- 6 *L'homme qui devient Dieu*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1988; IDEM, *Les sources*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1989.
- 7 *La dernière tentation* of the director Martin Scorsese in 1988; *Jésus de Montréal* of Denys Arcand in 1989. On the small screen one can see *L'évangile selon saint Matthieu* of Pasolini, a film of 1965, and *Jésus de Nazareth* of Zeffirelli.
- 8 See J. VERNETTE, *Jésus dans la nouvelle religiosité*, (Coll. Jésus et Jésus-Christ, 29), Paris, Desclée, 1987; R. BERGERON, "Jésus et le Christ. Lecture esotérique de Jésus", in *Jésus: Christ universel?*, coll. Héritage et projet, 44, Montréal, Fides, 1990, p. 239-262.
- 9 See R. MARLE, "Chalcédoine réinterprété" in *Recherches de science religieuse*, 65, 1977, p. 15-44; B. SESBOUE, "Le procès contemporain de Chalcédoine. Bilan et perspectives", *Ibidem*, p. 45-80.
- 10 K. RAHNER, "Problèmes actuels de christologie" in *Écrits théologiques*, Paris, Declée de Brouwer, 1959, p. 117.
- 11 Interest in the Jesus of history is still current today, as is evident in the imposing work of John P. MEIER, *A Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, New-York, Doubleday, vol. I, 1991, 484 p. and vol. II, 1994, 1118 p.
- 12 Regarding the place of the resurrection in Christologie, see J. DORE, "La résurrection du Christ à l'épreuve du discours théologique" in *Recherches de science religieuse*, 65, 1977, p. 279-304; A. GESCHE, "La résurrection de Jésus dans la théologie dogmatique" in *Revue théologique de Louvain*, 1, 1971, p. 257-274.
- 13 Here we must mention the work of F. X. DURWELL, *La résurrection de Jésus, mystère de salut*, Le Puy, Mappus, 1950, now in its 11<sup>th</sup> edition.
- 14 Most influential among Catholics was the work of X. LEON-DUFOUR, *Résurrection et message pascal*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1971. I have counted more than 700 studies on the resurrection of Jesus published during these last 30 years.
- 15 A work of a protestant theologian that has greatly influenced Catholic theologians is W. PENNENBERG, *Esquisse d'une christologie*, Paris, Cerf, 1971.
- 16 See K. KASPER, *Le Dieu des chrétiens*, Paris, Cerf, 1985.
- 17 See Ch. DUQUOC, *Dieu différent. Essai sur le symbolique trinitaire*, Paris, Cerf, 1977.
- 18 See L. MOLTMANN, *Le Dieu crucifié*, Paris, Cerf/Mame, 1972; J. MOINGT, "Montre-nous le Père. La question de Dieu en christologie", in *Recherches de science religieuse*, 65/2, 1977, p. 305-337; IDEM, "L'homme qui venait de Dieu", p. 545-551, 580-621.
- 19 W. KASPER, *Le Dieu des chrétiens*, Paris, Cerf, 1985, p. 287.
- 20 J. MOLTMANN, *Le Dieu crucifié*, p. 10-11.
- 21 See the clear and well-documented work of B. SESBOUE, "Jésus-Christ l'unique Médiateur. Essai sur la rédemption et le salut", coll. Jésus et Jésus-Christ, 33, t. I, *Problématique et relecture doctrinale*, Paris, Desclée, 1988.
- 22 See F. VARONNE, *Ce Dieu censé aimer la souffrance*, Paris, Cerf, 1984. This theological essay is somewhat partial but the problem it poses and its language are most actual and clear.
- 23 See J. MOINGT, "Christologie et modernité", in *Christianisme et modernité*, Paris, Cerf, 1990, p. 186-187.

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- 24 See J. DUPUIS, "Jésus-Christ à la rencontre des religions" (Coll *Jésus et Jésus-Christ*, 39), Paris, Desclée, 1989.
- 25 R. PANNAKAR, *Le Christ et l'hindouisme: une présence cachée*, Paris, Centurion, 1972; *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism. Toward an Ecumenical Christophany*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1981.
- 26 P. KNITTER, "Le christianisme, religion vraie et absolue?" in *Concilium*, no. 156, 1980, p. 38; see *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1985, p. 171-204.
- 27 This position is held, with different emphases, by J. DANIELOU, H. de LUBAC, Hans URS VON BALTHASAR. It is also the teaching of Paul VI in "Evangelii nuntiandi", no. 53.
- 28 Let us mention K. RAHNER, *Traité fondamental de la foi. Introduction au concept du Christianisme*, Paris, Centurion, 1983, p. 348-355; H. R. SCHLETTE, *Pour une théologie des religions*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1971; G. D'COSTA *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986.
- 29 J. DUPUIS, "Jésus-Christ à la rencontre des religions", p. 322. See J. B. COBB, "Toward a Christocentric Theology", in L. SWIDLER (ed.), *Toward a Universal Theology of Religions*, New-York, Orbis Books, 1987, p. 86-100.
- 30 I deliberately mention here the work of an Oblate colleague, A. PEELMAN, "Le Christ est amérindien", a theological reflection on the inculturation of Christ among the Amerindians of Canada. Outremont, Novalis, 1992.
- 31 I borrow this expression from J. MOLTMANN, *Jésus le messie de Dieu*, Paris, Cerf, 1993, p. 73.

# Jesus in the Oblate Constitutions and Rules

## Introduction

1. In his commentary on the 1982 CC&RR, Father Fernand Jetté writes: "Re-reading the entire text with only one idea in mind is, in fact, an excellent means to a deeper knowledge and assimilation of the text, especially if such effort is made in recollection and prayer" (p.18)

Our project is such a reading, our "one idea" being the theme "Jesus in the Oblate Constitutions and Rules". Our intention is not to make a spiritual commentary but a working paper that will "open up" the material for the attentions of the Congress. We intend to begin the study of our theme with an analysis of our present CCRR. But we ask first: What kind of a place can Jesus be given in our Constitutions? What does it mean, e.g. that in the 1982 Book of the Rule, the two pages of "Contents" (pp. 3-4 in the English edition) make no mention at all of Jesus? Why is that?

a. Jesus is not a "building block" to be inserted into our construction: we build our house on the rock that is Christ. In other words, we do not constitute Christ in relationship to us in our CCRR: we constitute commitments for ourselves in him, in response to his call or invitation. Jesus constitutes our being as Oblates at a different and deeper level.

b. The call or invitation itself we cannot "constitute", we can only describe it in a constitutional form. The description may take different forms: historical, doctrinal, exhortatory, explanatory... For this reason Constitutions contain within themselves a diversity of literary forms, corresponding to these differences. But all of these forms are subsidiary to the constitutive form, which is juridical in its widest sense, i.e. creative of relationships of interpersonal commitment. They are subsidiary, not in the sense of being less important, but because their *raison d'être* in the Constitution is to "justify" the constitutional statements.

c. Thus in the book of the Rule we will find the constitution of Oblate commitments. We will also find constitutional descriptions of relations of a wider kind, involving the Divine Persons, the Church, Mary, the world. In line with our topic, our focus is on those descriptions that involve Jesus.

2. This, then, is why the "contents" of the Rule make no mention of Jesus: for the nature of the Book is to constitute Oblate commitments, and the best way to structure them, and therefore the "contents" is according to their Oblate function, not according to the underlying basis of the commitments or the material content of the commitments, or whatever.

3. We have therefore three parts: the Oblate Charism, (Oblate) Formation, (Oblate) Organization. Jesus enters into the articles for a variety of reasons.

a. The fundamental Oblate commitment is to preach Christ, especially to the poor. Jesus appears in the formulation of this commitment and may appear too in the other commitments to which it gives rise, especially those arising out of the duty of living the Gospel which they are to preach (cf. La Rochelle, "Spiritualité moderne et les Missionnaires Oblats" in *Études Oblates*, 26 (1967), p. 24). This is chiefly Part I, chapters 1 and 2.

b. As a second fundamental commitment, Oblates are called to this mission by Christ as his cooperators, co-workers, and companions. Jesus appears in the formulation of this commitment too and likewise in the subsidiary commitments which arise out of the consequent duty to encounter him, speak with him, imitate and follow him. Again, this is chiefly Part I, chapters 1 and 2.

c. The duty of preparing oneself for these works gives rise to formation commitments in Part II, in which again Jesus may appear since his mission is the goal of formation given and received.

d. The duty of being "one heart and soul" the original motivation of the Rule, gives rise to organizational commitments in Part III, in which again Jesus may appear for the same reasons.

e. Could one have a Rule with a chapter on "Jesus and the Oblates"? Clearly one could, but it would have to be clearly descriptive rather than constitutive: more like a kind of Preface perhaps!

4. Canonically the only persons who can be committed in these relationships constituted in the Rule are Oblates, as the Constitutions are an Oblate document. Though the Church confers public status on them, they are essentially inter-Oblate commitments. In virtue however of his consecration by God through his religious profession each Oblate's commitments to his brothers takes on a sacred character.

5. Where does the knowledge of Christ's call, invitation, activity, come from? It was first discerned by the Founder, preserved as a living tradition in the Institute, and enshrined in successive editions of the Rule. This discernment by the Founder is one of his special gifts as a founder. We have already seen Eugene coming into this knowledge and translating it into actions and words. The roots then of the 1982 CRR reach back to those times: to Eugene's inspiration of 1815, his setting-up of the Missionaries of Provence in 1816, his writing of the 1818 Rule which we have already examined as one of his writings.

6. We begin then with as full as possible an account of how Jesus is described in the book of the 1982 CRR, after which we set out what Oblate commitments centered on Christ are constituted in the Constitutions on the basis of these descriptions. This will be the first of our three-fold task. (For the second and third parts, see I, D and X, A below).

## I. Analysis of the 1982 Constitutions and Rules

A. Throughout the book, Jesus is described by various titles: Saviour, Lord, Son, Christ, divine Shepherd. For Specific references, cf. *Select Index*, p. 145 ff.

### 1. Jesus' missionary life on earth is described

In the Foreword: Jesus is sent by the Father at the appointed time, and filled with the Spirit "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind news sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour" (Lk 4:18-19). He called men to become disciples to share in his mission.

In the Preface: Jesus "purchased" the Church as "his glorious inheritance at the cost of his own blood". When "he undertook to convert the world",

he chose a number of apostles and disciples whom he himself trained in piety, and he filled them with his Spirit. These men he sent forth, once they had been schooled in his teaching, to conquer the world which, before long, was to bow to his holy rule.

In the inter-leaved texts:

- God, in Christ, reconciled the world to himself (p. 24)
- He chose to be born in a stable and to die upon a cross, after having lived deprived of everything, for he was without the small coin needed to pay Caesar's tribute, and did not even have a place to rest his head (p. 30).

In the Constitutions:

- C 2: The pattern of his life is described: his gift of himself to the Father in obedience even unto death, and dedication to God's people in unselfish love.

- C 3: he grouped the Twelve around him to be his companions and to be sent out as his messengers.

- C 4: he was crucified; he redeemed the world with his blood.

- C 6: he prayed for the unity of Christians that all may believe that the Father sent him.

- C 10: Mary totally consecrated herself to his Person and work as a lowly handmaid; he was received by Mary to be shared with all the world.

- C 12: he was chaste and poor, and he redeemed mankind by his obedience.

- C 19: he became poor for our sake.

- C 24: his food was "to do the will of him who sent him". He became "obedient unto death, even death on the cross.

- C 29: he "always loved those who were his own in the world" and to the very end "he showed how perfect his love was".

- C 45: he personally formed the disciples he had chosen, initiating them into the mystery of the Kingdom of God. As a preparation for their mission he had them share in his ministry; to confirm their zeal he sent them his Spirit.

- C 73: he washed his disciples' feet.

In the Rules: Nothing is found on this theme.

## **2. Jesus is seen in his risen Life**

In the Preface: the Church is his beloved Spouse (p. 9).

In the inter-leaved texts:

- he is the Founder (p. 14, 40).

- he entrusts us with the word of reconciliation (p. 24)

- he is the divine Shepherd (p. 76)

In the Constitutions:

- he gives pastors to his people: C 6.

- he will come in the fullness of his justice: C 11.

- the Church is his Spouse and has a covenant with him: CC 15, 33.

- Mary is the faithful handmaid of the Lord: C 36.

- superiors are his stewards: C 74

- he accomplishes the work of salvation through us: C 105.

## **3. His present-day call is described**

In the foreward: in the Church he continues to call men to follow him (p. 7)

In the Preface: God has inspired some priests with the desire to form themselves into a Society in order to work more effectively for the salvation of souls and for their own sanctification (p. 13).

In the Constitutions:

- the Oblate call is heard within the Church through people's need for salvation: C 1.

- Jesus never ceases to call people to follow him and to proclaim the Kingdom: C 52.



#### **4. Jesus' specific invitation to Oblates is described**

In the Preface: to work effectively for the salvation of souls and for their own sanctification (p. 13).

In the inter-leaved texts:

- to be the Saviour's co-workers, the co-redeemers of mankind (p. 14).
- to preach Jesus Christ and him crucified (p. 16).
- to be entrusted with the word of reconciliation (p. 24).
- to follow in the footsteps of those first Christians (p. 30).
- to imitate in everything the example of our Lord Jesus Christ (p. 40).
- to become other Christs (p. 40).
- to have an ardent desire for his own perfection, and to be enflamed with love for our Lord Jesus Christ and his Church and a burning zeal for the salvation of souls (p. 54).
- to serve and comfort their Mother (the Church) by their labours and good example (p. 72).
- to walk in the footsteps of the divine Shepherd, feed with watchful and constant care the sheep that have been led back to him (p. 76).
- to unceasingly undertake, under the aegis of our most loving Mother, even more important and effective works for the greater glory of God and for the salvation of souls. Mindful of these words (which marvelously sum up entire Rule), "all united in the bonds of the most intimate charity under the direction of the superiors" may they form but one heart and one soul (p. 141).

In the Constitutions:

- to come together as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate: C 1.
- to follow him and to share in his mission through word and work: C 1.
- to embrace chastity: C 14.
- to practice forms of voluntary penance, including acceptance of the various trials of ministry and the daily demands of community life: C 23.
- to follow in the Apostles' footsteps: C 45.
- from the depths of the Saviour's mystery, his Spirits moves them to dedicate themselves to the evangelization of the poor: C 45.
- the Saviour wishes to draw all hearts to himself and sends us out as his co-workers: C 63.
- by the gift of the priesthood he share with Oblate priests in a unique way his own ministry of priest, prophet and shepherd: C 66

#### **5. His presences today are described: each one is an invitation to find him there**

In the inter-leaved texts:

- by the ministers of the Gospel bearing about in their own bodies the death sufferings of Jesus (p. 16).
- in the charity of Christ abiding in them (p. 46).

In the Constitutions:

- in each act in life: C 31.

- the Eucharist: CC 33, 56.
- silent prayer: C 33
- examination of conscience: C 33.
- sacrament of reconciliation: C 33.
- sacred scripture: CC 23, 56.
- community: C 37.
- by the formative activity of the Spirit of Jesus: C 45.
- other persons and events: C 56.

In the Rules:

- new forms of pastoral and community prayer: R 20.
- in the lives of those who toil, especially among the working poor: R 65.

## **6. His formative activity is described**

In the Foreword: - he called men to become disciples (p. 7)

In the Preface: - he chose a number of apostles and disciples whom he himself trained in piety and he filled them with his Spirit: (p. 11).

In the inter-leaved texts:

- if you wish to be perfect, says our Lord, sell what you have: (p. 30).
- the image of the crucified Lord... will be a perpetual reminder to the missionaries themselves of the humility, patience, charity, modesty and of all the other virtues with which they are to carry out their most holy and sublime ministry: (p. 68).

In the Constitutions:

- his call and presence among us today binds us together in charity and obedience to create anew in our own lives the Apostles' unity with him and their common mission in his Spirit: C 3.

- he brings hope to the people: CC 5, 10.
- he gives pastors to his people: C 6.
- his presence is liberating and a new world is born in his resurrection: C 9.
- as God's life-giving Word, he seeks to transform mankind, to build his People: C 68.
- he is the source and model of authority in the Church: C 73.
- superiors are his stewards: C 74.
- he sends his Spirit to form Christ in those who endeavor to follow in the Apostles' footsteps: C 45.

**B.** We turn to the inter-personal Oblate commitments centered on Christ that are constituted on the basis of these descriptions. Here we confine ourselves to the Constitutions proper and to the Rules: the latter yield but little, however. We may note that these commitments too are "illustrated" by the other parts of the text, especially the Preface, but see too the inter-leaved texts on p. 14, 16, 20, 24, 30, 36, 40, etc. In fact, this may be seen as their principal function in the Book of the Rule.

### **1. Oblates are given titles or descriptions that are constitutive of commitments:**

- disciples, ready to leave everything: C 2.
- servants of all by obedience: C 25.

- pilgrims, walking with Jesus in faith, hope and love: C 31.
- Oblates who dedicate their life to making visible the Father's love in Jesus: they entrust their fidelity to Christ, their Oblation permeates all aspects and activities of their daily life: CC 59, 62, 64, 65.

- men of God, missionaries rooted in Christ: C 65.

## **2. Ways of following him are constituted**

- coming together in apostolic communities of priests and Brothers, united to God by their vows of religion: C 1.

- consecration to God by living the evangelical counsels and taking the vows of chastity, poverty, obedience, perseverance, for the sake of the mission: CC 12-30.

## **3. Ways of cooperating with him are constituted**

- we commit ourselves principally to evangelizing the poor: C 1

## **4. Ways of imitating him are constituted**

- we commit ourselves principally to evangelize the poor: C 1.
- we strive to reproduce in ourselves the pattern of his life: C 2.

## **5. Ways of meeting him are constituted**

- apostolic community: C 3.
- making him the principle of unity in our life: C 31.
- we seek his presence in the hearts of the people and in the events of daily life as well as in the Word of God, in the sacraments and in prayer: CC 31, 56.
- missionary prayer in the Spirit: C 32.
- we will seek the Lord often in his sacramental (Eucharistic) presence: CC 33, 56.
- studying and "listening" to Scripture: CC 33, 56.
- frequent recourse to the sacrament of reconciliation: C 33.
- praying and contemplating with Mary, especially the rosary: C 36.
- the guidance of the Holy Spirit: C 36.

## **6. Ways of conceiving and implementing mission are constituted**

- the cross is central: by preaching Christ crucified, by living it, by seeing the world through its optic: C 4.

- our principal service in the Church is to proclaim Christ and his Kingdom to the most abandoned, etc.: CC 5, 45.

- we fulfill our mission in communion with Christ-given pastors: C 6.

- for the sake of the mission, we work for Church unity: C 6.

- we are united with those who, without acknowledging Christ as Lord, nevertheless love what he loves: C 6.

- We proclaim "who Christ is" through various forms of witness and ministry, but especially through proclaiming the Word of God which finds its fulfillment in the celebration of the sacraments and in service to others: C 7.

- our missionary goal is to establish Christian communities and Churches, etc.: C 7; cf. R 3.

- with daring, humility and trust, we seek out new ways for the Word of God to reach

people's hearts: C 8.

- We have a prophetic mission to announce the liberating presence of Jesus Christ and the new world born in his resurrection: CC 9, 20, 25.

- our mission is to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to seek it before all else. We fulfill this mission in communities that are a sign that Jesus God is everything for us: C 11.

- by our choice of celibacy, we give witness to the depth of the Church's covenant with Christ: C 15.

- our celibacy is also a sign of the perfect charity which will be revealed only in the Kingdom: C 15.

- our perseverance is a sign of Christ's fidelity to the Father: C 29.

- the Eucharist is at the heart of our life and action, we offer ourselves with Jesus the Saviour: C 33.

- we pray the breviary, the prayer of the Spouse of Christ: C 33.

- by Brother's technical, professional or pastoral service: R 3.

### **7. Ways of formation are constituted**

- we are drawn to know him more deeply, to identify with him, to let him live in us: C 2.

- growing in faith, hope and charity, we commit ourselves to be a leaven of the Beatitudes at the heart of the world: C 11.

- learning from the poor, with whom we enter into closer communion through our choice of poverty: C 20.

- in the celebration of the Eucharist we are renewed in the mystery of our cooperation with him, drawing the bonds of our apostolic community ever closer and opening the horizons of our zeal to all the world: C 33.

- we come to a deeper knowledge of the Saviour through Bible study and meditation: C 33.

- in the prolonged silent prayer we make each day let ourselves be moulded by the Lord and find in him the inspiration of our conduct: C 33.

- times of renewal: C 35.

- in apostolic community, to grow in unity of heart and mind: C 37.

- inspired by the example of Mary, we live in creative and ongoing fidelity our personal commitment to Jesus Christ: C 46.

- in initial formation, gradual development of those whom Jesus calls to total discipleship in the Congregation, until they are mature religious, capable of carrying on the Oblate mission: C 50.

- accompaniment in first formation: C 51.

- discernment: C 55.

- development of personal relationship to Jesus: C 56.

- gradual entry into the mystery of salvation through liturgy and prayer: C 56.

- ongoing formation: CC 68-70.

- the goal of spiritual formation is maturing faith on a personal decision for Christ: R 52.

### **7. Ways of government are constituted**

- in the superior we will see a sign of our unity in Christ Jesus and of the Lord's loving

and guiding presence in our midst: CC 26, 80, 105.

- called to serve, not to be served: C 73.
- accountability as stewards of the Lord: C 74.

**C.** All of these commitments made in Christ are part of the Oblates' "contract" or "covenant". Evidently, there will be a hierarchy of importance among these commitments (see CIC 694-696 for one such hierarchy) but in principle all are commitments we make to one another through the Institute by our profession, and all depend on the fact of the call or invitation of Christ himself: to follow him, imitate him, cooperate with him, to be his companions, or on Christ's formative activity in our regard.

**D.** This, then, is the "state of the art" of Oblate constitutional writing on the theme of Jesus. How did we reach this point? What is the history behind this writing? This is the second part of our task.

**E.** To answer these questions we turn to the earliest editions of the Book of the Rule. As we do so we shall in effect be addressing two questions: how the need for new editions arises and how they have described the Founder's vision in respect of our theme.

## **II. Contextualization of the 1818 and 1826 Rules**

Every written document has to be contextualized if we are to avoid interpreting its provision in a fundamentalist way. The 1818 Rules is itself a contextualization of the Founder's inspiration. It answered the question: how are we missionaries to fulfill our mission in the changed conditions of expansion into another diocese? From the very first the Rule appears as a response to change.

In addition to the intuition of his charism, Eugene brought to the drafting of the 1818 Rules a number of time-conditioned factors.

**A.** The first of these was his Sulpician theological formation. This had its limitations as we have seen (Paper I, 4).

**B.** Secondly, linked with his theology is his Sulpician spirituality. Cosentino remarks that "the influence of Sulpician spirituality on Oblate spirituality was so profound that, at least in its beginnings, our Congregation knew no other" (COSENTINO, *Histoire de nos Règles*, Ottawa, 1955, vol. I, p. 168).

**1.** Apart from this influence, many other voices are heard in the Rule through the pen of the Founder: Cosentino lists them for us: Sts. Alphonse, Ignatius Loyola, Charles Borromeo, Philip Neri, Vincent de Paul, Augustine, Bernard, Ambrose, Gregory the Great, Jerome, Ignatius of Antioch, John Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, Leonard of Port Maurice, and also the writers Rodriguez and Picconius (COSENTINO, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 69-195). Of all these St. Alphonse is overwhelmingly the most important, as Eugene took and used as a precedent for the drafting of his Rule the 1791 Italian edition of the Redemptorist Rule, brought to him from Palermo at his request by his father in 1815, and thought to come from the hand of St. Alphonse. In his articles *Aux Sources de nos Règles (Études Oblates*, 25(1966), p. 231-249), Joseph Resle, o.m.i., shows that in fact there is little of St. Alphonse in this text! The whole structure of our Rule came from this source and the *ipsissima verba* of many of the articles. Clearly there is nothing sacrosanct about this structure, or these words. Cosentino also lists Eugene's explicit Scripture citations, four in number: 1 Tim 4:16; 2 Cor 5:18-19; Luke 14:23; Matt 19:21 (*op. cit.*, p. 197). Cosentino also finds six implicit citations of Scripture in the text (*op. cit.* p 198-299).

**2.** The insistence on the imitation of Christ is in line with Sulpician spirituality. Yet the whole insistence on this imitation cannot be attributed to St. Sulpice: thus e.g. the wording of the first article of the Rule is taken verbatim from the Redemptorist Rule. Nor can we forget Eugene's Ignatian retreats. In the last analysis it is the Founder's own inspiration that gives us the

fundamental image of his missionaries as a group following in Christ's footsteps with the Apostles. What comes from St. Sulpice is rather a particular style of following Christ, and it is more implicit than explicit in the founder's thought. It cannot be seen as normative for Oblates.

**C.** Thirdly, he brought to his task his two years' experience of missions and community life in the Society of Missionaries of Provence. While not dampening his zeal, these years brought home to Eugene the difficulties involved in leading men to follow the path of perfection and this preoccupation contributes much to the spirit and content of some parts of the Rule that are most personal to Eugene: the Nota Bene at the end of Chapter One of Part One, the section on "other Principal Observances" and the requisites for candidacy. There is thus a strong underlining of the call to perfection inherent in membership, of that note in our charism that calls us to follow the Lord and his Twelve Apostles, not only in their preaching, but also in their holy way of life. Also time-conditioned was the scope of the Society's mission and its style of mission. The Society was tiny in size and worked wholly in the context of re-evangelizing a few dioceses in southern France. Its style of mission, written into the Rule, in all its details, was wholly adapted to that religious, sociological and cultural context, that kind of missionary work.

**D.** Fourthly, the Rule itself was written under great pressure of time, in the space of 13 days. Some things get overlooked. Much is assumed. Many of its provisions would have been more at home in directories.

**E.** What emerges then from these considerations is that the 1818 Rule, like most human things, carried its pressure in an earthen vessel and would be subject to revision. It did in fact experience revision in its first decade, "the period of manuscripts" as it was called by Father Sion (OMI DOCUMENTATION, 93/80, p. 2), culminating in the re-writing done for papal approbation. Thus a second Nota Bene was added by Eugene to respond to objections raised by his companions between 1819 and 1824 (cf. 1928 edition, art. 253).

**F.** These same considerations are valid too for the 1826 Rule. Here one has to enter a caveat: the revision of the Preface has never been countenanced, which points to the fact that sometimes the medium is very specially the message.

### **III. Analysis of the 1818 Rule**

With these "limitations", but with the immense potentiality of his charism, Eugene wrote his Rule. How did he write of Jesus? Again we must do our "positive" investigation, following the pattern we used for the 1982 Rule Book.

#### **A. How Jesus is described in the Rule**

**1. Jesus' titles:** Saviour, Jesus Christ, Our Lord, Founder, Son of God, the Bridegroom (in the Nota Bene).

#### **2. Jesus' missionary life on earth is described**

- he acquired the Church, his beautiful heritage, at the price of his blood (I, ch. 1, #3, NB).

- when he wanted to convert the world, he chose a certain number of apostles and disciples whom he formed in piety, filled with his spirit; and after schooling them in his own teaching and in the practice of all the virtues, he sent them out to conquer the world which, before long, they were to subject to his sacred laws (ibid.)

- he journeyed and experienced weariness going through the towns and villages announcing the Kingdom of God (I, ch. 2, #2, line 160).

- he reproached the Jews for honouring God with their lips while their hearts were far from him (I, ch. 3, #6, art. 4).

- he said: if you want to be perfect, sell what you have (II, ch. 1, #1).

- the virtue of chastity was very dear to him (ibid., #2).

**3. From his risen life:** - the church is his beautiful heritage and his dear Spouse (I ch. 1, #3, NB).

**4. His present-day call is described:**

- he gives priests the desire to come together in community to work more efficaciously for the salvation of souls and at their own sanctification (Foreword).

**B. Oblate Commitments**

**1. Titles given to members:** - cooperators with the Saviour, coredeemers of the human race (I ch. 1, #3, NB).

**2. Ways of imitating Jesus are constituted**

- applying themselves principally to preaching the divine Word to the poor (I ch. 1, #1, art. 1).

- supplying for absence of religious Orders (ibid., #2, art. 1).

- reforming the clergy (ibid., #3, art. 1).

- remedying the evils caused by the Revolution, employing the same means the Saviour used when he sought to convert the world (I ch. 3, #3, NB).

- missionaries going on foot to imitate and do honour to the journeys and weariness of Our Saviour and the Apostles when they journeyed through towns and villages to announce the Kingdom of God (I ch.2, #2, line 160f.).

- sharing as they journeyed on the virtues demonstrated by Our Lord (ibid. line 165ff.)

- practicing the spirit of poverty and observing chastity (II Ch. 1, #1).

- to the extent our feeble nature permits, imitating the example of Jesus in everything (II, ch. 1).

**3. Ways of meeting him are constituted**

- Eucharistic devotion of the missionaries (I, ch. 2, #2, lines 128-158, 182ff., 334-5).

- oblation before the Blessed Sacrament, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (III ch. 2, #3).

**4. Ways of mission are constituted**

- always under the authority of the Ordinaries ( I ch. 1, #1, art. 2.).

- provide spiritual help to the rural poor by missions, catechism, retreats or other spiritual exercises (ibid.).

- perform the duties both spiritual and ministerial of the missing, religious, educate the young (i ch. 1, #2, art. 2-3).

- priests' retreats (I ch. 1, #3, arts. 2-3).

- eventually to spread throughout the world (i ch. 1, #3, NB).

- showing the cross (i ch. 2, #2, line 235; II ch. 1., line 451).

- preaching (I ch. 3, #1).

- confessions (ibid., #2).

- direction of youth (ibid., #3).

- aid to prisoners (ibid., #4).

- assistance to the dying (ibid., #5).

- praying divine Office publicly and in common (ibid., #6).
- public devotions in our churches (ibid., #7).

### **5. Ways of formation are constituted**

- We should seriously strive to become saints, we should courageously walk in the path trodden by so many apostles who have left us such beautiful examples of virtue in the exercise of the ministry to which we have been called just as they were; we should wholly renounce ourselves and strive solely for the glory of God, the welfare of the Church and the salvation of souls; we should continually renew ourselves in the spirit of our vocation; we should live in a state of habitual self denial, seeking at all times to reach the summit of perfection. We should labour assiduously to become humble, meek, obedient lovers of poverty and penance, mortified, free from attachment to the world and to family, full of zeal and ready to sacrifice possessions, talents, ease, even life itself for love of Jesus Christ, the welfare of the Church and the sanctification of our brethren. Finally, with an unbounded confidence in God, we should enter the combat and fight even unto death, for the greater glory of God (I ch. 1, #3, NB).

- It has already been pointed out that the missionaries ought, as far as the weakness of human nature allows, to imitate in everything the example of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the chief founder of the Society, and that of the Apostles, our first fathers. In imitation of these great models, one portion of their life will be given over to prayer, interior recollection and contemplation in the privacy of God's house, wherein they will dwell together in common. The other portion will be entirely consecrated to outside works requiring the most active zeal such as missions, preaching, confessions, catechizing, directing young people, visiting the sick and prisoners, giving spiritual retreats and other similar exercises. However, their chief concern will be, as much as when out on mission as when in the house, to make progress in the paths of ecclesiastical and religious perfection; they will especially cultivate the virtues of humility, obedience, poverty, self-denial, the spirit of mortification, the spirit of faith, purity of intention, and others; in a word, they will strive to become other Christs, radiating everywhere the fragrance of his lovable virtues (II cg. 1).

- Mental prayer will be made in common twice a day: in the morning, after morning prayer, for at least three quarters of an hour, and in the evening, around the altar in the manner of a visit to the most holy Sacrament, for half an hour. One will meditate especially on the theological virtues, and on the virtues of our Lord Jesus Christ, which the members of the Society will strive to exemplify in their lives. Each month they will have in view, in particular, one of these virtues to practice it better and apply it more especially. They will also make their particular exams and spiritual conferences on this same virtue. Likewise during the day one will make the visit to the Blessed Sacrament (II ch.1, #5).

- mortification (II ch. 2, #2).

- Novices must apply themselves to honouring, in a special way, the hidden life of Jesus Christ. They will count themselves happy to have this mark of resemblance to our Saviour, who, from the age of twelve to thirty, lived unknown to almost everyone. Jealously following in the footsteps of this divine model, their sole concern will be to imitate in their conduct what he did in his private life; thus they will live in perfect obedience to the Rules of the Institute (III ch.2, #2).

### **6. Ways of government are constituted**

- superiors represent Our Lord Jesus Christ (II, ch. 2, #3, line 104).
- at the election of the superior general, there is a Mass of the Holy Spirit for the intention that the Lord may deign to preside over the choice (III, ch. 1, #1).

**C.** That, then, is how the Founder wrote of Christ in the Rule. Without "larding" the text with references to the Lord, he places him at the heart of (Oblate) life, as "the Founder" who gives us our mission, and as the one to be imitated above all in his missionary life, an imitation that calls for a whole-hearted program of formation in apostolic virtue, chiefly in the context of apostolic community. His most creative writings is that which we have cited in II, A, 5, in the first



two long citations, his description of our life as having "two portions" centered on a search for "ecclesiastical and religious perfection" contains at least in germ a solution to the problem of unity in active apostolic life, but it has been subject to different interpretations. It has therefore been a point regarding continuous clarification. See DROUART, Notre propre forme de consecration à Dieu pour le service de l'Église, *Études Oblates*, 27(1968), 3-40; CIARDI, Fisionomia e natura della comunità oblata nel periodo della fondazione (1815-1818), *Claretianum*, XVI(1976), 173-275, cited by SANTOLINI in *Mission through Apostolic Community according to our Constitutions and rules*, Vol. 49(1990), E207-208).

#### IV. The contextualization of the 1966 Constitutions and Rules

While the contributions of the Chapter that approved the 1818 and 1826 Rules were almost wholly formal, subsequent Chapter have assumed a genuine authorship role as well. This is especially true of the 1966 and 1980 Chapters which for the first time completely rewrote the Constitutions and Rules. In the matters that are of concern to us, the intervening Chapters left the Founder's Rule practically unaltered, being chiefly conferred with canonical matters and matters of organization, and we can in effect pass them over. We saw that Eugene brought to the making of the 1818 Rules: what did the capitulars of 1966 bring?

**A.** They brought firstly the consciousness of the Congregation's 150 years of missionary experience. The lesson drawn from this history was not a comfortable one:

..it is the evident duty Oblates have, in virtue of the charism which is theirs, not to settle down comfortably, not to interrupt their forward march, not to copy complacently what was adequate at other times and for other situations, not to retire behind the protective walls of well-secure posts" (*The Congregation Renewed*, Rome, 1968, p. 13.)

**B.** The Capitulars brought too a consciousness of the imperative necessity of completing the task of revising the Rule, a task that had been on the table since the 1953 Chapter. Preparatory work had been done by the Commission for the Revision of the Rules appointed by the 1959 Chapter. This included the preparation of a working text, already once re-worked, the *textus revisus*. The 1959 Chapter had requested a distinction be made between Constitutions and Rules, a distinction that was later taken up by the Holy See. The Commission had made this distinction, thus performing the initial task of distinguishing primary and secondary elements. The Commission has also conducted two consultations of Provincials, leading to "voluminous reports and a great volume of suggestions from study groups and from individual Oblates" (*The Congregation Renewed*, Rome, 1968, p. xii; W. WOESTMAN, *The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate: A Clerical Congregation with Brothers*, Rome, 1984, p. 112-122). These consultations began to expose a contentious issue: should the Founder's actual words be kept in large part or should only contemporary language be used in the Rule?

The Council created a totally new situation. A valid case could have been made for postponing the revision of the Rule yet again to assimilate more thoroughly the conciliar documents and refer back to the members of the Congregation. The Superior General explained the decision to proceed in his circular 222, cited by Woestman (*op. cit.*, p. 115):

For twelve years the Congregation has been considering a revision of its Rules. This period of apparent incertitude, hesitation, suspense must end; it is prejudicial to the Institution and to the maintenance of its spirit (p.8).

**C.** Above all, however, the Capitulars brought with them an awareness of the recent experience of Vatican II (1962-1965). This experience dominated their collective consciousness to such an extent that the objective of the Capitulars in drafting the 1966 text has been described as being "to express the fundamental principles of the Oblate life and apostolate in the spirit and according to the criteria of Vatican II" (*op. cit.*, p. xi). This objective dominated the task to such an extent that "many of the conciliar documents are reflected in the language used in the text" (*op. cit.*, p. xiv). In the light of the unforeseen sweep of the Ecumenical Council, the text prepared by the Rules Commission became a working text in name only (cf. WOESTMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 114).

1. We have referred to the fact that Eugene's motivation in first writing the Rule was to respond to the new situation created by the offer received to take charge of the shrine of Our Lady du Laus in the diocese of Digne in the Upper Alps. This created a need to adjust our position in the Church, to take fresh "bearings" as it were, so as to preserve the Society's unity. This motivation was reinforced by the hostility of certain elements in the local Churches, so much so that it became in fact a matter of life or death for the fledgling Society of Missionaries of Provence to re-situate itself. Ultimately, Eugene's companions saw even more clearly that he did that Pontifical status was essential, given the actual state of diocesan life in the Midi and its surrounds.

2. Finally, we may remark that the Congregation was in fact at its zenith, numerically speaking, on this 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Led by a dynamic and experienced Superior General, Leo Deschâtelets, and endowed as a body with wealth of intellectual and spiritual gifts and experience, the Capitulars were conscious of their great responsibility in the Church and had the capacity and courage to face up to it.

## V. Eugene de Mazenod's vision in the 1966 Rule

A. Eugene wrote his Rule out of an inspiration that the "Oblate centre" lay in re-living the missionary life of Christ the Saviour and that of his Twelve Apostles, and in the light of his personal knowledge of that Saviour. We have seen how Eugene portrayed that center in his Rule. We seek now to see how that same centre is conveyed in the 1966 Rule.

B. We begin with the method adopted in the Chapter. The author of *The Congregation Renewed* quoted above in IV, c, points to two aspects of its task: i) the expression of the fundamental principles of Oblate Life and apostolate; and ii) in the light of the Council and according to its criteria.

C. What were these criteria? Wide-ranging as were its themes, the Council's focal point was the Church herself. The Council re-visualized her life and mission as the actualization of God's loving plan, directed to the world that God loved so much that he sent his only Son and gifted us with his Spirit. Roles were evaluated within the Church in the light of the image of the Church as the People of God. The Council stressed the equal dignity of the faithful and the universal call to holiness, and re-asserted the intrinsic goodness and proper autonomy of the world as God's creation, though marred by sin and in need of redemption.

D. In the perspective of the author cited from *The Congregation Renewed*, above, the Chapter was proposing to lay hold of the teaching of the Council, and re-read and re-state the Oblate reality in fidelity to this teaching.

E. But Father Leo Deschâtelets will insist that the Chapter "constantly looked for the Founder's mind which in substance remains amazingly apposite and in striking harmony with the directives of Vatican Council II".

The mind of the Founder, as enriched by the living tradition of the Institute, was the Chapter's main concern, updating it as to language and pastoral orientation and liberating it from elements now superceded which had their *raison d'être* in the theology and circumstances of their time, but which now demand adaptation and renovation...(*Circulaires Administratives*, 7, 356-357, April 12, 1966, cited by Woestman, op. cit., p. 118).

F. These are two different readings of what went on at the Chapter, emphasizing different standpoints, with the one emphasizing the role of the Council's inspiration in the Chapter's work, the other emphasizing the role of the Founder's inspiration. The difference will affect the way the Chapter worked and the kind of document it produced.

G. The result is that in pursuing our theme through texts of the 1966 Constitutions, we can distinguish two different foci:

i) a focus on who Christ is for the Oblates from the standpoint of the Oblate tradition,

sometimes using fresh language: texts stemming from this interest carry the burden of handing on to the new generation of Oblates the Founder's vision of Christ in that tradition.

ii) a focus on the Council teaching which speaks of Christ to the Oblates but out of a wider vision, where the aim is, not to define what we have called "the Oblate centre", but to insert our Oblate vision into the conciliar vision. Texts stemming from this interest will represent some development of the Oblate vision.

## **VI. Analysis of the 1966 Constitutions**

How then do the 1966 Constitutions accomplish the difficult task of Oblate writing they were faced with?

### **A. In the Constitutions Jesus is described by various titles:**

- Lord, Christ, Saviour, only begotten Son (C 9).

### **B. Jesus' missionary life on earth is described**

in the Preface: Jesus "purchased" the Church as "his glorious inheritance at the cost of his own blood". When "he undertook to convert the world",

he chose a number of apostles and disciples whom he himself trained in piety, and he filled them with his spirit. These men he sent forth, once they had been schooled in his teaching, to conquer the world which, before long, was to bow to his holy rule.

in the Constitutions:

- in the fullness of time he called his disciple to follow him and to share in his mission both by word and work: C 1.

- Mary is his Mother: C 6.

- God so loved the world that he sent him to save the world.

- he dispossessed himself and took on the nature of a slave: C 14.

- his death : C 14.

33. - his way of life was virginal and poor, and by obedience he redeemed mankind: CC 18,

- his meat was to do the will of his Father: C 33.

- he was obedient unto death: C 33.

### **C. Jesus is seen in his risen Life**

in the Preface: the church is his beloved Spouse: p. 2.

In the Constitutions:

- In the Church he continually calls men to follow him: C 1.

- he filled the Apostles with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost: C 7.

- the Church is his body: CC 15, 50.

- the world is his vineyard: C 16.

- the poor are sons of God in him: C 4.

### **D. His present-day call is described**

In the Preface:

- God has inspired some priests with the desire to form themselves into a Society in order

to work more effectively for the Salvation of souls and for their own sanctification (p. 9).

- the Lord continually calls men to follow him: C. 1.

#### **E. His specific invitation to Oblates is described**

In the Preface: to work more effectively for the salvation of souls and for their own sanctification (p. 5).

In the Constitutions:

- it is implied that such a call is made to the Congregation: C 1.
- and it is perhaps implied that it is a call to preach the Gospel to the poor: C 1.
- there is a special invitation to religious chastity: C 19.

#### **F. His presence today are described**

- in poverty: C 25.
- in divine Office: C 50.
- community prayer, Mass: C 51.
- sacrament of penance: C 53.
- to celebrant of sacraments, and to ministers in ministerial acts: C 53.
- Scripture: CC 55, 56, 81.
- by his action in the world: C 56.
- to persons taking vows: C 80.
- Eucharist: CC 81, 108.
- prayer and contemplation: C 81.
- community life: C 81.
- daily events: C 81.
- the priesthood: C 108.
- the poor: C 108.
- he appeals to the Congregation through the directives of the Church and the evolution of the world: C 121.

#### **G. His formative activity is described**

In the Preface: - he chose a number of apostles and disciples whom he himself trained in piety, and he filled them with his Spirit (P. 1)

In the Constitutions:

- as principal of unity of life: C 7.
- Christ acts through the liturgy and the sacraments, the priesthood, and in the life of men, especially the poor: C 108.

In the Rules: - the Lord invites to forms of penance: R 114, 1.

### **VII. The inter-personal Oblate commitments**

We look now for the inter-personal Oblate commitments that are constituted on the basis of these descriptions.

**A. Oblates are given "constitutive"**

**titles or descriptions**

- servants of the Church: C 2.
- mission Oblates set apart to preach the Gospel: CC 1, 7.
- sharers with Christ = companions with Christ: C 7.
- cooperators with our divine Saviour: C 7.

**B. Ways of following him are constituted**

- as servants of the Church: C 2.
- promoting Christian unity for the sake of the mission: C 2.
- obedience: C 33.
- novitiate: C 81.
- missionary spirituality based on self-denial: C 92.

**C. Ways of cooperating with him are constituted**

- by their religious consecration: C 7.

**D. Ways of imitating him are constituted**

- true servants of the poor: C 4.
- consecration by the Father Like Christ: C 9.
- imitate Christ's humility and self-denial: C 14.
- by the evangelical counsels: C 18.
- by celibacy show forth the Church's living faith in Christ, her only Spouse, and at the same time the apostolic fecundity of this mystical union: C 21.
- by celibacy manifest to his fellowmen the perfect charity which will be fully revealed in the heavenly Kingdom: C 21.
- by celibacy, love men with the heart of Christ: C 23.

**E. Ways of meeting him are constituted**

- poverty is a suitable means of union with Christ: C 25.
- divine Office, in common if possible, the prayer of the Body of Christ: C 50.
- community prayer: Mass and divine Office: C 51.
- sacrament of Penance frequently: C 53.
- the celebration of the Sacraments and the different acts of ministry will for all the missionaries be an occasion of personal encounter with Christ who through them gives himself to men and through men gives himself to them: CC 53, 56.
- Scripture: CC 55, 56, 81; R 111.
- by the vows he hopes to bind himself to Christ in a positive gesture of self-surrender: C 80.
- Eucharist: CC 81, 108,; R 110, 115.
- prayer and contemplation: C 81; R 110.
- community life: C 81.
- daily events: C 81.

- by profession he unites himself more profoundly with all his brothers in the heart of Christ the Saviour: C 93.

- the priesthood: C 108.

- the poor: C 108.

#### **F. Ways of conceiving and implementing**

##### **mission are constituted**

- the fundamental mission is to proclaim "who Christ is" by witness of life as well as by ministry of the Word: C 3.

- bring the message of the Gospel to those who have not received it yet, or where the Church is already established to those regions or groups furthest removed from its influence: C 3.

- every kind of good work and ministry: C 3.

- gathering together into apostolic communities: C 5.

- they build up the Church so that the world is renewed and perfected in Christ: C 8.

- use of talents the Lord has given: C 12.

- bear witness to their love for Christ and mankind, so as to be a leaven of the beatitudes: C 17.

- bear witness that Christ in their midst unites them intimately in order to send them forth to proclaim his Kingdom: C 45.

- Brothers bears witness to the faith of the Church in Christ by renouncing legitimate earthly values and advantages: C 48.

- each in his own way will share in and exercise Christ's priesthood: C 48.

- By placing the Eucharist at the center of life and action, the daily renewal of Christ's sacrifice, in which the Church offers praise to the Father, consecrates and saves the world, he renews himself in his apostolic mission, and strengthens the bonds of his fraternal union with all, especially his own community and those to whom he is sent: C 49.

- as minister of the Word, he will never act out of self-interest and will even, if necessary, refuse to gratify men, for like the Apostle he will proclaim naught but Jesus and him crucified: C 57.

#### **G. Ways of formation are constituted**

- practice obedience with the maturity of adults formed in Christ: C 36.

- in daily and prolonged mental prayer, he will allow himself to be moulded by the Lord: C 59.

- cooperating with the Saviour, he will find him, in all things and everywhere, the inspiration of his behaviour: C 59.

- renewal periods: C 60.

- he will contemplate Mary Immaculate in the mysteries of the Incarnate Word and will find in her the perfect model of his response to God: C 61.

- doctrinal formation centered on the mystery of Christ: C 93.

- social sciences are an effective instrument for radiating the charity of Christ: C 97.

#### **H. Ways of government are constituted**

- superiors are signs of their unity in Christ: C 34.

- the role of government is to help the Institute to discern and carry out the will of Christ

and the Church: C 116.

- to serve, not to be served: C 118.

## VIII. The Preface

**A.** In the 1966 Rule the intention seems to be to convey the Oblate centre above all by the retention of the Preface as it came from the pen of Eugene. We can obtain a sense of how the Preface was regarded by the 1966 Capitulars in *The Congregation Renewed* where we read:

1. The personality of the Oblate group finds expression in its wellspring which is the Preface of the Founder. This Preface, which was unanimously retained by the Chapter of 1966, is much more than a venerable historical document. It constitutes the birth certificate of the Congregation - its basic charter, more essential to the Institute's life than either Constitutions or Rules. It is the *Regula* in the traditional sense of the word; it will never change. It is a kind of baptismal sacrament - a visible and efficacious sign of the grace which welled forth in the heart of the Founder and his first companions. He himself speaks of "the heart of certain priests, moved by the spirit of God" (Preface). As such, it reveals and evokes to all generations of Oblates the inalienable personality of this living group, born of the Spirit at work in the innermost heart of some members of the People of God in view of the needs of the Church (op. cit., p. 6).

2. Father Léo Deschâtelets used similar language:

Everyone was agreed in conserving intact the Preface of our Constitutions and Rules, drawn up by the Founder himself, and indicating in substance the spirit of the Institute and its basic principles, which still retain their relevance in face of the needs of the Church and of the contemporary world. This Preface, inherited from Bishop de Mazenod, is a kind of birth certificate for the Institute, which it defines in the Church. The Constitutions and Rules simply add detailed precisions to the basic points outlined in the Preface (*Circulaires Administratives*, V. 7, p. 346 and 355, cited by Woestman, op. cit., p. 116-117).

**B.** Father Maurice Gilbert (*Oblate Life*; some reflections on the new Constitutions, translated by F. SACKETT, o.m.i., Ottawa, 1967, p. 17-26) links the Preface with the first article of the Constitutions. For Gilbert: "The first article of the new Constitutions, in a formulation which is a little heavy but charged with meaning, sums up, we might say, the content of the Preface" (op. cit., p. 18).

1. **Article 1 reads as follows:**

Our Lord Jesus Christ in the fullness of time called his disciples to follow him and to share in his mission both by word and work. In the Church the same Lord continually calls men to follow him. The Congregation of Missionary Oblates of the Most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary seeks in its own way to respond to this call. For this reason, priests in union with Brothers, bound by religious vows and living together as brothers, closely cooperating with one another in Christ the Saviour, devote themselves principally to the preaching of the Gospel to the poor.

2. **Father Gilbert comments:**

This is the formulation of the Oblate ideal. All of the Constitutions are developed around this insight which is clearly that of the Founder... It is a great achievement of the present revision to make this point crystal clear. Here we find all of the elements of the Oblate vocation:

- its mission, especially the evangelization of the poor (as the Saviour and with him),

- service of the Church (as the Saviour, and with him),

- union with Mary (as the Saviour, and with him),
- finally, the contemplation in faith of the Saviour and his work of salvation, which assures this cooperation.

This is true that we might even say, somewhat paradoxically, that this first article of the Constitutions, if it were fully understood, would suffice by itself alone to order the life of the Oblate (op. cit., p. 19).

**C. The author of Chapter Five of *The Congregation Renewed* sees even more in this article:**

What is new in art. 1 as compared with former Rules is the explicit affirmation that there is a *grace*, a charism, at the origin of the Congregation which accounts for its foundation. In keeping with a remark made by many Capitulars and approved by the assembly, it was important to state clearly that the Congregation is by no means a purely human undertaking which chooses its own proper aims for itself, as might have been implied by a superficial reading of (the 1928 edition)... It is not the Congregation which proposes to itself the need to be chosen. The initiative comes not from man but from God; it is a *grace* which pertains to the order of appeals which God makes to members of his Church. Father de Mazenod always insisted: 'Our Founder is Jesus Christ... (op. cit., p. 31).

1. Gilbert seems to take up this same point later, in his *Charismes et Institutions dans la Vie Oblate* (*Études Oblates*, 26(1967), p. 301):

The first article of our Constitutions, in its new formulation, places us immediately in the existential perspective of the history of salvation. The Congregation is not presented in the first instance as a juridical entity, but as an event: the acceptance of an intervention of God in the world.

2. It is not easy to verify the presence of this "explicit affirmation" in the text of art. 1. Gilbert too in his reading of art. 1 brings to it all his profound understanding of the Oblate ideal. One who does not possess this background may miss the full content he refers to.

3. We should not too that while the Founder spoke of the missionaries as being "cooperators with Christ", here "priests in union with brothers" are spoken of as "cooperating with one another in Christ". (The original expression is kept in C 7). The variation is a valid development: out of Christ's invitation to cooperate with him comes the commitment to cooperate with one another *in him*. What is also being asserted here is the fundamental equality of all those called to be Oblates, a very striking innovation in the realm of the inter-Oblate commitments, rooted in Christ.

D. What we have in this article, as well as the key statement at the end of the article 8, stating "the end of the Congregation", is an effort to situate the Congregation in the context of the Saviour's work and Church's development. The article expresses awareness of the wider context, an awareness that is spelled out in further detail as to various levels of ecclesial communion in art. 2. This prominent aspect of article 1 is in fact a contextualization of the institute in the broader sweep of things: it will appear in the 1982 CCRR as an historical "Foreword".

E. The next article of importance in the passing on of Eugene's vision is article 7, which opens Part Two: *The Apostolic Man*, and reads as follows:

Set apart to preach the Gospel, the Missionary Oblates, as sharers with Christ, and after the example of the Apostles whom he filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, are cooperators with our divine Saviour in his Paschal Mystery. Their religious consecration is, therefore, one with their apostolic life and is the foundation of their close union of thought and action.



1. In his *Charismes et institutions dans la vie oblate* (*Études Oblates*, 26(1967), p. 302), Gilbert declares that he sees here what is

undoubtedly the most complete portrait of an Oblate... Every Oblate can say, in a sense, that one day he met Christ, who called him to his service, like St. Paul on the road to Damascus, evidently in a less spectacular fashion.

2. We do indeed recognize in this article a succinct expression of Eugene's inspiration: companions of Christ, missionaries, imitating the Twelve, cooperators with the divine Saviour in the Paschal Mystery. This last element is expressed in language not used by Eugene who would have spoken rather of the work of redemption. The language of article 7 is of course reflecting contemporary trends, though it is not taken up in the 1982 Book of the Rule.

**F.** Linked with this "portrait of an Oblate" is an expression of the unity of his way of life: indeed it is the principal affirmation of the article. Because this portrait is a portrait of an "apostolic religious" (*Perfectae caritatis* 8), therefore what Eugene had called the "two parts" of the Oblate life have to interpenetrate with one another.

1. The author of the *Congregation Renewed* (p. 92) remarks: "This appears several times again in Council texts dealing with priestly ministry, as though the Council saw a need for re-education in this connection".

2. The formulation of article 7 captivated Father Drouart, for whom it expresses precisely Eugene's own thought: see his *Notre propre forme de consécration à Dieu pour le service de l'Église*, (*Études Oblates*, 27(1968), 3-40). Clearly, too, this principle was a key one for the Chapter as it placed it in this privileged position. As a formulation, however, it remains on the abstract level, and it will be replaced by a statement that is more explicitly Christological in the 1982 Constitutions (C 31).

**G.** Among the Founder's expressions "the imitation of the example and virtues of Christ" was prominent. *The Congregation Renewed* (p. 116) note that the Constitutions reflect a "Shift of Christ" which appears intentionally at articles 19, 25, and 33, which head the paragraphs on chastity, poverty and obedience respectively; it also appears at art. 1, 73, 80-81 and 92. The expression "the imitation of Christ" was retained at art. 4, 118, and in articles 18 and 83, as in conciliar texts.

1. The commentary cites a text of Schnakenburg:

Following Jesus does not mean in the first instance an imitation, but rather the acceptance of his conditions of life, sharing his mission and his destiny. The disciple is not superior to his teacher, nor the slave to his master. It is enough for the disciple that he should be like to his teacher, and the slave like his master (*Le Message Moral du Nouveau Testament*, Le Puy, 1963, p. 46).

**H.** Chapter 2 of Part Two entitles "Apostolic Requirements" embraces: the evangelical counsels, life in apostolic community, liturgical life, and lively faith enlightened by the Word of God. Throughout this chapter the Constitutions present a pedagogy that is far more explicitly Christological than the Founder's Rule and that is conciliar in inspiration.

1. We may point especially to:

- Articles 18-41 on the evangelical counsels;
- Article 45 which places Christ in the midst of the Oblate community.
- Article 53 which urges "personal encounter with Christ" in acts of ministry and the celebration of the Sacraments, an echo of Article 7.
- Article 59, which reads as follows:

In daily and prolonged mental prayer, he will allow himself to be

moulded by the Lord, in order to conform to his inspirations, and fulfill the life giving requirements of the Kingdom. Cooperating with the Saviour, he will find in him, in all things and everywhere, the inspiration of his behaviour.

2. Here again we have a miniature "portrait of an Oblate" of considerable power (cf. GILBERT, *Oblate Life*, Ottawa, 1967, p. 26), in the context of an article on mental prayer. Eugene's focusing of Oblate prayer on Jesus receives a new expression (cf. too C 49 on the Eucharist).

I. This seems to complete the examination of the texts specifically conveying Eugene's vision (cf. GILBERT in "La Nouveauté des Nouvelles Constitutions et Règles", *Études Oblates*, 28(1969), p. 298).

## IX. Towards the 1982 Book of the Rule

A. How were the "New Constitutions" received? We have seen above what the 1966 Capitulars brought to their task, and we may avert also what they did not bring: a developed Oblate language for the expression of Oblate reality in the contemporary world. They were in effect compelled to face their task with no prior experience to guide them save that of Rule Commission and its *Textus Revisus*. So strange would the new language they adopted seem that it would arouse revulsion in some Oblates. Language then was a large part of the problem.

B. In a consultation by the Congregation by the 1971 Rule Commission it was found that: "The majority considers that it recognizes the thought and intentions of the Founder in the 1966 text, not, however, without more or less serious reservations" (Paul SION, *Documentation OMI*, 93/80, p. 7).

C. There are inevitably imperfections. We referred above to the intellectual and other strengths present in the 1966 Chapter; the "shadow" side of these strengths makes its presence felt too, in the excessive number and length of both CC and RR, in doctrinaire and abstract modes of expression. Indeed, in the key articles 1 and 7 it can be doubted that the Chapter fully expressed what it wanted to say.

D. Going deeper, our (limited) study shows that the two foci referred to above in 6.7, it is the second, the conciliar focus, that predominated, that it is the conciliar element that absorbed most of the energy of the Chapter and that it is in this aspect of the Constitutions and Rules that the real energy of the text is found. Consequently the re-establishment of the Oblate centre did not emerge as strongly as the central unifying force permeating the text. While the Founder's Rule accentuated unmistakably the urgency of the call to holiness in Christ Saviour and Missionary, the new text

put the accent on values particularly felt in the contemporary world which found an echo in the Council: dialogue, participation, co-responsibility, etc. It reflected in greater depth a renewed theological reflection on the Church, religious life, missionary activity, the meaning of authority, etc. (Paul SION, *Documentation OMI*, 93/80, p. 7).

Above all, the content of the section we have labeled "ways of formation" in our analysis (VII, G above) is very weak in contrast to Eugene's trenchant statement (see III, B, 5 and III, C above).

E. One may agree with Gilbert when he says:

We still believe not only that the thought and ideal of the Founder have been conserved, but that in comparison with preceding editions, this charism has been formulated with great clarity, thanks especially to the division introduced between constitutions and rules. There has been restored in a number of places in the text an expression of the Founder that seems central and that the revision of the primitive rule had left fall: 'Oblates are cooperators with the Saviour' (art. 1, 7, 59) ("La nouveauté des nouvelles Constitutions et Règles", *Études Oblates*, 28(1969), p. 293.

That is to say, the new Constitutions do represent an advance in clarity and precision, and they do formulate the Oblate ideal (with the reservations already expressed). But they are also sparse and fragmentary in this regard. They have lost something of the dynamic power of Eugene's vision and of the image of Jesus and the Twelve going around Galilee and Judea that moved Eugene himself. It is there in the *Preface*, but it does not overflow into the text of the Constitutions.

**F.** While acknowledging these weaknesses, we see these pioneering Constitutions as an indispensable first step towards Oblate renewal, breaking through the double barrier of long-standing inertia and fear of the new. Even a cursory comparison of the analysis with that of the 1982 Book reveals the enormous contribution the 1966 made to that of 1982.

1. Furthermore, in these days of ecological awareness, we recognize that a living being cannot live or be understood apart from its environment. The special contribution of the 1966 Chapter would be to move the Congregation into the renewed ecclesial environment created by Vatican II, the only place where true renewal would be possible. It was from such a position that Eugene had spoken, it was there he would be found in all his vitality. It was from this position that the Congregation would move forward to effect a second stage of renewal, culminating in the 1980 Chapter.

**G.** The 1966 CCRR were approved by the Holy See *ad experimentum* for six years, and were to be revised by the 1972 Chapter. This revision was eventually postponed for a number of reasons until the 1980 Chapter. In the interval a Rules Commission was established by the 1974 Chapter and a revised text prepared on the basis of the 1966 CCRR but making use too of preceding editions, especially those of the Founder, as sources and references, and also of the documents issuing from the 1972 and 1974 Chapters: *Missionary Outlook, Community, Administrative Structures, Formation*. (Oblate writing was on the march!) The entire Congregation was engaged in the consultative process. For all this, see A. TACHÉ, *Rapport de la Commission pour la révision des Constitutions*, VOL, 37(1978), p. 199-212.

**H.** Father Taché's remarks on the consultation process highlight the determination to root the revision on Oblate experience and thus have access to whatever there was of newness in that experience:

1. The Commission believed that the best way to go about the consultation would be the issuing of a questionnaire, drawn up as a guide for reflection on present-day Oblate life, considered as a point of departure for the revision in the light of the 1966 text (op. cit., p. 202).

## **X. "Opening up" the material -- Questions and Comments**

**A.** And so we return to our starting point and our present-day Book of the Rule with its great richness derived in part from the Founder's Rule, in part from the 1966 Rule and in part original to it. At the outset we said that our purpose was to "open up" the material for the attention of the Congress. Our third and final task is to see how the material has been "opened up" in the course of the paper: to raise some questions, and make some comments.

**B.** The most fundamental truth about Jesus and our Rule is one that is true for all institutes of consecrated life: the Rule gives those for whom it is intended a practical insight into the Gospel of Jesus and access to its grace. Let us listen to Father Zago, Superior General, for a modern understanding of religious constitutional texts. His words highlight their multi-dimensional character:

1. Constitutions and Rules are essential to every religious family. The identity of the latter's membership depends on authentic reference to them. They are a source for a deeper grasp of the institute's charism, a concrete way to discern God's will, a reflection of the Gospel and a vantage point to learning its requirements, a means of renewal for individual persons and the community (in F. JETTÉ, *The Apostolic Man*, Rome, 1992,

Presentation, p. 11).

2. The writing of the Rule has not been just a question of intellectual creativity but of finding a way to express a spiritual reality that the writer did not create. The vision is the gift of the Spirit. The Rule-writer had to translate this vision into concrete terms, by constituting Oblate relationships on its basis that would give existence to the new institute in the Spirit.

3. In Lazano's words: "Every charism .. gives rise to various styles of life, through which it incarnates the Gospel in different tongues" (*Foundresses, Founders, and their Religious Families*, Claret Center for the Resources in Spirituality, Chicago, 1983, p. 92); i.e. the life of the institute is a Pentecostal manifestation of the Spirit and thus an incarnation of the Gospel.

4. As a literary work whose aim is to speak about Oblate commitments in various relationships: with one another, the Church, the world, above all with God, our Constitutions cannot escape their juridical dimension. But we say: "Do this and you will live" --meaning, of course, that you will live with Christ's own life. We base this promise on the fact that texts of this kind transcend their juridical dimension and give to those for whom they are intended a practical insight into the Gospel itself.

5. This then is the most fundamental truth about Jesus and our Constitutions.

C. But there is of course much more. In the Founder's vision, chief among the relationships that constitute our existence in the Spirit is our relation to Jesus. We saw in the previous Paper and again here how this was written into the primitive Rule. In the 1982 Rules this relationship is still the rock on which all else is built:

1. the relationship with Christ is constitutive of our being called together as his companions and co-workers, and the Rule calls us together in this relationship.

2. the relationship with Christ, Saviour and Missionary to the poor, is constitutive of our ministry, and the Rule founds our ministry on it.

3. the relationship with Christ is the source of our strength, and the Rule leads us to these waters.

4. All this emerges from our analysis above and is the second fundamental truth about Jesus and our Rule: i.e. our commitments to one another as Oblates are made *in Christ* and can be conceived of as a covenant we make *in Christ*. The content of the covenant can be from the content of I, B, 1-8. Our Rule is not made in the form of a covenant between the Lord and the Oblates (cf. 1e above) but we can construct the content of a covenant made by the Lord with us in the Spirit from what is contained in I, A, 1-6 above (see Appendix for a possible version of these covenants).

D. But while this fundamental relationship remains the same, the shape given to Oblate commitments on its basis, i.e. what is truly "constituted" by the Constitutions, is contemporary.

1. It is in the faithful Oblate living of these commitments that the Spirit who is ever new finds its "tongue".

2. This then is the third fundamental truth about our Constitutions and Jesus: if we live in fidelity to his call and the ensuing commitments, we become bearers of the Spirit.

E. Lozano also remarks:

... charism, properly speaking, cannot be defined. Rather, it must be described by gathering up those traits through which it gradually appeared in those who first lived it, as well as in the successive generations who received it. It is not something that can be expressed in a few words, for if it were reduced to just a few words, many of its really different manifestations in history would seem to blur and coincide (op. cit., p. 92).

This, then, is a warning that we cannot reduce the description of the place of Jesus in our Oblate lives to just a few words, like "founder", "cooperators", "co-workers", etc. What that place

is conveyed by the commitments that have emerged and do emerge and will emerge from it. And the biblical images that originally moved Eugene will always be a vital source of inspiration for Oblates. Constitutional writings, in fact, has to "spread itself" to express the full sense of the charism and even then it cannot say it all.

**F.** Eugene first set about finding the way to write about how Oblates see the world, the Church, Mary, God. He "invented" the language: his Preface remains the classic text. But time moves on and Oblate language must keep moving with it. Actually, as we have seen, it did not.

1. How is one to judge the fact that the Rule, despite various revisions, remained substantially the same as the Founder left it until 1966 so far as concerns the expression of our charism: including then our relation with Jesus? Were we not "doing" any theology in those years? In these years Oblates clearly had what one might call "the Oblate formula". Did they have the spirit to read that formula to the exigencies of the times they lived in, or did a gap open up between the letter of the Rule and the way life was lived? Or was there a lapse into fundamentalism? Whatever is the verdict of Oblate historians, one consequence is plain: for decades Oblates were not called to develop the faculty of writing Oblate literature of this kind, of articulating their lived theology, of developing the Founder's language as an instrument for the spirit of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Imagination, innovation and opening-up new relationships, if they were found in Oblate life, could not find their way into the Oblate Rule. This would have its impact, as we have seen, when the task of re-writing could not longer be deferred.

2. It would seem that it is only in our own time, under the influence of various stimuli, that there has been an effective concern to redescribe the core of our charism. The preoccupation was there in the 1966 revision and shapework was done, but it was overshadowed by the Chapter's necessary preoccupation with the Council.

3. The steady work of the Oblate research centered on the project of the cause of the Founder came to fruition with his beatification in 1975. It led to the creation of a core-group of Oblates with expertise in the field of Oblate studies, who used their expertise to lay the groundwork of a modern "oblatology". The congress on "The Charism of the Founder Today" was held in 1976, and in 1978 the AOSR network began to emerge. Decrees of the Vatican Council and the Holy See calling for religious to renew themselves in the spirit of their originating charism stimulated a growing interest in this field. The Oblate appetite was whetted and led to calls for publication of new materials. Thus, in the 1970's a new sensitivity was being created in the Congregation with regard to the spirit of the Founder. It bore fruit in the 1982 Book of Rule.

**G.** With the skillful combination of Foreword, Preface, Inter-leaved texts, Constitutions, rules, those who "set pen to paper" to write the 1982 Book of Rule "spread" themselves to good effect and considerably developed the way Oblates express themselves about their charism.

1. By use of an evocative technique a spiritual authority is invoked upon the text that goes far beyond that of those who put pen to paper.

2. Most of the voices evoked by Eugene himself are no longer "heard" by Oblates: Eugene's own authority has superceded theirs.

3. The 1966 Chapter evoked the voice of the Council: its sound too grows fainter now as we read the Rule.

4. In the virtue of their successful evocation of the voices of Eugene de Mazenod, of Oblate tradition, of the Gospel itself, and of the Church, those who set pen to paper to write the 1982 text infused the spiritual authority of these voices into the text and it became a text to be handled with reverence.

5. One is left wondering though: will the time come when we no longer need to erect the scaffolding of the "Founder's own words" around our present-day words? Is the presence of the inter-leaved citations a sign of a lack of confidence in our own words? Or is it realism about the limitations of what committees and Chapters can do with Language? The Founder's words are of course always there for us, whether we wrap them around our own or not.

**H.** To this intrinsic spiritual authority is added the extrinsic authority of the Church and the Chapter, both to authenticate the spiritual authority of the text and to give legislative to the book in so far as this is necessary. We must not insist excessively on this latter quality: by that criterion the 1982 Constitutions are one book, the Rules are another, and neither includes the Preface of the inter-leaved citations from the Founder's writings or the Foreword. As a literary text all of these form one work, and it is as such that we have considered it. We have seen that the various parts all make a vital contribution to the whole.

**1.** What is one to make of the adverse reaction to the policy in the 1966 Book of putting the details of our prayer commitments in the Rules section? Is it sentiment? or a recognition that these details are our main arteries!

**2.** In Paper I, we cited Barry as saying that God is there to be encountered in all experience but we have difficulty in seeing him there. In the Book of the Rule we acknowledge Christ's many presences and commit ourselves to finding him in them. Our spiritual challenge is to be as faith and convincing about these presences as Eugene was about the Eucharistic presence.

**3.** It is around a living sense of Christ's presence that the Book of the Rules centers the unity of our life. This theme is a recurring one in the story of our Rule. The principle enunciated in C 31 is the "state of the art" expression: "We achieve our unity in life only and through Jesus Christ." This we may propose as a fitting final fundamental truth concerning Jesus in our Constitutions.

**I.** We may close with the hope expressed by Father A. Taché for the Rule Commission:

The hope was to discover, at the community and personal level, a way to integrate lived experience with the text's formulation so that what God gives us to live in today's commitment might be really offered to the rest of the Oblate brethren, especially those still in the future (op. cit., p. 202).

## **Appendix**

### **The Lord's call and covenant with us in the Spirit**

I am Jesus the Saviour, Lord, Son, the Christ, divine Shepherd, Bridegroom, Founder.

I was sent by my Father at the appointed time, and filled with the Spirit to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour.

I chose to be born in a stable, I was received by Mary to be shared with all the world. My food was to do the will of my Father. I purchased the Church as my glorious inheritance at the cost of my blood. I will come in the fullness of my justice.

Now I entrust you with the word of reconciliation, and accomplish my work of salvation through you.

I call you within the Church through people's need for salvation to follow me and to proclaim the Kingdom. Come together as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Follow me and share in my mission through word and work. Work more effectively for the salvation of souls and for your own sanctification. Be my co-workers, the co-redeemers of mankind. Preach "Jesus-Christ and him crucified". Follow in the footsteps of the first Christians. Imitate in everything my example. Become "other Christs". Embrace chastity. Practice forms of voluntary penance. Accept the various trials of ministry and the daily demands of community life. Follow in the Apostles' footsteps. From the depths of my mystery, my Spirit moves you to dedicate yourselves to the evangelization of the poor. I wish to draw all hearts to myself and send you out as my co-workers. By the gift of the priesthood I share with Oblate priests in a unique way my own ministry of priest, prophet and shepherd. Oblate Brothers share in my common priesthood

and I may call them to be permanent deacons or priests.

I promise to be with you in my love abiding you, in each act in life, the Eucharist, silent prayer, examination of conscience, sacrament of reconciliation, sacred scripture, community, by the formative activity of my Spirit, other persons and events, new forms of personal and community prayer, in the lives of those who toil, especially among the working poor.

I form you. If you wish to be perfect, sell what you have. My image as the crucified Lord will be a perpetual reminder to you of the humility, patience, charity, modesty and all the other virtues with which you are to carry your most holy and sublime ministry. My call and presence among you today bind you together in charity and obedience to create anew in your own lives the Apostles' unity with me and their common mission in my Spirit. I send my Spirit to form me in you who endeavour to follow in the Apostles footsteps. I am the source and model of authority in the Congregation and your superiors are my stewards.

AMEN

### **Our covenant in the Lord with each other, for God and his Church**

1) As persons consecrated to God through our religious profession, we are disciples, ready to leave everything, pilgrims, walking with Jesus in faith, hope and love, Oblates who dedicate our lives to making visible the Father's love in Jesus and entrust our fidelity to Christ. We will let our Oblation permeate all aspects and activities of our daily life, to be men of God, missionaries rooted in Christ, servants of all by obedience, called to serve, not to be served.

2) To follow Jesus, we come together in apostolic communities of priests and brothers, united to God by the vows of religion, the vows of chastity, poverty, obedience and perseverance, for the sake of the mission.

3) To cooperate with and imitate him, we commit ourselves principally to evangelizing the poor and strive to reproduce in ourselves the pattern of his life.

4) To meet him, we will seek him in apostolic community and make him the principle of unity in our life. We will seek him in the hearts of the people and in the vents of daily life as well as in the Word of God, in the sacraments and in prayer, especially in missionary prayer in the Spirit and in his sacramental (Eucharistic) presence, studying and "listening" to Scripture and in frequent recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in praying and contemplating with Mary, especially the rosary, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We will see him also in our superiors.

5) To be in mission. The cross is central. We will preach "Christ crucified" and live by it, and see the world through its optic. Our principal service in the Church is to proclaim Christ and his Kingdom to the most abandoned, in communion with Christ-given pastors. For the sake of the mission we work for Church unity.

We are united with those who, without acknowledging Christ as Lord, nevertheless love what he loves. We proclaim "who Christ is" through various forms of witness and ministry, but especially through proclaiming the Word of God which finds its fulfillment in the celebration of the Sacraments and in service to others, and by the technical, professional, or pastoral service of Brothers. Our missionary goal is to establish Christian communities and Churches. With daring, humility, and trust, we will seek out new ways for the Word of God to reach people's hearts. We have a prophetic mission to announce the liberating presence of Jesus Christ and the new world born in his resurrection. Our mission is to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to seek it before all else. We fulfill this mission in communities that are a sign that in Jesus God is everything for us. By our choice of chastity, we give witness to the depth of the Church's covenant with Christ, our celibacy is also a sign of the perfect charity which will be revealed only in the Kingdom. Our perseverance is a sign of Christ's fidelity to the Father. The Eucharist is at the heart of our life and action, we offer ourselves with Jesus the Saviour. We will pray the breviary, the prayer of the Spouse of Christ. We will dedicate ourselves to vocation work.

6) To be formed in Christ. We are drawn to know him more deeply, to identify with him, to let him live in us. We will grow in faith, hope and charity, we commit ourselves to be a leaven of the Beatitudes at the heart of the world, to learn from the poor. In the celebration of the Eucharist we will be renewed in the mystery of our cooperation with him, drawing the bonds of our apostolic community ever closer and opening the horizons of our zeal to all the world. We come to a deeper knowledge of the Saviour through Bible study and meditation. In the prolonged silent prayer we make each day we will let ourselves be moulded by the Lord and find in him the inspiration of our conduct. We commit ourselves to times of renewal. In apostolic community we will grow in unity of heart and mind. Inspired by the example of Mary, we will live in creative and ongoing fidelity our personal commitment to Jesus Christ, until we are mature religious, capable of carrying on the Oblate mission. We will provide accompaniment for those in first formation, practice discernment, develop our personal relationship to Jesus and gradually enter into the mystery of salvation through liturgy and prayer. We commit ourselves to ongoing formation. The goal of our spiritual formation is maturity in faith based on a personal decision for Christ.

AMEN

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# Jesus Christ in the Founder's spirituality<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

### A. The questions

1. Jesus asked Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" An on receiving the answer he affirmed: "It was no human agency that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven" (Mt 16:17). Fully explicated, the question that Peter actually answered could be phrased: "Who does the Father say Jesus is for Israel?".

2. We are putting a like question to Eugene: "Who does the Father say Jesus is for Eugene's own life and for our life as Oblates?" We hope that the answer to this question will clarify our own identity as a principal constitutive element of our charism is disclosed.

3. Correlative to this question is another: What is Eugene's response to this Christ? It is in this response that Eugene's personal spirituality is found. This is an inspiration for Oblates, but it is not as such as constitutive element of the charism.

4. Our task then is an inquiry into the way God worked in Eugene's life, into the relationship lived between Jesus and Eugene.

### B. Methodology

1. Our focus will be primarily on Eugene's religious experience, considered as an experience of relationship with God: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. We need to get inside his experience to find the answer to our questions. We can do this to the extent that he shares his inner experience with us, which is far from totally. But, as Father Jetté points out:

Eugene de Mazenod is an apostolic man; his spiritual journey is practically inseparable from his missionary activity. So it proves to be very difficult to determine the stages of his interior life relying solely on interior events or graces which would signal entry into a new stage ("Eugene de Mazenod. Son Expérience et son enseignement spirituel" in *VOL*, 50(1991), p. 250).

In this perspective we realize that our inquiry is not focused solely on interior experience but must draw light too from life as a missionary.

2. In our inquiry we need the guidance of a spiritual master to interpret this experience. It is appropriate to turn to St. Ignatius who had a profound influence on Eugene's spirituality, and in particular to an exposition of St. Ignatius' spirituality as developed by his Jesuit sons in our own way when it has seen a renaissance and there has been a deepening of the way in which spiritual development is understood in that tradition, making use of contemporary insights into interpersonal relationships.

3. William Barry, a distinguished exponent of cotemporary Ignatian spirituality, in his *The Development of the relationship with God from Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with God* (Paulist Press, 1992, p. 61-71) writes as follows: "I will try to sketch out a developmental pattern that corresponds to an interpersonal view of the dynamic of the *Spiritual Exercises*" (p. 63). This dynamic, as we know, carries a participant in four "weeks" through the mystery of Christ. It provides a paradigm of the Christian's journey through life. At the same time the participant's experience of ups and downs, union and resistance, in the course of a typical 30-day retreat, reveals the meaning of the vicissitudes experienced by the Christian in his/her life's journey considered as an on-going, developing relationship with God.

4. This is just the kind of tool that we need to bring to our task of interpreting the way God worked in Eugene's life and thus glimpse the answer to our questions.

5. Barry points out: "A person's experience of another can be largely a projection of his/her own fears and past relationships." This is true also of that person's experience of God, which is why we need the guidance of a spiritual master like Barry to help us discern what is and what is not of God in Eugene's experience.

6. Eugene himself is no stranger to the language of relationship. We have but to read a passage like the following from his 1814 Retreat Notes (*Oblate Writings* 15, D. 130) where he is meditating on venial sin, to appreciate that we are not forcing an alien methodology onto our material:

Sixth meditation:... venial sin...

How much I need to consider that the least venial sin is a greater evil than every worldly evil is; be it ever so trivial, it remains always God who is offended... To gauge the effect it must have on God, I have but to examine the effect had on me, a wicked creature full of imperfections and faults, quite unworthy of love, etc, I do not say of a premeditated insult from someone to whom I have demonstrated concern, to whose good I have tried to contribute, whom in short I love, but a simple failure of attention which brings home a certain indifference, etc. I feel a coldness in my heart towards him, a lessening of my concern; it is already a lot if I do not dwell on some means of meting out some punishment by some reproach or an equal show of indifference to that he has shown me. ...Was it just, could I claim that the Lord should mete me out any other treatment than as an unprofitable servant, insolent, inattentive, etc.? Since I know the reason for these coldnesses of the Spouse, why not put it right? It seems that this lovable Saviour wished, even this year, to show me extraordinary favours on some occasions...

## I. The affective principle and foundation of Eugene's relation to God

A. Where does the pattern begin to unfold? According to Barry, begins with what he calls "The Affective Principle and Foundation". Here clearly he has in mind the "Principle and Foundation" of the spiritual exercises. He is suggesting that there is an affective experience in a person's interpersonal life that functions in the way what the "Principal and Foundation" functions in the dynamic of an Ignatian retreat.

The first real step towards a closer relationship comes with the experience that the other person really cares for me which elicits from me the response of gratitude to and trust in that person. When this attitude is relatively firmly established in me, I have what might be called the affective foundation for the positive development of the relationship. In the case of the relationship with God what needs to be established is what I have called the affective Principle and Foundation... (p. 63)

This affective principal and foundation can be called the experience of having a spiritual identity, a real relationship to God. It is the experience of wholeness that allows one to know brokenness, the experience of being loved and lovely that precedes the experience of sinfulness, the experience of enjoyment and oneness with God that enables a person to see the present state of self and world as a fall from grace. Without such an experience of God's primordial love and care a person remains rooted in a distant, perhaps scrupulous, perhaps resentful relationship with God (p. 64).

B. Can we show how in Eugene's life the affective principle and foundation of his relationship with God comes to be laid down? We think so. For surely this is a valid way of interpreting Eugene's religious experience that culminated in the Good Friday experience of 1807. We must examine this latter experience carefully. It was an experience that he seems to have kept to himself (except probably from his spiritual directors) as the only direct knowledge we

have of it is his Retreat Notes of 1814.

Can I forget the bitter tears that the sight of the cross brought streaming from my eyes one Good Friday? Indeed they welled up from the heart, there was no checking them, they were too abundant for me to hide them from those who like myself were assisting at that moving ceremony. I was in a state of mortal sin and it was precisely this that made me grieve. I could tell there was a difference between this time and some other similar occasions. Never was my soul satisfied, never did it feel such happiness; for in the midst of this flood of tears, despite my grief, or rather through my grief, my soul took wings for its last end, towards God its only good whose loss it felt so keenly. Why say more? Could I ever recapture what I experienced then? Just the memory of it fills my heart with a sweet satisfaction. So I looked for happiness outside of God, and outside him I found but affliction and chagrin. Blessed, a thousand times blessed, that he, this good Father, notwithstanding my unworthiness, lavished on me all the richness of his mercy.

### C. The Experience Itself

Let us first explore this experience so far as we can in itself.

1. The experience consisted in a sight of the Cross, with the figure of Christ crucified on it, perhaps with a representation of blood pouring from the wounds, in the Good Friday liturgy, perhaps at the moment the cross was unveiled.

2. It was not an experience had in solitude but in public, in a church congregation.

3. It moved him to uncontrollable tears for his sinfulness. At the same time it was full of consolation: his tears were also tears of joy. It was an experience of mercy. It was an experience of tasting the divine love, encountering the divine love, and of tasting and seeing the miserable state he himself is in.

Can we go further and say it was an encounter *with Christ*? In this account (which we must remember dates to 1814) Eugene never once refers to Jesus Christ: he refers to a "sight of the Cross" and to "God" and "this good Father". He is in fact meditating on man's final end, end when he refers at this point and in this context to "God we think he has in mind "God the Father". Just a little later in his retreat notes he puts before each person the choice: "...he will be our Judge or our Father. The choice is ours".

The matter does not end there however. After all, an image of Christ was at the heart of the 1807 experience. What is more, when later in the same Retreat Notes of 1814, in the 13<sup>th</sup> meditation, Eugene described his "conversion" as being an experience of being "ambushed" by Christ, he is surely describing yet again his Good Friday experience (Alexandre TACHÉ, *La Vie Spirituelle d'Eugène de Mazenod*, Rome, 1963, p. 42-43). For these reasons we think that the experience was itself truly an encounter with Christ, the God-Man, through his image on the Cross.

4. He felt a qualitative difference between this experience and other times when he repented. The difference was felt in his soul's satisfaction and happiness, its depth of affectivity.

5. The experience was felt as having its origin outside of himself. This in another qualitative difference between this experience and other times when he repented. It is possibly the first of the two occasions referred to by Eugene in his letter to Forbin-Janson dated October 13, 1815. (Father Pielorz posits another experience as being the first of these two experiences: a special grace to overcome his hesitation about going to the seminary. Does this tally with Eugene's description of that decision, which he is at pains to stress came as a result of a careful process of consultation and prayer extended over a period of time? [Pielorz, *ibid.*, p. 152; LM to his mother, OW 14, D.49]).

6. Eugene experienced it as a dynamic reality: its power to move him was not exhausted on that day. Its memory still moves him in 1808. Its power is such that Eugene testified that he felt his whole life had to be a response to it, a response that ultimately will include the foundation

of the Oblates:

... (My soul) must offer itself every day as a holocaust to thank him for snatching it from the hands of the devil, from the jaws of hell; it must be melted, emptied, at the thought that only has this excellent, rich, generous Master displayed his power on its behalf to withdraw it from vice, but he has willed to choose for it a home, to call it to a state from which, in bringing it close to Jesus Christ, places it in the happy necessity of centering its thoughts solely on this divine Saviour, of serving him with more ardour, loving him without cease (1908 retreat resolutions: OW 14, D. 28).

**D.** That then is the experience. The justification of our interpretation of it as the laying down, so to speak, of "the affective principle and foundation" of Eugene's relation with Christ will emerge from our consideration of the background to the experience and its fruits. Eugene himself theorizes about it in his own account, in the context of the retreat he is engaged in: he explains it as a return to the pursuit of his true end as a human being and Christian. Such theorizing of course is not part of the experience itself but at some remove from it. It is as close as could be to the interpretation we are offering: Eugene is here affirming St. Ignatius' own "Principle and Foundation" as the new rock of his life. We recall that his retreat in 1814 was Ignatian.

### **E. The Background to the Experience**

While we focus on the 1807 experience in his 25<sup>th</sup> year as the culminating point in Eugene's life for the laying down of his foundational affective relationship to God, we must look too at his life of faith prior to that year. The whole of a person's life is a journey of faith. All experience mediates the presence of God. Barry writes: "At every moment of our existence we encounter this creative presence of God, but we are only intermittently aware of the encounter" (p. 105). Barry acknowledges the fundamental role of other people, especially one's family, in bringing one to an encounter with God. He does not develop it here however. In an attempt to come to some deeper understanding of Eugene's life preceding Good Friday 1807, we will use another developmental pattern, that of James W. Fowler, one of the leading American developmental theorists and research of today, as he sets it out in his work *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 1984.

1. Eugene did in fact have a very strong life of faith from his infancy. It will have brought him through the normal stages of what Fowler calls primal faith, mythic-literal faith, and synthetic-conventional faith. Primal faith is: "the acquisition of a basic trust. Primal faith arises in the roots of confidence that find soil in the ecology of relations, care, and shared meanings that welcome a child and offset our profound primal vulnerability" (p. 53). Eugene, the first-born male son of an aristocratic but pious family, was blessed in his infancy with the love and care lavished on him.

As dependable realities who go away but can be trusted to return, our primary care givers constitute our first experience of a superior power of wisdom, as well as our dependence. These primal others, in their mixtures of rigidity and grace, of arbitrary harshness and nurturing love, are doubtless present in the images of God that take more or less conscious form by our fourth or fifth years (p. 53).

The infant Eugene lived in a benevolent universe, with a benevolent though lofty God. Of this period of his life he narrates:

...God placed in me I would almost say a kind of instinct to love him; my reason was not yet formed when I loved to dwell in his presence, to raise my feeble hands to him, listen to his word in silence as if I understood it. By nature lively and irrepressible, it was enough to bring me before the altar to make me gentle and utterly tranquil, so ravished was I by my God's perfections as by instinct, as I said, for at that age I could not understand them. What a happy augury these early beginnings were, had I been faithful to this wonderful way of grace...

While his family may not have been precisely a school of sanctity (Pielorz, *op. cit.*, p. 31), it was the precious vehicle for the transmission to him of his core religious values and also of his capacity to relate in a trusting way at both the human and supernatural levels. As Peilorz writes:

His mother, and especially his affectionate grandmother, Mrs Joannis, as good Christians, would watch over his religious and moral formation; Zeze learns to put his little hands together, to make the sign of the cross, to genuflect, to pray and praise his Creator (p. 34).

2. "Intuitive-projective faith" is a time when

perception, feelings, and imaginative fantasy make up children's principal ways of knowing - and transforming - their experiences. The ordering tendencies of logical operations will come later. For now, stimulated by experience and by stories, symbols and examples, children form deep and long-lasting images that hold together their worlds of meaning and wonder (Fowler, p. 54).

So we find Eugene at play delighting in playing the priest and preacher (PIELORZ, *op. cit.*, p. 61). Eugene's deepest images from this period of his life were those of pre-revolutionary France, of King and Pope, or aristocracy, a society in which he and his were rightly leaders, and also of other strata of society where there was often acute need. Eugene's image of God will have been formed in this context and coloured by it.

3. "Mythical-literal faith" emerges as children's mental processes develop;

In their thinking about right and wrong, good and evil, they can develop a strong sense of fairness based on reciprocity (this means elevating the associations of reward for doing good and punishment for doing bad to the level of cosmic principle). Faith becomes a matter of reliance on the stories, rules, and implicit values of the family's community of meanings. Where the family... is related to a larger community of shared traditions and meanings, faith involves valuing the stories, practices, and beliefs of that tradition... Narrative or story is the important idea here... Knowing the stories of 'our people' becomes an important index of identification and of evaluation of self and others and their groups (Fowler, p. 56).

Eugene passed through this stage too in pre-revolutionary times. It is now that he will have been imbued with his family's sense of loyalties: to Church to Pope, to King, and with their paternalistic sense of responsibility too to the less fortunate. From his father he will have imbued the traditions of provincial nobility: unlimited loyalty to the King, a sense of pride, dignity, honour and good manners (PIELORZ. *op. cit.*, p. 31). In his self-portrait written in 1808 in the seminary he recalls:

It was quite normal for me to give away my breakfast even when I was hungry to satisfy the hunger of the poor. I used to bring firewood to people who complained of the cold and of not being able to afford it. On one occasion, I almost gave away the clothes off my back to clothe a poor person, and many, many other stories in the same vein.

4. "Synthetic-conventional faith" is

a stage that typically begins to emerge in early adolescence... By observation and experience, they have found that either adolescence... By observation and experience, they have found that either God is powerless with regard to punishing evil people and rewarding the good, or God is 'asleep'. The God, therefore, who is constructed on this basis of moral reciprocity effectively dies and must be replaced. Such an experience involves, to a greater or lesser degree, coming to terms with feelings of anguish, struggle, and possibly guilt and grief... At the synthetic-conventional faith stage, a person holds a synthesis of belief and value elements that are derived from one's significant others. The

elements themselves, then, are conventional, although they may be formed into a novel, individual configuration... It is a synthesis of belief and value that has... a largely 'tacit' (as opposed to 'explicit') character. By this we mean that the beliefs, values, and stories that compose a person's faith outlook and support her/his emerging identity are not yet objectified for critical reflection by that person. The synthesis is supportive and sustaining; it is deeply felt and strongly held; but it has not yet become an object of (self) critical reflection and inquiry. In this same stage one is *embedded* in her/his faith outlook, and one's identity is derived from membership in a circle of face-to-face relations (Fowler, p. 60).

Eugene's synthetic-conventional faith stage may be placed in his years of exile: in his journey from Aix to Nice to Turin to Venice to Naples to Palermo and the collapse of the charmed world of his childhood. "Significant others", to use Fowler's term, were not lacking in his life: especially his father and uncles, his mentor Zinelli in Venice, and later in Sicily the Duchess Cannizzaro. Under the tutorship of Zinelli he begins a new education of his faith and his call to priesthood is first heard. In his later life he attached great importance to Zinelli's influence. In June 1814 he wrote his friend Forbin-Janson: "It is to this holy priest I owe the little shoot of piety I cultivated so badly. But for him I would have known God" (OW 15, D.125).

The period can be illustrated by his Venetian "profession of faith":

I firmly believe everything the Church commands me to believe, and detest the jansenistic and other errors contained in this book. I am writing this so that it may be known that, although this book is my profession, in no way do I adhere to any maxims contrary to the constant teaching of the holy, catholic apostolic Roman Church, which is one and indivisible, and will be so until the end of the world (OW 14, D.1).

In the abrupt and cruel wrench from Venice to Naples where he leads a dreary meaningless existence, he will certainly have been challenged by the apparent indifference of God to the evil being done all around him, and despite his exemplary behaviour in Venice! His sense of call to priesthood quickly wanes (see PIELORZ, *op. cit.*, p. 66) and we may see in this waning a questioning of his former simple faith. A new Eugene emerges, less innocent and with a biting tongue, with an adolescent's self-assertion and peer-group dependence and yet still amenable in Sicily to the wholesome influence of a new mother-figure, the Duchess of Cannizzaro. His faith is a part of his world and he continues to hold it.

We savour this new Eugene in his critical review *On the book entitled Reason, Folly, to Everyman his Opinion* (OW 14, D.2) of which we give a short extract:

...I am unable to see how he draws the conclusion from this story that there is more to be got out of changing one's gods than one's priests. It is not only time he shows the latter his claws. But this is the vogue today. It provides latter his claws. But this is the vogue today. It provides an explanation for everything... The third between Death A and B is a bitter piece of nonsense. It is true that in it he has found the way to show up a Jesuit to the least advantage. It was today's vogue at work again: it brooks no contradiction. It was a case of making fun of the dead, so as to satisfy one's rage against the living.

5. At the time of his Good Friday experience, 1807, we would see Eugene as being in transition from this stage to yet a new one, that of "individualized reflective faith". It was the jolt of his return to Aix that stimulated his transition to this stage.

Fowler sees two fundamental movements at the heart of a transition to this stage:

(1) There must be a shift in the same sense of the grounding and orientation on the self. From a definition of self derived from one's relations and roles and the network of expectations that go with them, the self must now begin to be and act from a new quality of self-authorization (p. 62).

Let us pause to see how this is verified in the case of Eugene.

In August 1802 he is painfully separated from his father, uncles, noble Sicilian friends and benefactors; he is equally painfully inserted into a suffocating, feminine, narrow-minded family in a society that has usurped his privileges and ignores his talents. At this period of his life he experienced disorientation and a sense of aimless drifting that gave rise to frustration and anger, even desperation, as we see in his rather wild plan to return to Sicily to seek his fortune, and in the way he talked about marriage. This is principally the period that, with whatever justification, he would refer to later as his time of serious sinfulness. Gradually his character asserted itself and he began to take control of his life. He acknowledges the help his father gave him to achieve his emancipation which resulted in his life taking a wholly new course. When finally he begins to see his way clear through this fog, he writes to his father:

As to myself, it is more than likely that my father's absence has set my destiny on a course quite contrary to what the feelings of my heart, in the past so eager for glory, seemed to hold out for me. I will perhaps be all the happier for it if I am able to turn my scarcely voluntary inactivity to my heavenly profit, an inactivity that I would never have shrugged off without the advice and counsel of a father as enlightened as mine... (For a commentary on this letter, see PIELORZ, *op. cit.*, p. 139).

The movement that has been described is not to be confused or identified with psychological adolescence and its assertion of independence vis-a-vis parental authority. Adolescence in itself does not move a person out of conventional patterns of faith. As Pielorz shows, the experience of adolescence began to show itself unmistakably in Eugene's life while he was still in exile: in Naples and especially in Palermo (*op. cit.*, p. 101).

We return to Fowler:

(2) There must be an objectification and critical choosing of one's beliefs, values and commitments, which come to be taken as a systematic unity. What were previously tacit and unexamined convictions and beliefs must now become matters of more explicit commitment and accountability (p. 62).

This process too we see going on in these years, in Eugene's dialogue with the Jansenist Roze-Joannis, in his wrestling with the realities of the Church in France and his acceptance of the Concordat, in his critical reading of the controversial Chateaubriand, in his friendship with and pastoral counseling of the young military surgeon Emmanuel Gauthier de Claubry, not least in his confrontation with the pastoral needs of the poor.

Pielorz notes: "...the letters of Eugene de Mazenod, from the end of 1806, allow us to discern a certain transformation taking place in his soul..." (*op. cit.*, p. 140). By about Christmas, 1806, Eugene is beginning to think again about the priesthood (LM to mother, April 4, 1809; PIELORZ, *op. cit.*, p 140-141).

It was to a young man in this state of ferment that the grace of Good Friday came. It was in the fertile seedbed of this ferment that the grace took root. It met with little resistance. Barry remarks: "Resistance to a closer relationship with God prior to the foundational experience derives primarily from the false images of God people have formed during their early years..." (p. 64). Thanks to his upbringing, there was little that was false in Eugene's image of God and his soul opened readily to this revelation of a loving, crucified Saviour.

## **F. Fruits of the Experience**

1. As we have seen, Barry describes the effect of a foundational experience of this kind as being the acquisition of a spiritual identity and the creation of a real relation to God. If Eugene were asked at this time: "Who are you?", in the depths of his soul he would have answered: "I am the one who has received God's mercy, one saved by the cross of Jesus, a brand plucked from burning...". And if he were asked: "Who do you say Jesus Christ is?", he would have replied simply, "My Saviour." And in this word "Saviour" would be contained all the joy and tears and

gratitude of this experience. As Maurice Gilbert puts it: "This grace of conversion made him rediscover with all its fervour the original orientation of his life: the priestly vocation. Nay more, it rooted his life once and for all in Christ the Saviour" (*Oblate Life*, trans. Fred Sackett, OMI, Ottawa, 1967, p. 22).

2. Father Giovanni Santolini sees the experience as being genuinely "theological territory":

For St. Paul, the moment and modalities of his conversion become the aspect through which he enters into the mystery of God, and one cannot understand his theology if one does not start with his experience of Christ begun on the road to Damascus. Due proportion being observed, one cannot understand Eugene if one does not begin with his experience of Christ the Saviour in whom is comprised and revealed God's whole love ("Les thèmes fondamentaux de la théologie de Mgr de Mazenod", *VOL*, 46(1987), p. 104).

3. However, Eugene did not become, in and through this experience, a solitary adorer of Christ. The experience was profoundly ecclesial in all its aspects. And Eugene already had an identity: he was a baptized member of the Catholic Church, in communion with the Holy Father the Pope. This identity was one he felt very strongly, it was an integral part of his conventional synthesis of faith. What was new was his personal relation with Christ *within that Church*. We must see this experience as enhancing, not only his relation to Christ, but his relation to "church". The Church as well as Christ becomes the focus of his affective attachment in a personal way. And his new-found passionate love for Jesus Christ translates itself immediately into action expressive of an equally passionate love for the Church. The feelings that moved him then find expression in his letters to his mother shortly afterwards (see e.g. OW 14, D. 46). Thus for Eugene the mystery of the Church is inextricably bound up with the mystery of Christ. (see Angelo D'ADDIO, *Cristo Crocifisso e la Chiesa Abbandonata*, Frascati, 1978; see also however Lamirande in "The Blood of the Saviour", *Selected Oblate Studies and Texts*, p. 135).

4. This is not surprising. The Jesuit student of mysticism, W. J. Johnston, writes:

I say unhesitatingly that there are three sources of Christian mystical experience: (1) the Word of God in sacred scripture, (2) the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, and (3) the Word of God in the community called the Church (*The Wounded Stag*, Collins, Fount Paperbacks, London, 1985, p. 9-11).

5. The 1807 Experience was surely of the Third category. Angelo D'Addio has studied this experience in depth. He writes:

If Mgr. de Mazenod had followed his master Don Bartolo from his years in Venice at a time when his vocation seemed really already formed, what kind of a priest would he have become? This is a hypothesis that flies in the face of history but that brings us up before the thought of the importance of the purification God subjected him in these years. It was only then that all that aristocratic world that marked his whole existence crumbled. His outlook will still remain *aristocratic* throughout his life, but he has the capacity to open his soul to the poor and to become one of them because he has met the Poor One in the Crucified One ("Eugene de Mazenod et le Christ", *VOL*, 38(1979), p. 175).

Angelo D'Addio, then, sees in this experience the roots of Eugene's mission to the poor.

**G.** Eugene moved swiftly into action. Confirmed in his desire to give himself entirely to God, he returned to fervour (LM to mother, March 23, 1809) and within about a year and a half he was a seminarian at St. Sulpice. He had overcome his repugnance to being responsible for ending the De Mazenod line, he had found the emotional strength to deal with the resistance of his mother, he had energetically consulted with the best directors available on the discernment of his vocation (LM to mother, April 4, 1809; see Peilorz, *op. cit.*, p. 150-151). As Eugene



proclaimed in a spiritual conference dated March 19, 1809 (one of his fast days):

You restored my flagging courage, and helped me overcome the obstacles that every day grew more. Helped by your powerful grace, I overcame without difficulty, nay joyfully trampled underfoot the barriers that vanity, the world's false prejudices, and even more a misplaced tenderness for persons you command us to honour and love, but to whom you wish to be preferred, seemed ever to place between the altar and myself...

## II. Seminary experience: St. Sulpice (1808-1812) - Plumbing the depths of Christ's love

A. How does interpersonal relationship evolve on the basis of this "Foundation"? How does the pattern unfold? Barry sees it unfolding as a "Rhythm of Withdrawal and Return".

The pattern of withdrawal and return characterizes all our relationships throughout our lives, including our relationship with God. The withdrawal shows itself in our resistance to God's offers of intimacy, and return in the overcoming of the resistance. The latter always requires the grace of God (p. 65).

Barry then instances various modes of this rhythm, following the pattern of the spiritual exercises, beginning with "Withdrawal because of Real Sin". Barry warns us that:

Once the foundation is firmly established, the next step seems to be taken when people experience themselves as sinners... while the foundational experience of God's love comes as a surprise and feels undeserved, at this new stage people begin to see themselves as unworthy because of personal sin. 'God created me out of love and brought me into his friendship. Look what I have done to him! Could God really still love me with all my past sins and my present sinfulness?' God seems distant once more... The withdrawal from and resistance to closeness to God now seems to come from the realization of how 'unholy' one is before the Holy One. The resistance here, too, is based on an illusion, but one founded on the fact of one's sinfulness. The illusion, however, is the belief that God does not love sinners, especially when they are stuck in sin. God comes close again (in experience) when I realize that God loved me, sins and all, that he let his beloved Jesus die for me. I personally accept Jesus' dying for me even though Jesus and the Father know exactly I have been and am (p. 66-67).

B. Let us see how this is verified in Eugene's life after he set out for St. Sulpice.

There is nothing in Eugene's life more palpably the result of grace than his years in the seminary. Stepping across the threshold of the seminary was a great victory in his conquest of self, his first living-out of his foundational grace. Some of the exterior aspects of this conquest we have already mentioned above (see I, G: mother's opposition, etc.). The interior conquest could only be won in the life of the seminary itself: laying aside his creature comforts, entering into comradeship with his social inferiors, above all *facing the reality of himself*. It is this last aspect that we must focus on in our study of his unfolding relationship with Christ.

1. On the one hand we see in Eugene's seminary years how firmly the foundation is laid. The seminary's regular life with its rich fare sacramental life, community life, doctrinal instruction, pastoral work, and spiritual direction, is food and drink for his hungry soul. He partakes of it all unstintingly.

2. On the other hand we see being made visible before our eyes just such a process as Barry refers to: Eugene begins to see a stark contrast between the holiness that surrounds him and himself. He begins to allow his sense of his spiritual poverty and sinfulness to impinge on his relation with the Lord. We are in the presence of a withdrawal. The relationship cannot move forward until this obstacle is overcome. A condition of Eugene's making further progress in his relation with Jesus will be his successful negotiation of this obstacle. As Barry puts it, it is a quite normal obstacle to meet with at this stage. (cf. Y. Beaudoin, OW 14, p. XXVII, where he refers to

Eugene's "delicacy of conscience" at this stage).

**C.** Our sources here are chiefly the retreat notes Eugene made in these seminary years and they highlight these sentiments.

1. The texts we will cite, with their assertions of sinfulness, ultimately even of "mortal sin" in the passage we have already seen from his 1814 retreat notes, have been the subject of much Oblate commentary. What was he referring to? it is asked. (for a balanced discussion, see Beaudoin's introduction to *Spiritual Writings I*: OW 14, p. XXI-XXVII). That is not the question that holds our interest at this point of our inquiry. The relevance of these assertions to our inquiry is what they indicate about Eugene's state of soul at the time he made them, rather than as pointers to what he had done in the past.

2. In his retreat resolutions of 1808 we read:

I cannot pretend that I am other than unworthy, and very much unworthy, of living among the saints who form this truly heavenly house. I must abase myself profoundly in view of iniquities which should have closed to me for ever entrance into the sanctuary. My sins must be always before me so as never to forget I am last of all in the eyes of the just God... If men could only see me as I really am, however great their charity, they would not be able to endure me.

I have betrayed, sold, abandoned, crucified the Just One...

I am unworthy of ever clothed what a character so awesome at least to a man who has had the misfortune to live for so long in forgetfulness of God.

Could I ever have doubt about my very great need of penance!

...this body, unworthy tool of sin, this body which has so often drawn into excesses which turned it into God's irreconcilable enemy...

So I will give thanks to God that, while during my sojourn in this world I was accustomed to win approval, and was pampered, feted, and respected by all around me, I will give thanks to God, I say, for finding myself here one of a crowd of people who, more virtuous than I...

Finally to punish myself for the creature comforts I overindulged in the world, and the kind of fondness I had for certain vanities, I shall observe poverty in my cell...

In a word, not having, unfortunately for me, imitated St. Aloysius Gonzaga...in his innocence...

3. In a set of prayers that Father Yvon Beaudoin dates as probably belonging to 1808, we find the following:

How still imperfect, my God, is my conversion; the root of sin lives on in me; the thoughts and memory of the world are still powerfully at work; the things I have renounced retain their hold on my imagination, and reawaken baleful images. My heart, still weak, is quite disturbed by it, and in the midst of this disturbance it feels all its passions coming back to life; it takes but little for it to be ensnared. Is this what it is to be perfectly God's? My inconstancy in the little good I do, my God, is no less humiliating for me; full of good desires, I am often satisfied with their formulation, almost all my zeal is used up in the making of plans; I fluctuate between yielding to grace and to my own desires, while time flows by, I journey swiftly towards eternity, and I am always the same. Shall I all my life be the plaything of the enemy of my salvation? Make firm, my God,

my inconstancy, wholly change my heart; inspire within me, for my salvation, the same zeal I showed for my damnation.

Have I come back to you, my God, only to burden myself more with the greater crime of falling back into sin? In all conscience, is my ingratitude to match the greatness of your love? Am I to meet all your bounty with but a new tissue of sin? My God, shorten the course of my life, rather than permit the demon to re-enter my heart.

Can I hide from myself how awful such a state would be, my God, after what you have yourself made known to us in the Gospel? A sinner who is still unconverted is in the power of but a single demon, but a sinner who relapses lets a legion of impure spirits into his soul.

Eugene then lives with the anxiety and dread of failing to persevere in grace. This is his worst torture. He remembers with sorrow and even horror what life was like before he was found by Christ. We are far here from the consolation of Good Friday. We are in a phase of withdrawal, taking distance from God.

Even, so, my God, I feel within myself a fatal flaw, which while alerting me to my weakness, gives me too every reason to be afraid; I feel that I am carrying in a fragile vessel the treasure of the grace with which you have enriched me; in view of this danger, how can I not be afraid? I turn to you, my God, God of goodness, Father of mercy, remove far from me every evil occasion which has in times past been so fatal; give me the strength to sacrifice to you everything that might bring my passions back to life, close my eyes to all the vanities of the world, make me insensible to those of which I will be an involuntary witness; project my heart from all the wicked impressions it may receive from the different objects which surround it, in a word, inspire me with indifference, distaste, hatred even, if needs be, for all that could claim a share in a heart that should be wholly yours. Alas, I have come so late to serve you, I have waited almost until the last hour: at least, my God, let nothing in the world have power any more to separate me from you, or deflect me from your service.

A bitter experience has taught me all too well, my God, that dissipation has been for me a source of sin: how many times, led on by this dissipation, have I lost sight of you, my God? How many times have I forgotten my most essential duties; and allowed myself to be lured by love of creatures; today by the prior intervention of your grace, at a time I was most unworthy of it, I have come back to you my God; at last I have left the path of iniquity, to enter in the way of justice; what happiness for me! What good reason for thanksgiving!

But I cannot hide the fact, my God; I am ever the sinner; my passions, ever alive or at least ever ready to rear their heads, forever urge me against my duties, and my still sluggish heart pays them heed. Should the same occasions present themselves, I feel a sense of danger, they may induce me to abandon your service.

Even so on the pretext of a necessary break, I yield too much to my senses, pleasures and dissipation; I allow myself to be led too much by my vivacity; I do not take adequate precautions against my concupiscence, the impressions of the world, the devils' wiles, I do not watch enough over myself, over dangers to which I am exposed. A baneful state for salvation. Open my eyes to the danger, my God; reawaken my zeal, strengthen my faith: terrified by the danger to which I am exposed, sustained by the power of your grace, I will bemoan my condition; I will pray with more ardour; I will redouble my vigilance so as to work efficaciously for my salvation.

4. When he began his seminary training, Eugene did realize that he must not abandon himself to thoughts like these:

Even so these sentiments, just though they are, must not wholly fill my heart, fear of the dreadful judgments of a just God must not so fill it that the trust I must have in his mercy cannot find entrance. Ah Lord, what would become of me, if I dared not approach your adorable heart to consume in the midst of the flames of your love all that must pass through that furnace if it is not to be fuel for the accursed fires of hell. No, no, my sorrow will not be like that of the traitor Judas; after acknowledging I have betrayed, sold, abandoned, crucified the Just One, I will not become my own enemy and flee his holy and blessed presence, I will run to him, I will throw myself at his feet, confess my ingratitude, and he will pardon me... This God of mercy came among us only to call sinners, it is to them he addresses the gentlest words, he pursues them, holds them to his heart, carries them on his shoulders. Ah Lord, I do not ask for that, I will count myself very lucky if you enable me to follow in your footsteps, but above all forgive me, deliver me from the unnumbered host of enemies who are ever set on my downfall, strengthen me at least against their onslaughts, I place my trust in you alone, Lord, hear my prayer (OW 14, D.28, p. 58).

Would the spiritual formation of St. Sulpice help Eugene to resolve this problem? Cosentino summarises Sulpician spirituality as follows:

(St. Sulpice) draws its spirituality from the dogmas of faith, and especially the dogma of the Incarnation. Incorporated in Christ by baptism, and receiving from this source the Holy Spirit who comes to dwell in our soul, we must, in union with the Incarnate Word, glorify God who lives in us and imitate the virtues of Jesus, giving battle stoutly against the adverse tendencies of the flesh and the old man to bring to life in us the new man according to the ideal lived by Christ: *Vivere summo Deo Christo Jesu* was the motto of the Seminary of St. Sulpice. St. Paul's text: *Hoc enim sentite in vobis quod et in Christo Jesu* (Phil 2'5) is the fundamental text of this school. From this one drew the conclusion that Christian life is the life of Christ in us and that we must live as Christ lived on earth, copying his virtues and being inspired by his sentiments; to this end, throughout the day one must think and act as Jesus would have done in our place. One can discern 3 characteristics in this spirituality: it is theocentric, christocentric, and practico-perfecti (*Histoire de Nos Règles*, I, Ottawa, 1955, p. 167).

This high ideal was little calculated to help Eugene, if anything it heightened the tensions he was feeling in himself. The spiritual conference he delivered on March 19, 1809, should be read in its entirety, but this short extract will make the point:

a)...There you have the features that characterize my model. How can I but be dazzled by such a pure and brilliant light? and are not my fears justified when I consider that far from having the least resemblance to the one I must of necessity imitate, there is nothing in my life that is not in stark contrast with such virtue. Jesus challenges his implacable enemies to find a single sin in him. My dearest friends, however prejudiced they might be in my favour, could not but agree that I am the greatest of sinners. The Saviour's whole life is totally consecrated to his Father's glory. Mine, alas, could scarcely muster a few moments of non-resistance to his grace. The heart of Jesus burned for love for us. Mine is deadened in its devotion. At the very moment when the immaculate Lamb has just forced his persecutors to admit he is sinless, he humbles himself, and far from showing any complacency over the advantages such an admission gave him over his despicable adversaries, he immediately adds these remarkable words: "If I glorify myself, that glory of mine is worthless"... (Jn 8:54). While for my part, none of whose actions may yet have found acceptance with the just Arbiter of merit, scarcely have I accomplished the most ordinary act of the commonest virtue when I imagine I have filled heaven and earth with consolation and joy (OW 14, D.48).

At the close of the conference he expresses a defiant trust that he will conquer in the end, but it is a defiance that would be easily deflated, as we see when we move on to the retreat notes of 1809.

b) Alas! What a sorry thought! I have spent 27 years in this world, and here I am with nothing to show for it for the next life. I cannot however blind myself to the fact that I was created and placed on this earth only to serve God, and acquire by my works sufficient merits to reach heaven. When I look back over my past life, I see only disorder, iniquity on my side, a pouring out of grace on God's side. The most signal of all these is to have pulled me back from the abyss to set me at the foot of his throne in his sanctuary (OW 14, D.62).

5. Finally we come to his priesthood retreat, December 1811, a retreat spent doing the Ignatian exercises under the guidance of Father Judde's book. Again we come up against his deep consciousness of his sins:

But who am I, miserable sinner, to want to love very purity and sanctity! Ah! I am well aware that in the sins of my past I made a quite different choice; I gave myself over to the devil and his perverse works. See there the master I served, see there the one I loved. My God! Although that hideous period is now far distant, it is still present to my mind. May I never forget it!... And so I am convinced that I have never really loved you. But whom did I love in your place? The devil. Yes, it is the devil who has been my god, it is to him I have prostituted my whole being!... Meditation on the prodigal son. To my shame, this parable never applied to anyone better than it does to me... Seeing the graces which have been given me and which I have profaned, and in spite of which I have sinned, I acknowledge myself as the man who stood in most need of redemption... (OW 14, D.95).

D. But as fruit of this retreat we find the new note we have been waiting for: a consciousness that God loves him "sins and all". The illusion that God does not love sinners is beginning to crack. A movement in his relation to God is approaching. The moment of renewed intimacy with God was to come to him in new transcendental experiences as he began to say Mass as a newly ordained priest.

1. The tears begin to flow again as he writes to his mother on ordination day:

L.J.C. Amiens, (December 21, 1811)

Dear, darling mother, the miracle has been wrought: your Eugene is a priest of Jesus Christ. That one word says everything; it contains everything. It really is with a sense of deepest lowliness, prostrate in the dust, that I announce such a huge miracle worked in such a great sinner as myself. Dear mother, I have not the strength to say more. Every moment is precious in the state in which the grace of such a tremendous sacrament has placed me: I have to say in a state of total recollection to savour what it pleases God in his goodness to have me taste in the way of happiness, consolations, etc. What shall I say? the tears are flowing, or rather streaming down; they ought to flow forever, as they take their source in the most tender of loves and are simply the expression of a most just gratitude, a feeling I will bring with me into blessed eternity. I leave you now, dear, darling mother. I have three days still to get used to the idea that I am a priest and prepare to celebrate the divine mysteries on the delightful night our lovable Saviour is born in a stable. I was on retreat from the first day of Advent; it was none too long to prepare the ways, to open my heart to the best of my ability for his coming in me. I pray I have not placed any obstacle to the fullness of his Spirit which he was disposed to pour out in me by the grace of ordination! (OW 14, D.97).

2. At the same time he wrote a note for himself and Father Duclaux:

My good friend...urged me, at the time of his own ordination, not to forget to write down what my feelings were when my own turn came. As I think I have captured them in the letter I have just written to Mr Duclaux, my spiritual father, I shall now make a copy of it.

Very dear and beloved Father, I am writing this on my knees, prostrate, overwhelmed, stunned, to share with you what the Lord, in his immense, incomprehensible mercy, has just accomplished in me. I have already for the first time offered the awesome sacrifice with the Bishop. Yes, it is me, it really is me, the wretched sinner whose turpitudes you are familiar with, who has immolated the immaculate Lamb, or at least he has immolated himself through my ministry. Dear Father, I fancy I am dreaming when I bring to mind what I am. Joy, fear, confidence, sadness, love enter one after the other into my heart. **The thought uppermost in my mind and that I get quite lost in is this: so this is how God in his goodness avenges himself for all my acts of ingratitude, by doing so much for me that, God through he may be, he can do no more** (emphasis added). After this, could I ever again be tempted to offend him? Truly this is the moment to reply: it were better to die a thousand deaths.

My letter could not go off yesterday. I am writing at a time when my heart overflows, to coin an expression of the Apostle's in a moment like the one I am experiencing. **If the underlying sorrow for my sins, that it always with me, still persists, it is also true that love has changed its nature** (emphasis added). Is it possible, my beloved, that I could have offended you? How can it be that I offended you, you who at this moment seem to me so wonderful? Can it really be that a heart that loves you as much as mine could bring the smallest frown to your face! And two streams of tears flow with peace and sweetness, and the soul in a state of ravishment it cannot put into words, any more than the other things I am experiencing. I do not know what it is, I do not know how it is. But one thing I see with clarity is that I shall be deserving of hell if ever I deliberately offend against God in his goodness, even in the most venial way. I am priest! You have to be one to understand what it means. Just to think of it sends me into transports of love and gratitude, and **if the thought of my sinfulness recurs, love abounds all the more** (emphasis added). *Jam non dico vos servos* (Jn 15:15) etc. *Dirupisti vincula mea. Tibi sacrificabo hostiam laudis* (Ps 115: 16-17) etc. *Quid retribuam Domino* (Ps 115:12) etc., are like so many arrows that pierce this heart that has been so cold until this day. If meeting God in holy communion has such an effect on me, how will I be able to say Holy Mass on Christmas Eve? It will be evident to everybody what the Lord is doing within my soul. This is the only thing that bothers me: it has brought me to the pitch of wanting, I dare not say asking, that I will not be affected so perceptibly and for so long a time (OW 14, D.98).

#### E. The Experience Itself

Let us explore this particular experience as we did that of Good Friday 1807.

1. It is an experience of loving communion with Christ in the liturgy of ordination and reception of communion at the ordination Mass, but it goes on more or less continuously when these are over. He wants to stay with it.
2. As the Good Friday experience, it is not an experience enjoyed in secret, in private, but in public liturgy with the People of God all around.
3. It brings tears of peace and sweetness, an overflowing heart in which joy, fear, confidence, sadness, love enter one after the other.
4. It is a healing experience. He knows that something new has happened to him, that his anxiety over his sins has given way to a deeper love of God in which his only care is lest he hurt God. The sorrow for his sin is still there, but it is no longer a festering wound.
5. Again it is clear that it is something done for him, not by him.

6. Again its effects stay in his memory to be recalled, dwelt on, enjoyed, profited from.

#### **F. The fruit of the Experience**

Eugene himself has told us what the fruit is: the healing of anxiety over his sins.

1. Barry remarks:

This experience also takes time and may need to be repeated in many different ways, but when it takes root, it frees people radically and relatively permanently from the kind of crippling fears that keep them focused primarily on themselves and their own protection. The response is gratitude and the desire to do something for the Lord (p. 67).

How this desire to do something for the Lords finds expression in Eugene's life we will examine more closely in the next section. Suffice it to indicate here that, once ordained, Eugene is indeed empowered in himself for the work of the apostolate.

2. Barry uses a strong expression: he speaks of "crippling fears". Where there any signs in Eugene's life in the seminary that his anxiety over sinfulness was potentially "crippling"? We do not think so. Rather we would judge that Eugene "fought a good fight" and maintained a healthy equilibrium in his seminary years despite his fears and was thus saved from going down that road. The general tone one picks up from his letters of this period is one of great vigour, of faith being put into action. One should read, e.g. in OW 14 his letters to his mother dated January 4, 1809 (D.40), February 4, 1809 (D.44), April 4, 1809 (D.50). This "public face" of Eugene is no false mask but quite genuine, but we must let it blind us to the sight of the interior struggle he was waging. That struggle as we have said above is a quite normal one at this stage of a person's spiritual growth. The grace we have described is the fruit of that struggle.

**G.** Barry also notes: "At least by this stage of the journey there is an experience of a distinction of persons in God since Jesus and God experienced as somehow distinct yet identical" (p. 67).

1. In his verbal prayers, of course, and in his reflections, Eugene addresses each of the divine Persons freely and often: we know the prayers that entered our own Oblate prayer book that Sulpician prayer was strongly Trinitarian. But it is one thing to say prayers and reflect, it is another to "encounter".

2. In his ordination retreat, most of Eugene's dialogue is with "God": see OW 14, D.95 passim. It is the same with Eugene's post-ordination experience described in OW 14, D.98. But his final remark in his note to Father Duclaux does I think suggest an encounter with the Person of Christ: "Starting with the days preceding ordination and especially after ordination, I think I know O.L.J.C. better. What would it be like to know him as he is!" (OW 14, D.98).

3. And even more precious is the remark: "If **meeting God in holy communion** (emphasis added) has such an effect on me, how will I be able to say holy Mass on Christmas Eve? It will be evident to everybody what the Lord is doing within my soul." A plainer assertion of an encounter with the God-Man in the Eucharist could not be desired.

4. It is important to reflect back on the Good Friday experience of 1807 in this light. What we find 1811 certainly reinforces what we concluded in our discussion of the 1807 experience (see 2.32 above).

**H.** Who then is Christ for Eugene at the time of ordination? The same Saviour whom he met on Good Friday 1807, but one who is known more deeply. He is the Christ of the ordination retreat: "very purity and sanctity" OW 14, D.95, p. 214), the "sovereign Mediator, whose precious blood, this says it all, had expiated greater and more numerous sins than my own" (p. 215). He is God in the Eucharist (D.98). Eugene is his priest. Eugene knows him even better now. What is known more deeply is Christ's love, which embraces the sinner as sinner and is inexhaustible. The founding of Eugene's identity on his knowledge of Christ as his priest is establishing itself. It is as a priest that he now knows Christ.

1. We can further enrich our picture of Christ as seen through Eugene's eyes at this time if we read back through his seminary letters and reflections. He is a Master who has designs for Eugene (D.27). His "adorable heart" is a purifying furnace (D.28), p. 58). He is "God of mercy" who "are among us only to call sinners" (*ibid.*). In his humanity he was the "most excellent of sons" (D.29, p. 63). He is the "God of love" received in holy communion (*ibid.*), the Lord whose presence at weddings brings blessings (D.32, p. 73); "Master of the world and Sovereign Dispenser of graces" he is reduced to "poverty weakness and misery... for love of men" (D.37, p. 84). In union with him, we are in union with fellow-believers (*ibid.*, p. 85). Offended by blasphemers, he is consoled by sacrifice (D.45, p. 99). Without sin, he is on earth a pure and brilliant light, a model, totally consecrated to his Father's glory, his heart burns with love of us, immaculate Lamb, sinless (D.48, p. 108ff). He is a good Master who wills to make us sharers in his resurrection (D.50, p. 113). He is heavenly food essential for Christian living in the world (D.57, p. 129; D.59, p. 135; D.75, p. 167; D.90, p. 199). He is the "Master of his creatures" (D.60, p. 137). "Even the most trivial act done in the same of O.L.J.C. will count for us" (D.64, p. 145). "King of Heaven consubstantial with God his Father, the Holy One, the Just, the Omnipotent", he takes on the humiliations of the Incarnation (D.77, p. 171: this whole spiritual conference on the mystery of the Incarnation should be read). He is "our King" (D.93, p. 209). While noting the richness of this panoply, let us not too that we do not yet catch more than a glimpse of the Lord who called him and sent the Twelve (in D.50 he refers to himself as "moved by God's Spirit to imitate J.C. in his active life of teaching his divine doctrine..." there is a meager reference in D.66). Eugene has a "high" Christology but also a strong conviction of the very warm humanity of Christ.

2. What spirituality has Eugene evolved in the course of these years? We have that it is one of vigorous self-discipline in pursuit of Christian and priestly virtues. Along with this he has developed a strong and demanding pattern of piety (see e.g. OW 14, D.24, 28, 31, 39, 62, 85). With particular reference to our theme we can point to Eugene's growing Eucharistic devotion, expressed in a desire to receive the Eucharist himself as frequently as possible and to have others - in particular his family - do so too (cf. Fabio Ciardi, "Eucharist in the Life of Eugene de Mazenod", *VOL*, 38(1979), p. 208-213; OW 14, D.59, 75, 78, etc.), and also in practice of adoration (*ibid.*). By this time in his life too his practice of making the Eucharist and the Sacred Heart a place of rendez-vous with his love ones is already deeply embedded. It goes back at least to December 1807 when he wrote to his friend Emmanuel Gauthier de Claubry:

Let us fix a spiritual rendez-vous in the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ every Sunday at 10:30 a.m., an hour at which the holy sacrifice is solemnly celebrated in every church. There we will pray at the same hour for our mutual needs, and through our union, we will so to speak compel the tender heart of our Redeemer to apply in our regard in a special way the merits of his Passion and Death (OW 14, D.22).

Let us make a closure with these words that Beaudoin dates to the end of December 1811. Eugene asks:

Do we resemble J.C.? Do we imitate Jesus Christ with all our strength; do we live the life of J.C.? Then we shall infallibly be saved. Every other mark of predestination is highly equivocal, or can be reduced to the above (OW, D.101, p. 232).

### **III. Early experiences of ministry and founding of the congregation (1812-1826): Following in the footsteps of Christ**

**A.** We come now to the period, as crucial for us Oblates as it was for Eugene, when the Oblate charism was given and the Institute founded, the time when Eugene's personal journey became also our journey, his inspiration the mainspring of an Oblate way of life.

He was burning with zeal. Barry tells us:



The experience of radical freedom from the fear that (one has) been rejected by God shifts a person's focus away from the self toward the Other... People who are ready and willing are led into a dynamic of a developing relationship with Jesus. They want to know Jesus better, to know his values, his dreams, his vision, his loves and hates, in order to love him more and follow him more closely. The dynamism for this desire is the Holy Spirit who draws each of us toward a more intimate relationship with Jesus (p. 67).

All this describes Eugene's spirit at this time. All through his seminary years Eugene had expressed a desire to evangelize the poor. Now he was to plunge into this work with brilliant success. There was no abrupt break with St. Sulpice, indeed he continued on there for a year as a director, and when he did return to Aix in October 1812, he maintained his contracts with M. Duclaux and his Sulpician outlook. He had uniquely assimilated its spirituality and outlook to such an extent indeed that he would find serious difficulty in adapting his spiritual program to the very different circumstances of active apostolate.

2. Indeed, the theological framework within which that spirituality was offered has been judged as lacking in breadth and vision and all sense of the history of salvation (Santolini, *op. cit.*, p. 100). It viewed the Incarnation solely from the aspect of redemption and focused in an exaggerated way on man's sinful condition (p. 105). These traits were not unique to St. Sulpice, they were rather baneful legacy of Jansenism.

3. Beautiful, and very Sulpician, but also very personal, are his thoughts of Jesus at this time.

I will take as my model of this worship that I love God, his adorable Son Jesus Christ our lovable Saviour, for whom I will try to have the most tender of devotions and the most ardent love, having in my mind and even more so in my heart the memory of his generosity. And recognizing too that I am as incapable as I am unworthy of loving him, I will ask him this grace every day in the holy Sacrifice, and one hundred times each day with this ejaculatory prayer: *My Jesus, give me your love.* Ah! The battle will be won if I have this devotion for J.C., one that should be par excellence that of a priest (OW 14, D.109).

And again:

I will meditate on Jesus my love in his Incarnation, his hidden life, his mission, his passion and death; but especially in his Sacrament and Sacrifice. My chief occupation will be to love him, my chief concern to make him loved. To this I will bend all my efforts, time, strength, and when after much toil I have succeeded in winning but a single act of love towards so good a Master, I will consider myself well paid.

I will continually recommend my soul to this good Saviour that he may preserve it from all sin, and I will so press my attentions on him during the time he sees fit to make himself accessible as so to speak dependant on me, what I may have grounds for hope that he will be favourable to me on that terrible day when he is my Judge (OW 14, D.109).

4. In his Retreat Notes of 1814 he gives us perhaps his lengthiest writings on Jesus: these may be read in their entirety in D.130. Here we see Eugene coming more strongly under the influence of Ignatian spirituality. The image of the Two Standards and enrolment in Christ's army against the empire of the demon becomes dominant in Eugene's faith outlook.

a. One notes especially three places in these meditations where Eugene's affectivity as well as his head is involved: the second meditation where he recounts his 1807 experience, meditation six where he describes Jesus' coldness towards him because of his lukewarmness, and the fourteenth meditation on the humility and humiliations suffered by Jesus in the Incarnation. The latter may be a sign of the nature of his resistance to founding a society of missionaries.

b. Again we must note that nowhere in this retreat, not even in the meditation on the Two Standards, do we catch a glimpse of the Lord who called and sent the Twelve (cf. III, H, 1).

5. But living out his demanding program of spiritual exercises (see D.107) and simultaneously carrying out a selfless apostolate (see D.116) let to consolidate stress and anxiety which he expresses in his retreat notes, December 1814 (D.130). He was locked in a genuine perplexity from which he would never completely escape: see e.g. D.140, dated by Beaudoin to 1816-1817, and D.166, dated October 1832. (on the period 1812-1818, see A. TACHÉ, *La Vie Spirituelle d'Eugene de Mazenod*, Rome, 1863). It is a genuine problem. How can one avoid the absurdity of activity "for the Lord" failing to lead to the Lord who is "the source of all activity"? (Cf. CRIS Directives 1990, n.3). Today we borrow the Ignatian language of "contemplation in action" to talk of this problem in spiritual terms, while in psychological terms we speak of "burn-out", but the only language Eugene had to describe it with was the language of sin. His description of his state is accurate: "I have quite lost the interior spirit." His diagnosis is valid: "I have become too forgetful of myself." But his judgment is moralistic and his remedy narrow.

6. However, this perplexity, seriously worrying though it was for him, was not in fact his major spiritual challenge at his time and we shall not pursue it here. More dangerously, and perhaps making use of this perplexity as a rationalization for an escape into monastic life, there lurked a fear in Eugene that blocked him from taking the step he was being drawn to take: his 1814 Retreat Notes show clearly that his mind is in fact set on a life of active apostolate but he still cannot bring himself to make a commitment to a definite project (see TACHÉ, *op. cit.*, p. 55-56).

7. It will take a very special grace of the Holy Spirit to resolve his crisis, as he relates in his letter to his friend Forbin-Janson, dated October 23, 1815, i.e. ten months after his retreat.

Now I ask you and I ask myself how I, hitherto unable to make up my mind in this matter, suddenly find myself setting wheels in motion, renouncing my comfort and risking my fortune by launching an enterprise of which I know the worth but for which I only have a liking negated by other and diametrically opposed views! This is a riddle to me and it is the second time in my life that I see myself moved to resolve something of the uppermost seriousness as if by a strong impulse from without. When I reflect on it, I am convinced that it so pleases God to put an end to my irresolution. And in such a way that I am engaged to the hilt (OW 6, D.5; see TACHÉ, *op. cit.*, p. 60-70).

8. The rest of the story we know: the foundation of the Missionaries of Provence in 1816, the expansion in 1818 and the requirement of a Rule, the conflict with diocesan authorities and and eventual papal approbation in 1826 of the Rule of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

### **Analysis of the Experience**

**B.** God called Eugene to the active apostolate. Eugene held back. Why? Again we turn to Barry and his Ignatian reading of spiritual experience to understand the nature of Eugene's fear:

1. As they progress in this dynamic of companionship, they experience the attraction of Jesus, but also the resistance to and fear of being chosen as his companions. Again we see the rhythm of withdrawal due to fear, but here the resistance to a deeper intimacy with Jesus is much more realistic: those who take on the values of Jesus do often suffer persecution and martyrdom... If fears of loss and suffering dominate our hearts, then we cannot have what we most deeply want at this stage, namely, intimate friendship with Jesus where affective union means being united with Jesus' goals and strategies (p. 67-68).

2. For Eugene, following the call to active missionary apostolate would mean "loss and suffering" on the planes of lifestyle and spiritual comfort. He clearly expresses his aversion to the renunciation involved in such a choice (see above IV, A, 7). He feared to renounce "his comfort" and to risk "his fortune by launching an enterprise of which I know the worth but for which I only have a liking negated by other and diametrically opposed views" (cf. TACHÉ, *op. cit.*, p. 33-41,

especially p. 36).

3. Here then is our key as we look at Eugene's inner life over these critical years. He is facing the challenge of "resistance to and fear of being chosen as (Jesus') companion" in the precise way that Jesus wants. He has to make a leap of faith and accept the hardships inherent in the missionary project that was forming in his mind under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He had an intuition of what it would cost him in human and spiritual terms to become the leader of a missionary band in rural Provence, what it will cost him in terms of renunciation, abnegation. Helped by a special grace, he overrode his fears and went where the Lord was drawing him.

### The Fruit of Experience

C. The fruit of this experience is a yet closer intimacy for Eugene with Jesus, as his companion in apostolic work, as an "apostolic man", the grace "to beg to be chosen" (Barry) as his companion and to be imbued with his Spirit, to "want to be affectively and effectively united to Jesus where affective union means being united with Jesus' goals and strategies" (Barry, p. 68).

1. From this close union with Jesus, and with others of like mind, come a new power: that of giving birth to new life, a reaching out to share a new life with others, a

desire to be of service to others and to confront unjust powers and structures just as Jesus did. Intimacy with Jesus, if it is real, does not lead to a true 'me and Jesus' spirituality feared by some social activist (Barry, p. 68).

In Eugene's case this grace of productivity took on the very special character of a founding charism.

D. Who then, we now ask, does Eugene say Christ is, not simply for himself and his own life, but for us Oblates in the illumination of his grace as Founder? For an answer to these questions, we turn to Eugene's Oblate correspondence of this period in OW 7.

E.1. Taking up OW 7, the letter to Father Aubert (D.3) yields nothing.

2. The letter to Tempier, however, dated October 9, 1815, yields a precious nugget: "If presently we are not more numerous, it means we wish to choose men who have the will and the courage **to walk in the footsteps of the apostles** (emphasis added). It is surely significant that it is at this grace-filled time that Eugene first turns to this image as expressive of his inspiration.

3. The letter to the community, dated July 1816 (D.12), has a noteworthy postscript:

I want you to change the end of our litanies; instead of saying JESU SACERDOS, we must say CHRISTE SALVATOR. That is the aspect under which we ought to contemplate our divine Master. Our particular vocation is such that we are associated in a special manner with the redemption of men; the Blessed Liguori has likewise put his Congregation under the protection of the Saviour.

4. Another important statement comes in the letter to Tempier, dated August 22, 1817 (D.21): "Our Lord Jesus Christ has left to us the task of continuing the great work of the redemption of mankind. It is towards this unique end that all our efforts will tend..."

5. From D.29 (to Tempier) we cite:

... all (the Society's students') actions ought to be one with the dispositions in which the Apostles were when they were in the Cenacle waiting for the Holy Spirit to... give them the signal to go forth swiftly and conquer the world...

6. In D.38 Eugene writes to an inquirer:

The missionary, being specifically called to the apostolic ministry, should aim at perfection. The Lord destines him to show forth anew... the

marvelous things that were done of old by the first preachers of the Gospel. He ought then to walk in their footsteps...

7. In D.47, dated November 1819, he writes to Father Tempier who is on mission:

God be praised, my dear friends and **true apostles!** My heart is afflicted by your situation but rejoices at the same time to see you sharing the fate of our **first Fathers**, disciples of the Cross (emphasis added).

8. From these texts three images or symbols have emerged:

- for us Jesus is the Saviour, who calls us to be coredeemers;
- we are to follow in the footsteps of the Twelve as missionaries sent by Jesus;
- our way of life is imaged for us by the Twelve in the Cenacle.

The naming of Jesus as Saviour is an element of continuity in Eugene's experience of Jesus. The focus on the twelve is new, and these two elements are the central ones in the vision Eugene proposes for himself and his missionary companions in his Oblate correspondence at this time.

**F.** What are images and symbols in his correspondence are to be translated into a variety of literary forms in the primitive Rule: juridical norms, faith statements, pastoral directives, explanatory statements and exhortations. The Founder is not an experienced draftsman: he leans heavily on the reliable precedent of the Redemptorist Rule of St. Alphonse both for his over-all structure and for the very words of a great many articles. Many other saintly voices too echo in the text, called in aid by Eugene to enhance its spiritual authority. He has, however, his own preoccupations and these lead him to frame some personal statements that are of special value to us. In the primitive Rule, then, Eugene addresses the task of making his intuitions concrete. We focus on the place Jesus occupies in the Rule: how do the Constitutions describe his (Jesus') activity in relation to the gift of charism? How does the presence of Jesus make itself felt in the various relationships constituted by the Constitutions?

**1. Jesus is the principal Founder of the Institute.** Eugene bursts forth in the Nota Bene:

What end more sublime than that of their Institute? Their Founder is Jesus Christ, the very Son of God; their first Fathers, the Apostles. They are called to be cooperators with the Saviour, co-redeemers of the human race.

A founder does two things: he conceives the spirit and aim of the institute and he calls it into existence. Jesus does each of these things:

- he conceives the spirit and aim of the institute when he gives it its primary end which is none other than the end he set himself on coming into the world (the Nota Bene);
- he moves priests to desire to join it (Foreword) and constitutes the members as his co-workers, co-redeemers of mankind (Nota Bene).

**2.** From the beginning **entry into the Institute** has been by oblation according to the formula we are all familiar with: IN THE NAME OF OUR JESUS CHRIST... This is made in the very presence of, and directed to, the Eucharistic Christ. As we have seen, in the 1818 Rule Jesus plays the key role in incorporating members into the institute: he moves priests to desire to join it. And to have "a great love for Jesus Christ" is one of the major criteria for discernment of vocation: "One must have a great desire for one's own perfection, a great love for Jesus Christ and his Church, great zeal for the salvation of souls..." (Third Part, Chapter 2, #1 --- 1826 Part Three, Chapter 2, # 1).

Eugene does not elaborate on the vows. There is of course at this time no vow of poverty, simply the spirit of poverty is proposed.

*Si vis perfectus esse, said Our Lord, vende quod habes.* The first

Christians were faithful in following this counsel to the letter. They had still present the example their divine Master gave them, who willed to be born in a stable and to die on a cross after living a life of complete deprivation... There are more than sufficient reasons to decide us in our Institute which wants to walk in the footsteps of the first Christians and according to the spirit of the holiest religious Orders, to adopt this essential aspect of a perfect and religious life.. (Second Part, Chapter 1, #1 --- 1826 Part Two, Chapter 1, #1, -- 1928 art. 176)

The vow of chastity "was most dear to the Son of God and most necessary for a Gospel worker." The vows of obedience and perseverance are not given a Christological context.

**3. From the beginning Oblate ministry has been as a relationship with Jesus Christ.** It consists essentially in such a relationship.

In article 1 of the 1818 Rule the relationship is one of **imitation**:

The purpose of the Institute known as the Missionaries of Provence is firstly to form a society of secular priests who live together and strive to imitate the virtues and example of our Saviour Jesus Christ, mainly in devoting themselves to preaching the divine word to the poor (Part One, Chapter 1, #1, art. 1 --- 1826-1928 Part One, Chapter 1, art. 1).

This is reaffirmed and developed in the text: **Concerning other Principal Observances.** Here the whole life of the missionaries is seen as patterned after that of Christ and the Apostles:

It has already been said that the missionaries ought, as far as human nature allows, to imitate in everything the example of Christ our Lord, the chief Founder of our society, and that of the holy Apostles, our first Fathers. In imitation of these great models one portion of their life will be given to prayer, recollection, contemplation, while living together in the seclusion of God's house. The other will be wholly consecrated to exterior works. Whether out on missions or at home, their chief study will always be to make progress in the way of religious perfection... In a word, they will, in imitation of Christ, spread abroad everywhere the fragrance of his amiable virtues.

In Part 1, Ch. 2 on the missions, we notice how the superior sends out missionaries as Christ sent out the Apostles (see lines 128-155). If possible they go forth on foot "to imitate and honour the journeys and weariness of Our Lord and the Apostles when they went through the towns and villages, there to proclaim the Kingdom of God" (lines 159-164). The mission culminates in the planting of the Cross (line 401).

In **Nota Bene** text the relationship of the missionaries with Christ is that of **co-worker, co-redeemer** of the human race. They are seeking to restore the Church which is the "beautiful heritage" of Jesus Christ. And their methods are a radical imitation of his:

What did Our Lord Jesus Christ do? He chose a certain number of apostles and disciples whom he trained in piety and whom he filled with his own spirit; and after schooling them in his teaching and in the practice of all the virtues, he sent them out to conquer the world which, before long, they were to subject to his sacred laws. What must we do in our turn, if we are to succeed in winning back to Jesus Christ the many souls who have thrown off his yoke? We should seriously strive to become saints; we should courageously walk in the paths trodden by so many apostles who have left us such beautiful example of virtue in the exercise of the ministry to which we have been called just as they were; we should wholly renounce ourselves... ready to sacrifice possessions, talents, ease, even life itself for the love of Jesus Christ.

In Part I, Ch. 3 on preaching, it is asserted that the missionaries like the Apostles are to preach "Jesus Christ and him crucified..." (line 50). In the same chapter "on confession", the missionaries are seen as ministers of reconciliation: "For God was truly in Christ, reconciling the world to himself", etc. (line 82). Christ makes them fecund with a power to regenerate souls (line 90-92).

This Christ whom they must follow and imitate is not the perfect Adorer of the Father of St. Sulpice: he is the militant Christ of St Ignatius, the evangelizer of the poor of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Luke. *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me. Pauperes evangelizantur* is their motto. He is the "Christ crucified" of St. Paul (Father Drouart).

4. The dynamic role of Jesus in Oblate community has been disclosed in the studies of Ciardi. The key text is again that **Concerning other Principal Observances**.

As an ideal, we are referred to the life of the Apostles, and the Oblate community is seen as the continuation of that community made up of the Apostles who were the first to become other Jesus Christ and who were the first to spread everywhere his 'fragrance', thanks to their preaching (F. CIARDI, "Fisionomia e natura communita oblata nel periodo della fondazione (1815-1818)", in *Claretianum*, XVI (1976), 173-275, cited by G. Santolini in "Mission Through Apostolic Community According to our Constitutions and Rules", VOL 49(1990), p. E207-208).

5. Jesus is the focus of prayer life in the Institute. In the section on prayer and pious exercises we read:

Mental prayer will be made in common twice a day, in the morning, after morning prayer, for at least three quarters of an hour; and, in the evening, around in the altar, in the manner of a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, for half an hour. One will meditate especially on the theological virtues, and on the virtues of Our Lord Jesus Christ, for these should be exemplified in the life and conduct of our members. Every month they will choose one particular virtue of this Divine Model, and will endeavor to practice it with ever-increasing fidelity. They will make these same virtues the subject of their particular examens and spiritual conferences (art. 19; 1928 art. 697).

Novices must apply themselves to honouring, in a special way, the hidden life of Jesus Christ. They will count themselves happy to have this mark of resemblance to our Saviour, who, from the age of twelve to thirty, lived unknown to almost everyone. Jealously following in the footsteps of his divine model, their sole concern will be to imitate in their conduct what he did in his private life; thus they will live in perfect obedience to the orders of the superior and in the exact practice of all the Rules of the Institute (Third Part, Chapter 2, #2 -- 1826 Part 3, Chapter 2, #2, arts. 10,11 -- 1928 arts. 707, 708).

G. The Pontifical Rule of 1826 and the other editions up to and including the 1928 edition have all these same elements that we have cited from the primitive Rule, with the exception of the Foreword and the Nota Bene. Instead of these we have the Preface, where Christ appears as the "Saviour", the very Son of God, who was sent by his Father to purchase his "glorious inheritance" the Church "at the cost of his blood", sent "to preach the Gospel to the poor", sent to redeem the human race, and who is himself the sender of the Apostles as "co-workers", "co-redeemers", "whom he himself trained in piety", "filled with his Spirit", and "sent forth, once they had schooled in his teaching, to conquer the world which, before long, was to bow his holy rule", the opponent of Satan and destroyer of the dominion of hell. He is the Christ of the public ministry. Perhaps inadvertently the Preface omits reference to Jesus as the true Oblate Founder. But the body of the Rule does contain this affirmation obliquely.

We should note that in the 1826 Rule and editions dependant on it we do not find the statement cited above from the 1818 Foreword that it is the Lord who gives missionaries their desire to come together in community. In the Preface the accent is on the call of the Church (second paragraph). At the same time, the language of the insistence on love of Christ as a criterion of discernment of vocation is strengthened: the candidate must be "enflamed" with such a love.

H. A Rule is a practical affair, and Eugene was a practical man. Here he passes through faith statements to works, the works specifically of evangelization. What links does he see

between these statements and the work of evangelization?

1. Eugene makes these statements in the Rule because they reveal the title, and the only title, by which he and his fellow missionaries will be assured of the grace they need for the mission to which they are called. For him Jesus the missionary is also that Saviour of 1807 who has been the source of all his spiritual energy, who brought him through the seminary to ordination and its delights, who brought him through the anxieties of his early years of ministry, preserved his life when he lay at death's door. That Saviour is now calling him and his fellow-missionaries to take up and carry on the very mission that he took up. He knows the power of Christ. Whatever one may say about Eugene's theology, what we have seen of life assures us of this: he has a personal knowledge of Christ. And his sole concern is that in their mission he and his will cleave to that Christ. Thus Ciardi sees here the very principle of the unity of the lives of the missionaries, the solution in fact of the vexed question of the "two parts", a perspective in which the whole Rule should be read and understood. Father Drouart taught likewise. Father Jette remarks that the only synthesis of the spiritual life (Eugene) wrote is the book of the *Constitutions and Rules* of his Institute (*op. cit.*, p. 286). Here we are at the heart of that synthesis. Oblates must be with Jesus as the Apostles were. They must live as the Twelve Apostles lived. That is really the whole Rule. *Hoc fac et vives*.

#### **IV. The assault of the forces of darkness (1827-1841): An apocalyptic hope in the Lord**

In effect we have no answered the main question we put at the beginning of the paper. There will be no radical change in the way Eugene sees the Oblate Christ. What does continue to develop is Eugene's personal relation with Christ, and with it Eugene's affirmation of the Oblate call.

A. We have seen that Eugene enjoyed a particularly "sunny" childhood, in the last days of the French monarchy before "the deluge". Despite their danger and hardship, his years of exile were not in the main a depressive experience. His first experience of Provence on returning in 1802 was decidedly depressing, but the resilience of youth, God's grace, his rediscovery of meaning in life, the fruitful years of the seminary, the restoration of the monarchy, the successful foundation of the missionary society and the glory of the first missions, the blessed experience of Rome and papal approbation, not only of the Rule but of himself, all contributed to give Eugene a psychological and spiritual buoyancy which enabled him to support all the huge stresses that also belonged to these years and build up his relation with God in the way we have seen.

B. He was now to "enjoy" a very different experience. One could make a comparison with the experience of Job! Messenger after messenger arrives with news of disaster. Well may Father Robert Moosbrugger talk of a temptation to despair (*The Spirituality of Blessed Eugene de Mazenod*, Rome, 1981, p. 142). First there were the deaths of Oblates most dear to him: Marcou, Arnoux, Dumolard, Suzanne, Capmas; and also Nathalie de Boisgelin, Pope Leo XII. Then there were the illnesses: Dupuy, Reynier, Albini, Guibert, Mye, Courtes, his own. The young Congregation suffered a dearth of talented vocations. On top of it all, on a wilder canvas, and probably the heaviest trial of all, a second "deluge" threatened and was in part realized: the July Revolution, 1830.

"Wretched are these times and detestable is the influence of this age on minds!", he wrote in 1830 (OW 7, D.351). "Although I expect each day more bad news, when it arrives it is impossible to ward off a profound impression of sadness, especially when domestic sorrows come and pile themselves on top of the burden already too heavy to bear" (OW 7, D.359). Again,

I have intimated to you in several letters... that my opinion would be that his Lordship depart for Italy in order not to be exposed to all the troubles that, at his very advanced age, could affect his morale to the point where his health would suffer considerably (OW 7, D.361).

He writes of the "trials and perplexities" facing Tempier, of the "tedium of life mingled with bitterness of adversity", of his own "sorry position" (OW 7, D.362). "It is worse than in the other revolution" (OW 7, D.363). "We cannot hide from the fact that the persecution is

beginning... it is unbelievable how the morale influences my sorry person physically. My heart is heavy, it beats with difficulty and too fast" (OW 7, D.375).

Even in this dark period, however, there are too moments of spiritual consolation:

This morning, before communion, I dared to speak to this good Master with the same freedom that I would have had if I had the happiness to live when he walked on earth, and if I had myself in the same predicament. I said Mass in a private chapel, I was not impeded by anyone's presence. I exposed to him our needs, asked his light and his assistance, and then I surrendered myself entirely to him, wishing absolutely nothing else than his holy will. I took communion in this disposition. As soon as I had taken the precious Blood, it was impossible for me to withstand such an abundance of interior consolations that it was necessary, in spite of my efforts not to reveal before the Brother server what was on my soul, to utter sighs and shed such a quantity of tears that the corporal and altar cloth were saturated. No painful thought provoked this explosion, on the contrary, I was well, I was happy and if I was not so miserable, I would believe that I was loving, that I was grateful. This state lasted quite a long time... (OW 7, D.212).

Well may Ciardi say: "(Eugene's) moments of most intense communing with Christ were experienced while he was saying Mass" ("The Eucharist in the Life and Thoughts of Eugene de Mazenod", VOL, 38(1979), p. 206; Lamirande makes a similar point).

**C.** Looking most closely at some of the events of this period, we see that 1831 is a year full of difficulties but also of intense activity. In this year he feels the full horror of the political revolution of the previous July, with its atrocities, blasphemies, attacks on the Church and its teaching. His response is one of political neutrality, despite the opposition which his natural sympathies would have inclined him to. For safety's sake, he has transferred the scholasticate to Billens in Switzerland: he promotes the growth of a strong formation program using the resources at his disposal. He endures the disappointment of not getting the mission in Sardinia he was seeking and which he judged to be important for the growth of the Congregation and also the death of one of his best men, Father Capmas. He writes to Father Mille in Billens:

An immense apostolate is closed to us. They are turning down a providential offer of assistance: God knows how greatly they stand in need of our ministry! The fault will not be laid at our door. I have done everything that depended on me, nothing remains but to lament how hard it is to do good in circumstances where so many succeed in doing evil and to adore God and his ways even when I find them very hard. It is the disposition I have tried to adopt in the latest misfortune which has befallen us, for I felt deeply the loss of our dear Father Capmas (OW 8, D.383).

Previously he had written to Father Tempier:

One must confess that sickness and death are finding their mark amongst us in an uncanny way: men less submissive to God's will than ourselves would be dismayed. The thought does not discourage me - I think that this is because I am sufficiently used to bending myself to the impenetrable designs of divine Providence (OW 8, D.380).

Through the whole year there is a dreary and thankless administrative gring as Vicar General, to which his response is to stay faithfully at his desk, writing letter after letter, document after document.

Towards the end of the year he is on retreat, the notes of which have been preserved. The opening words reveal a certain stress and his anxiety over the spiritual state of the Congregation:



The reflective reading of our Rules I have just made during this retreat has filled my soul with wonder, and has raised in my mind a number of disquieting thoughts I have to put down on paper. The shame of having in one's hand so perfect a code, and of not having grasped its meaning! Are there not indeed some among us for whom this code is a sealed book? I want to believe that there are none any longer, but it is enough for the possibility to exist for my reflection to stand and make it food for thought. If everyone had been able to read this book, we would not have had to deplore the loss of many whom God will judge (OW 15, D.163).

1. 1832 saw his consecration as Bishop of Icosia. In itself this was a most consoling experience. He went into his ordination retreat somewhat unwilling and jaded (cf. D.431, D.433). However, "patience and resignation...won the day" and brought in their train "spiritual consolation and true interior joy in solitude" (D.435). And after his episcopal ordination he was to write:

The Holy Spirit, the object of so many saintly people's prayers, made his appearance on the great day, and I assure you that not a day passed since then, and I could even say an hour, that he has not imparted ineffable spiritual experiences to that person whom he deigned to choose sanctify... (OW 8, D.437).

And again he goes on to pledge himself to total fidelity to grace.

Despite these conditions, however, it was to prove to be an event that led to exceptional trials: his denunciation to Rome by the French Government as a political agitator. His shock on discovering his need to defend himself in Rome, the ongoing persecution he endured from the French Government, the seeming coldness of Rome to his plight, his resulting pastoral inactivity: all these took a heavy toll of him emotionally. The trial was further compounded by another cholera epidemic in the region where the Oblates were working.

2. The lowest point was probably 1834-1835. In 1834 we find him filling in the same of his forced inactivity by helping out the bishops of neighboring dioceses with their visitations and confirmation (OW 8, D.481-483, D.520) and attending to the administration of the Congregation. There is a sense of calm and serenity in his resignation to God's will (cf. OW 8, D.509, 511). But as the time wears on the stress increases and sometimes his temper grows ragged (D.522, 523, 525, 527, 528, 531). As negotiations with the Government and the King are broached, his anger and suspicion are apparent (D.535, 536, 537, 538).

3. Eventually he is reconciled to the King and accepts in a spirit of resignation the succession to the see of Marseilles. Life assumes a more equable note, but it is not until the very significant year of 1841 that one could say that the assault was passed. From this date, with the departure of Father Daly for England and Father Honorat and five companions for Canada, Father Yvon Beaudoin notes a significant change of tone in Eugene's correspondence from one of resignation to "joy and greater confidence in light of a family growing in numbers and becoming ever more stable" (OW 9, Introduction).

#### **D. Exploring the experience**

How are we to assess the experience of these years?

1. Beaudoin describes the years 1831-1836 undramatically as the period of the Founder's "personal crisis" (OW 8, Introduction).

2. Leflon, even less flamboyant, labels the years 1815-1837 "the second period of his life, a period that was essentially controversial" (Leflon II, 594).

3. Father Robert Moosbrugger (*op. cit.*, p. 137) comments:

We would go further and say that it was not only controversial but critical and crucial as well. It was critical in the sense that there were risks and dangers to his spiritual and emotional development that had to be challenged

and overcome. It was crucial to the extent that his success in the face of these risks and dangers, precipitated by the events and experiences of his life during this period, was of a decisive nature in determining the degree of spiritual maturity he would attain and the vitality of his apostolic ministry during the rest of his life.

He turns to St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas and sees Eugene moving from the stage of being an "incipient" or "beginner" to spiritual maturity. His concluding chapter is entitled: "Towards complete trust and confidence in God".

4. In describing the experience of these years as an experience of "apocalyptic hope", I am following out an aspect of Barry's (Ignatian) pattern. We have seen how Eugene, like everyone else, had to learn in his heart as well as his head to know the depths of God's love, that God's follows even to sinner in this life. Barry points out that it is not only our own sinful condition that can be a stumbling-block to our relation with God, but the general state of "fallness" of the universe we live in.

People may experience the pervasiveness of sin and sinful structures in our world... If personal sinfulness can seem so intractable, rendering us almost despairing of a conversion of heart, how much more powerless we feel before the enormous social, political and economic problems we face today!... Darkness does threaten to overcome the light... In our present world and Church, the experience of being freed from the tyranny of sin needs to include a relative freedom from the overpowering sense of being trapped by these forces. With St. John we need to come to the felt conclusion that the light has not been and will never be overcome by the darkness (Jn 1:5), that, in fact, our fears are illusory (p. 66-67).

The part of the Johannine corpus known as "The Apocalypse" is especially addressed to this aspect of Christian experience: hence the little we have given this period of Eugene's life.

## **E. The Fruit of this experience**

1. How has he met the challenge of these years? With his resources of faith, which prove equal to the task of generating a hope against hope. "I will say to you however that I am not discouraged and that I am afflicted without being laid low. It seems to me that Our Lord will help us by his grace to endure all our sorrows" (OW 7, D.359). Expressions of this kind abound in his letters of this time.

2. It is noteworthy that in connection with this type of challenge Barry speaks of the acquisition of "relative" freedom. Clearly this particular struggle is on-going in everyone's life. It is especially hard though in Eugene's case, so alien does he find the world he lives in: "One would almost say that Providence made a mistake over the century in having me born in this one, with the dispositions and, if you like, the qualities that were needed to do great things two hundred years ago" (OW 8, D.536).

3. His perseverance in all these difficulties brings many fruits: an ever-clearer grasp of the Oblate vocation (1831 Retreat), an ever-deeper rooting in God's will, an experience of communion with the young Oblates of Billens, an experience of solidarity with the faithful of Marseilles though this did wilt in the difficult year of 1835 (OW 8, D.528).

4. But the special fruit was the penetration of his life by the virtue of hope, bringing that freedom that Barry described as "freedom from the overpowering sense of being trapped by these dark forces". This hope was to be the springboard of his great constructive period, the last twenty years of his life.

In his episcopal ordination retreat of 1832, he begins as he usually begins his retreats by taking stock of where he stands. He feels he is getting worse, rather than better. And then he concludes:

That is where things stand, it is the feeling that predominates in my soul, an unlimited trust in the goodness of my God. I am a sinner, a very great sinner. After 21 years of ministry preceded by three years' preparation, after working more than many another, both myself and through a great number of cooperators whom I have set in motion, after succeeding in many undertakings conceived and carried out for God and the Church, I acknowledge myself to be without virtues and merits, and notwithstanding that I do not despair in my God's goodness, and I count always on his mercy, and I hope that I will finish by becoming better, that is, by dint of supernatural helps and habitual assistance of grace, I will acquit myself better of my duties and cooperate with the plans of the heavenly Father and his Son Jesus Christ, my most lovable Saviour, and the Holy Spirit who hovers over my soul prior to invading it again in a few days time. Amen, Amen, Amen. That is enough reflecting on the past. The best thing is to abandon myself to God, to apply myself especially to consider what is going to be done in me by virtue of the Most High, and the obligations I am going to contract on receiving the plenitude of the priesthood of J.C. (OW 15, D.166).

And again:

How can I have got to the end of these lines, without the pen dropping from my fingers a thousand times? My God, who could ever attain just the virtues one ought to possess to respond worthily to the Church's designs? *Num parum vobis videtur esse generum regis* said David with less reason than I, *ego autem sum vir pauper et tenuus* (1 Sam, 23). *Ego autem sum mendiculus et pauper* (Ps. 39:18) I respond... The Lord will have pity on me: *Dominus sollicitus est mei*: I turn to him with the utmost confidence for he is my help, my strength and all my hope; *adjutor...et protector meus es tu. Domine ne moreris* (Ps. 69:6). I am going for my part to set my hand to the task, and so that divine grace may stimulate my will and stir up my courage, I hope of his infinite goodness that having sown by an impulse of his mercy this seed of my soul, having thus begun the work he will deign to see it through to the end. *Ipse perficiat*. I want to cooperate seriously with all my power by a continual application and an assiduous effort to the advances I receive; I will neglect neither suffering nor sacrifices to acquire the virtues which I lack, and I will not put off until tomorrow to begin to lay the foundations for this new edifice, *ubi enim amor, ibi non est labor*. God is doing me the favour of being so penetrated with my obligations in this regard, I am so resolved to make a good beginning, to continue on well, to make a success with the help of grace of this last phase of my life that I take up the Challenge with confidence as this retreat comes to an end. I know that the priesthood I have been honoured with for 21 years is a state of perfection, and that the Church in elevating me to the episcopate must have believed me to be abundantly endowed with those virtues of which I can scarcely catch a glimpse in my soul or in which perhaps to my shame I am totally lacking, but what can I do except cite the words of the debtor in the Gospel: *patientiam habe in me et omnia reddam tibi* (Mt 18:26). Help me Lord, and give me time and I will try to become what you want me to be. *Facile est...in oculis (Domini) subito honestare pauperem* (Eccl 11:23). You my God are my only hope and I know by experience that you are not lacking in case of need: *Adjutor in opportunitatibus* (Ps 9). The glory of your holy Name, your Church's honour are engaged, I must be worthy of my vocation, I must make certain of it by my works, that is to say may your grace make me equal to my duties, may it so uphold me until death, that in giving me eternal life and so liberally rewarding me you might crown your own gifts. Amen.

**F.** Where is the Lord in it all? Who does Eugene say Christ is in these times? As in the book of the Apocalypse, he is **beside his Father's throne in heaven**. In his retreat for episcopal ordination he writes to Tempier:

I know all the time that it is my Father who is in heaven I am dealing with, who has at his right his Son Jesus Christ, our Saviour, who is our

advocate, our mediator, who never ceases to make intercession for us, with that powerful prayer which has the right to be heard and which is in actual fact always heard if we put no obstacle in its way. It is precisely on this point that the power of the Holy Spirit draws me to dwell and it is the fruit that I want and hope for my retreat. In other words in this last phase of my life I think I can say that I am firmly resolved through the overflowing abundance of graces that I will receive, to try, by assiduous application, so to conform myself to God's will that not a single fibre of my being will knowingly swerve from it (OW 8, D.436).

The sureness of his belief that Christ has already conquered and is directing all things is the source of this strength.

1. As an Oblate and formator of Oblates, his vision of Christ is taken from the Rule: his gaze is unswervingly on Jesus and the Apostles:

The means that we employ to attain this end share in the excellence of this end, again they are unquestionably the most perfect since they are precisely those same means used by our divine Saviour, his Apostles and his first disciples, that is to say the exact practice of the evangelical counsels, preaching and prayer, a happy blend of the active and contemplative life of which Jesus Christ and the Apostles have set us an example which is without doubt by fact alone the pinnacle of the perfection that God has given us the grace of possessing, and of which our Rules are but the development (1831 Retreat Notes: OW 15, D.163).

In the same Notes we read:

Thus models are at hand, it remains only to imitate them, but for following the footsteps of such models, a common virtue will not suffice. The Constitutions will make it plain. *Quid vice sua sit ab hominibus agendum cupidis implendi vestigia Jesus Christi divini sui Magistri, ut illi revindicent tot animas quae jugum eius confregere?* Read attentively and hold fast to what comes next, for it is what your Constitutions require you to be, so weigh each word, engrave the meaning on your heart: *Serio sanctitati suae incumbere habent, instare etiam viriliter easdem vias quas tot apostoli, quas tot operarii evangelici, qui, in eodem agone certantes in quo semetipsos rapi sentiunt, tot mira nobis tantarumque vitutum example suppeditarunt; debent penitus abnegare semetipsos, debent soli gloriae divinae, Ecclesiae utilitati, animarum saluti unice studere, debent sese renovare jugiter in spiritu mentis suae, debent vivere in statu habituali propriae abjectionis et in voluntate perpetua perfectionis apicem obtinendi, assiduam dans operam ut fiant humiles, mansueti, obedientes, paupertatis amatores, poenitentiae et mortificationis dediti, ab inordinata mundi vel parentum affectione alieni, zelo zelati ut parati sint impendere opes, dotes, vitae otia, vitam ipsam amori Domini nostri Jesus Christi, utilitati Ecclesiae et sancticationi fratrum suorum: deinde divina superabundantes fiducia, possunt in agonem procedere decertaturi usque ad interuicem, pro majore sanctissimi et tremendissimi Nominis ejus gloria.* Can one conceive anything more perfect on the face of the earth? Re-read this paragraph attentively, and when you have done that re-read it again. In the judgment of the Church, this is what we must be if we are to embrace the ministry we are called to and if we are to respond with fidelity to our holy vocation. At least we must seek this perfection with all the powers of our soul. It concerns our salvation. We are dedicated, consecrated to it, on entering the Congregation. Happy necessity!

And again:

Always the obligation to retrace Jesus Christ in our persons: *Speciali meditatione contemplabuntur...virtutes Domini Nostri Jesu Christi, quas membra Societatis nostrae debent in semetipsis ad vivum exprimere: et quolibet mense peculiarum huius divini Exemplaris virtutem sibi eligent, ut modo perfectiore ad huius virtutis praxim sese exercent. Easdem etiam*

virtutes acquirendas sibi proponunt in examine particulari et spiritualibus collationibus (De oratione aliisque exercitiis).

And

Does one believe the Rule thinks there has been sufficient insistence on the indispensable necessity of imitating Jesus Christ? No. Here now it presents us with the Saviour as the true founder of the Congregation, and the Apostles who were the first to follow in the footsteps of their Master as our first Fathers. Could anything bring greater pressure to bring us to imitate them! Jesus, our Founder, the Apostles, our forerunners, our first Fathers! And it is the Church that tells it to us, it is Peter through the mouth of Leo who says it! Let us prostrate ourselves, respectfully listen, wonder in silence. Let us swear to be faithful, to become worthy of our great vocation: *Jam dictum est missionarios quantum humana patitur fragilitas, imitari debere in omnibus exempla Christi Domini, PRAECIPUI SOCIETATIS INTITUTORIS, necnon Apostolorum NOSTRI PREGENITORUM.* So one must live their life, exercise their ministry, practise their virtues? There is no room for doubt: *Tanquam exemplarium imitationi inhaerentes, unam vitae suae partem debent orationi, recollectioni interiori et contemplationi in abscondito domus Dei quam simul inhabitabunt.*

2. From all this we can see that there is no slackening in the vigour of his spirituality. He describes it as "a happy blend of the active and contemplative life of which Jesus Christ and the Apostles have set us an example". In his own life this is expressed in the unremitting pastoral work we have described and also in untiring efforts to lead a structured, disciplined life of piety. We can see evidence of this in OW 15, D.161, 162, 169, 186, 189.

## **V. The years of construction and fruitfulness (1841-1861): *Consummatum est***

**A.** Eugene is now entering his 60<sup>th</sup> year. Some twenty more years lie ahead of him, years of unceasing activity both as Bishop of Marseilles and as Superior General of the Oblates.

1. In general, these are sunnier years. The world itself has become a less alien place, he finds delight again in travel and enjoys a ride on a train! The autumn of his years leads not to winter but to a "second spring", a "second naivety".

2. In these years Eugene's story seems to blend with that of his diocese and the Congregation. It is the story of his reconstruction of the diocese of Marseilles and his forging of the Oblates into an instrument of world-wide mission. These stories are too long to tell here.

Time and again, in his letters to his missionaries Eugene tells them that they are going forth to spread the empire of Christ. He is with them heart and soul. In the fullest sense he directs the enterprise. In all this he is still living out his Oblate vocation, he is following in the footsteps of the Apostles, he is the cooperator of Jesus in the self-same mission that Jesus had chosen for himself while on earth.

Simultaneously, he is Bishop of Marseilles, living out his calling as one sharing in the fullness of the priesthood of Jesus Christ, the father and teacher of his own diocesan family but also sharing in the solicitude for all the Churches.

3. But if we are not to tell these stories, what story shall we tell? While Eugene's story seems, as we have said, to coincide with that of his Congregation and his diocese, is there not a deeper story to be told too, the story of his interior journey with Jesus in these last years of his maturity? In our study of Eugene's relation with Christ in this period, we are unfortunately hampered by the lack of the detailed specialist study of Eugene's spiritual journey that we have for his earlier years. We are further hampered by the fact that Eugene has not left us so rich a harvest of retreat notes for this period as for others, and we still await publication of the Journal as such. What we have are the general biographers of the Founder, his letters, citations from the Journal, his will, pastoral letters and circulars, various monographs that touch on this period under this or that aspect. Beaudoin points to a serious difficulty:

The pastoral letters pose a special problem: who wrote them? It can be shown that Eugene wrote some of his uncle's pastoral letters, from 1823 to 1826, but it is also established that Bishop Jeancard was the author of some of his most important letters and no doubt of several of the pastoral letters as well (OW 14, Introduction, p. XI).

4. Pending the scholarly research and study that is needed, we must be content with the impressions of men who have acquired a knowledge, intuitive perhaps, of Eugene. In his brief survey of Eugene's personal spiritual evolution in his article on "Eugene de Mazenod, his experience and spiritual teaching" (VOL, 50(1990), 255-286), written for the Dictionary of Oblate Spirituality, Father Jetté sums up this period in these words:

(In this period) interior balance and profound unity characterize Eugene de Mazenod's spiritual life. Resting solidly on his love for Christ and the Church, he no longer thinks of himself but of all those who are in his care and the evangelical works entrusted to him. He has become interiorly very free (p. 262).

This judgment of a qualified commentator ties in well with what Barry has to say.

5. The third and final stage of relationship that Barry describes in his developmental pattern that we have been employing is that in which

a person really desires to share Christ's sufferings, to be privy to his inner state in the passion, and finally to share his experience of glory. Those who have moved this far along the continuum will be converted to the full reality of this world and be well on the way to finding God in all things quite literally (p 68-69).

6. Of course, there are other possibilities too, negative ones:

Throughout life, however, there is a **Continued Possibility of Regression**. Even though the development is pictured as on a linear continuum, experience teaches that the stages are not fixed positions from which there is no regression. A very deep experience of the Lord's forgiving love, for example, may not and usually does not touch every aspect of the person. Later in life a new dimension of sinfulness may be uncovered which can call into question all of the growth in relationship that has gone on. New life crises can also shatter a sense of security and bring old fears to God. Such 'regression' happens frequently to all of us. But if the original conversion formed a solid base, the person will, with relative ease, be able to return to the earlier level of relationship... (p. 69).

7. Finally, Barry notes the Deepest Source of Withdrawal:

I want to touch upon another source of resistance to closeness which seems even more at the heart of the matter than those sources we have touched upon thus far. We have noted sources of resistance that reside in our false images of God or in the real consequences of following Jesus. Deeper than any of those sources of resistance, I believe, is the fear of God's very being. When we get close to God, we feel heartened, whole, joyful and grateful. Yet often enough, we find that right after such positive experiences of God we neglect prayer and have little time for God. When we "know" God (in the Johannine sense of 'know-love'), we show in our depths that we are just our little selves, just John, Mary, Joan, with a very limited time on earth, with a very limited role to play in the history of the world and in salvation history. The positive reactions come from the realization that, in spite of our limitations, our sinfulness, our smallness, God, Mystery itself, still loves us and desires us as the 'apple of God's eye'. But what we also have to accept is the reality that we are just who we are, not God, nor even great players in the drama of the universe... (p. 70).

**B.** Although we know Eugene, beatified and soon we hope to be canonized, fought and won the fight, as we scan the last 20 years of his life we must be aware that the outcome had to be fought for and won.

**C.** In his monograph "Eugene de Mazenod and Christ" (VOL, 38(1979), p. 169-200), after dealing with Eugene's earlier years, D'Addio declares: "In fact, there is nothing more original in any person's life experience than participation in the cross of Jesus" (p. 191). He illustrates how this is true of Eugene by recounting various episodes from his life. Only two of these fall within our present period of Study: the 1859 disappointment over the Pope's passing him over when he names new Cardinals, and Eugene's own death in 1861. In the former incident Eugene displays a truly Christ-like resignation to the "immense humiliation" he is made to endure in the eyes of the world. In the latter he endures his sufferings in his agony with Christ-like joy and chooses to suffer as on the Cross for the Church.

Eugene was unified with Jesus Christ throughout his life, but now in his latter years there is a profounder unity. This union is the goal and fruit of his whole life, while all the time, right to the end, as we see e.g. in his will (OW 15, D.191), he remains conscious and convinced of his need of redemption, of the Saviour.

## **Conclusion**

**A.** Our studies in this Congress can be seen as a follow-up on the 1976 Congress on the Oblate charism. We have taken one of the elements highlighted by the Congress as characterizing us, giving us our identity, to explore it more deeply. Already in that Congress much work was done precisely in our question by gifted Oblates. We are conscious then that this is no place in which to search for novelty and that we have not even absorbed and reflected in our paper all the work that has already been done.

**1.** In our study we have tried to read again the often-told story of the spiritual journey of Eugene de Mazenod, using as a key the developmental pattern given us by William Barry, S.J. (see Introduction, B, 3). To that end we have focused on the personal relationship between Jesus and Eugene. This brings us to the very centre of our Oblate universe, a vantage point from which all the other elements that filled Eugene's life and go to make up our life are to be viewed: God the Father, God the Holy Spirit, Mary, the Church, the poor, the Eucharist, the Twelve, the Sacraments, the Priesthood, the Brotherhood, the Communion of Saints.

**2.** Our study shows that to find that Oblate center one must first find Eugene's centre. His personal journey to that centre is inextricably interwoven with his Oblate vision and therefore the indispensable context for an adequate understanding of that vision. Only within that context can we understand what the title "Saviour" meant to the Founder (cf. I, F, 1 above), and the significance of the urgency to the call to follow "Christ the Missionary to the Poor" and his Apostles (see section 4). Without that context we have a lifeless formula, an ideology.

**3.** In his article "The Blood of the Saviour" in *Selected Oblate Studies and Texts I*, p. 115ff., Lamirande makes the remark:

In order to avert in advance an incorrect interpretation of the texts, let us note that the attention Bishop de Mazenod paid to the Blood of Christ does not appear to assume the character of a special devotion or cult (p. 116)

**4.** This can, we think, be raised to the level of a general principle. Eugene is not the promoter of special devotions or cults of aspects of Jesus Christ. He is, as Paul VI told us, a man in love with Christ, the *Person* of Christ.

**5.** Likewise Ciardi, in his study of "The Eucharist in the life and Thought of Eugene de Mazenod", VOL, 38(1979), p. 201-231, examines the nature of devotion to the Eucharist in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and acquits Eugene of its essential sentimentality and its focus on adoration of the Blessed Sacrament as something apart from the Mass. Eugene's devotion is to Jesus in the Eucharist. He finds that Eugene's "moments of most intense communing with Christ were experienced while he was saying Mass" (p. 206), and we have seen some of those moments in

the course of this paper. Eugene had a strong sense of liturgy and the liturgical year.

**6.** Eugene does indeed have his favourite thoughts: that Jesus had a warm and sensitive heart and is no model for stoics (and this certainly qualifies the statement that his is a "high" Christology); that there is nothing more precious on earth than the "divine Eucharist"; that in the Eucharist we can rendez-vous with all we love. And where appropriate he translates these thoughts into devotional actions, structures them even, as with evening oraison for the Oblates, or the institution of devotions to the Sacred Heart and perpetual adoration in his diocese. He so loved the sign of the Cross that he made it the only distinctive sign of the Oblate, but even more he loved the *dying* of Christ, as Father Drouart has demonstrated.

**7.** In his interior life it is the Person of Christ who holds centre stage. Christ is first known personally as a personal Saviour affixed to a cross, a priority in point of time but also in the domain of Eugene's affections. It is as Saviour that he wishes to make Jesus known. He recognizes eventually that this desire is a divine vocation to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and his Apostles and exercise the very same mission that Jesus did: *evangelizare pauperibus*. But his experience of Jesus is not an historical personage who lived long ago: it is of someone who is alive and in relation with him now and interceding for us with the Father in heaven. He is the "master of hearts" who, using us as his instruments, extends his "empire" on earth. That empire is one of hearts that live out of his life, who must partake of that life to live, that life being given in abundance in the Eucharist.

**B.** Already in the seminary he developed a very rich grasp of the Mystery of Christ in all its dimensions. Even so, it is only when he received the grace of Founder that he became fascinated by the image of Jesus and the Twelve.

**1.** Two images are superimposed here. First, there is the image of Jesus in his public ministry, journeying throughout Galilee and Judea, etc., accompanied by the Twelve and preaching the gospel to the poor. Secondly, there is the image of the Twelve preaching the gospel to the whole world after Pentecost, full of the Spirit sent by Jesus.

**2.** Eugene sees his missionaries as following in the footsteps of these Twelve. It is they now who are making these journeys and preaching that Gospel to the poor in the company of Jesus. It is they now who called to go forth to the whole world, full of Christ's Spirit.

**3.** At the same time these same images inspire Eugene's vision of Oblate life-style. It is that of Jesus and his Twelve companions, living the evangelical counsels. It is that of the first community around the Twelve, one heart and one soul.

**4.** We are not simply companions of Jesus, we are companions of Jesus in his missionary journeys. As Father Gilbert expresses it: "It is nothing less reproducing in our own day the apostolic experience of the Saviour himself" ("In the Footsteps of the Apostles" in *Selected Oblate Studies and Texts*, I, p. 21).

**C.** It is these images, biblical in origin, that we hear Eugene responding to our question: In the spirit of your founding charism, who do you say Jesus Christ is? They are the inspirational transmitters of the spirit of the charism. In the Rule they are concretized, structured. For they are the title, the only title, by which we can be assured of the grace we need for our mission.

On all this, the best commentary is quite simply that given by the Founder and cited above in IV, F, 1.

Michael Hughes, o.m.i.



NOTES:

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1 How Jesus is envisaged in Eugene de Mazenod's vision of the Oblate charism, studied in the context of his personal spiritual journey.

# Jesus Christ, Formator of the Oblate

## I. Between the Founder's Beatification and Canonization

Speaking to the 1980 General Chapter, in his report on the state of the Congregation, Fr. Fernand Jetté also treated the theme *The religious life of the Congregation*. Referring to certain events which have contributed to the spiritual life of our Institute, he said:

We have to mention the beatification of our Founder on October 18, 1975. This beatification has aroused a new interest in his life and in his spirit. There is a desire to know him better; we have gone towards him with an attitude of acceptance, of availability, of openness.<sup>1</sup>

Today, when I look at that event of twenty years ago within the perspective of my personal history, I must say that the words of Fr. General have been proved quite accurate; for me, however - then a young Oblate, formed in the Roman Scholasticate, and just ordained priest - it wasn't so much a question of a "renewal of interest" as of a true and proper beginning of 'taking a look' at the Founder and at his, that is, my Congregation. I can say, without exaggeration, that from then on Blessed Eugene always had something to tell me. And all of us know that in those years, the Founder has spoken to us in many and varied ways; it suffices to mention the many books and articles published with a view to getting closer to him and to his activity on behalf of the people; various studies about certain elements of his life (doctoral and licentiate theses), and above all the fifteen volumes of the collection *Écrits Oblats* which give us his letters and other spiritual writings.

Among these various ways in which the Founder has been speaking to us, I would like to underline one which is completely original because made *viva voce*. On October 2 1986 Pope John Paul II made his memorable discourse to the members of the XXXI General Chapter. At a certain precise moment, when his voice became louder and more piercing, he lent it to our Founder, Blessed Eugene de Mazenod, to utter the following: "The basic question he asks today of all his sons, by the voice of Peter's Successor, is brief and deeply stirring: Is Jesus Christ really at the heart of your life?..."<sup>2</sup> I was among those who heard these words of the Pope and I was able to observe that for many of us, they had an enormous significance. The question that was posed was so unexpected and so dense with meaning that we hadn't realized that it came from the Founder. On the other hand, at first in discussions and then in various conversations, we spoke of the question posed to us by the Holy Father. However, it is sufficient for us to pause a little, to reflect a little, in order to perceive that it was Blessed Eugene who was asking us this question.

I don't know how many times since his death Our Eugene has spoken so directly to us. Nevertheless I suppose that this is a fact, if not unique, surely exceptional in the course of our history. If it deserves to be noted because it is exceptional, it deserves to be all the more, because of its content. In fact, through the mouth of the Successor of St. Peter, the Founder asks us about Jesus Christ! He who already enjoys the glory of the Blessed, asks us about him who "is the way" (Jn 14:6). Further, the fact that Peter was among those to whom a similar question was posed by Jesus himself (Mt 16:20) is not without significance here.

For two months now, we are living the "Mazenod Year". The Congress of the 'Association for Oblate Studies and Research' comes at the beginning of our 'Holy Year'. Its theme *Jesus Christ in Oblate Spirituality* seems to me an attempt to respond positively and without compromise to that fundamental question: Is Jesus Christ really at the heart of your Life? Yes, He is really at the center of our life. He is at the center of our life, and it cannot be otherwise, because He, Jesus Christ, is the Formator of the Oblate.

## II. Jesus Christ, the first formator of the Oblate

Commenting on Article 45 of Our Constitutions, in which one sees clearly the parallelism between the formation of the Apostles and that of Oblates, Fr. Fernand Jetté cites a very significant passage of his address to Oblate Formators in 1983 and published afterwards in his book: *The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate*. There he observes:

The reality has not changed. Jesus Christ not only calls some to Oblate life but, through his Spirit he also internally forms the Oblate. Externally, it may seem that a given organization, this or that person, such and such a program of studies holds the chief place; instead, the primary role in formation always belongs to Jesus Christ. Today, just like yesterday, it is He who forms his own Apostles.<sup>3</sup>

May I be permitted to say that this short passage is of capital importance. The fact that Fr. Jetté has repeated it after nine years and inserted it into his commentary on our Rules, could mean that the truth expressed in this passage remains a truth to be always re-discovered. Personally, I have been in the ministry of formation since 1977. The field of my labours is, since then, the biggest community of formation in the entire Congregation. I have behind me six years experience as Superior of this large Scholasticate, six years in the General Committee for Formation, many Congresses and other gatherings around formation organized at the regional (BEF) and Provincial levels. I am conscious of possessing already a noteworthy experience in the field of formation, with some small successes, but also with painful setbacks. In short, I believe that I can say how much it costs to be a Formator. Having said all this, I would like to return to Fr. Jetté's text.

Today more than on that day I can appreciate how courageous Fr. General was when he addressed the Formators in 1983. Why? Because in these years past the greater part of energy of Formators gathered together in various Formation congresses and sessions proceeded in opposing directions; it often seemed to be as if everything should depend on such an organization, on such a person, on such a program, and I would add, on such a document. In such a concrete situation a voice was raised that warned: Do not forget that the prime formator of the Oblate is Jesus Christ. I do not know to what extent that voice was heard, but I believe that the climate of that time was not yet favorable enough to listen to it. All this is easily understandable.

After the awakening that took place in the Congregation following the beatification of the Founder, even the indifference evident in certain important Provinces towards vocations disappeared and was replaced by an increasing interest (in vocations). They wanted to do something, and I have always felt that this wish was really authentic and sincere. Oblates responsible for vocations were chosen when candidates appeared here and there, Masters of Novices and Formators were named. After this various formation committees and commissions were created whose membership also comprised representatives of Provinces which didn't have any vocations, or which had groups of young men whose sense of belonging to the Congregation couldn't easily be defined. During the quite frequent meetings of Formators - at least of the European Region - Formators of the various Provinces, whether of those which had well organized houses of Formation and a considerable number of young men in formation, or of those which had very few candidates, or those which didn't have any vocations at all, came together. This diversity, even if it furnished the richness that flows from various points of view, did not facilitate a consensus regarding the essential element of formation. Indeed this essential element was conceived in different ways.

As if this wasn't enough, I sensed another impediment to a real and profound consensus. This impediment consisted in the fact that two very diverse mentalities faced each other. The first, which I will call the Cartesian spirit, was closer to Formators of Provinces with very few or no vocations at all; the second, which I will call the existential spirit was more expressive of Formators who had houses of formation with a great number of young men in formation. While the latter based themselves on lived experience, the former was founded on

theoretical (conceptual) experience.

The atmosphere created, even though very fraternal, certainly helped the work aimed at elaborating various projects, programs and documents. However in the elaboration of these things, the lead was quite often taken by the ideas of those who had few or very few vocations, and being of the cartesian spirit, were easily based on what I have called "theoretical experience". As a philosopher I know well it is very much easier to discuss and then write about theoretical subjects than about real ones. The tendency to discuss and produce various texts has given rise to the role of so called specialists and experts. Little by little we have come to the stage in which when we look at the field of formation, - to repeat the words of Fr. Jetté - "it may seem that a given organization, this or that person, such and such a program of studies holds the chief place".<sup>4</sup> In this atmosphere, in this situation, Fr Jetté - our Superior General at that time - reminded us that the first formator of the Oblate is Jesus Christ!

I wouldn't want the description which I have presented in this paragraph to be considered simply as a criticism of the various commissions which have studied and discussed the problem of formation. They have at times committed themselves to propose in certain documents the best solutions in such an important and at the same time delicate field. I give this description in order to point out a part of the path that our Congregation has traveled. Besides I believe that I could do so because I too have been personally involved therein, and I too have traveled that same road. The experiences which I have had in this field have permitted me to understand that one is not automatically a formator, but that one becomes a formator.

A little while ago I said that we must still discover the full significance of Fr. Jetté's statement. We need to pause a while to understand what the affirmation that Jesus Christ is the Formator of the Oblate means to us. We will do this in two stages. First of all we will see why He is our Formator ie., we will seek to identify the situations which would be incomprehensible without the presence of Jesus. Thereafter we will try to find out how He is our formator.

### **III. Why is Jesus Christ the first formator of the Oblate**

#### **A. The call of Christ...draws us together as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (C 1)**

The first reason is situated entirely on the level of Faith; we believe that we have been called by Jesus Christ. This manifold call of his is in each one of us.

1. First of all this call is expressed in our Christian vocation ie., in the call to salvation which he offers us. In fact in Him we become new men, redeemed, sons who cry out "Abba, Father". Vatican Council II instructs us: "Christ who is the new Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear".<sup>5</sup> It is not my task, nor is it necessary to develop here the theme of the christian vocation; however it seems important to me to recall that Jesus Christ who reveals our "supreme vocation" to us is also our formator. He forms us in the discovery of our Christian identity.

2. The call that unites us as Oblates does not obviously fulfill itself completely in the Christian life as such, but for us it becomes more specific in our religious vocation. This call is considered by the Church as a "more intimate" consecration, rooted in Baptism; it is understood as a state in which "the faithful of Christ intend to follow Christ more closely (and) to give themselves to God, loved above all things..., pursuing the perfection of Charity".<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting how the following of Christ leads to the giving of oneself to God and to the perfection of charity. Even here we are very close to Vatican Council II which indicated that

those who profess the evangelical counsels love and seek before all else that God who took the initiative in loving us (1 Jn 4:10); in every

circumstance they aim to develop a life hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). Such dedication gives rise and urgency to the love of one's neighbour for the world's salvation and upbuilding of the Church.<sup>7</sup>

Without entering into details I would like to note that Jesus shows Himself here as one who points out to us the way to the Father and who is the example of the perfect love which is expressed in the sacrifice of his own life (Jn 15:13).

**3.** Our Christian and religious vocation makes itself still more precise in our call to Oblate life. This fact was recently recalled to us in the document of the last General Chapter: "While we share with every Christian the same baptismal vocation, we are also convinced that God calls us to the specific vocation that is ours as sons of Eugene de Mazenod".<sup>8</sup> In its original intuition this specific Oblate vocation was expressed when Fr. de Mazenod decided to form a society of priests "who live together and strive to imitate the virtues and examples of Our Lord Jesus Christ especially in devoting themselves to preach the word of God to the poor".<sup>9</sup> The desire to live together, the effort to imitate the virtues and the examples of Jesus and the willingness to evangelize the poor were then the first distinctive features of the new Institute. However, when we read the first part of the text of the Rules of 1818 these are not the features that impress us the most. What seems to be the most significant is the fact that after the presentation of the aim (or rather the aims) of the Society there is a parenthesis added, which is more inspirational in style than juridical:

What more sublime purpose than that of their Institute? Their Founder is Jesus Christ, the very Son of God; their first fathers are the Apostles. They are called to be the Saviour's co-workers, the co-redeemers of mankind...<sup>10</sup>

We see here clearly how from the beginning the originality of the Congregation, its value and the sublimity of its aim depend directly on Jesus Christ. Here already the first place belongs to Him.

Having accepted the fact that our Founder is Jesus, that the Apostles are our first fathers and that our mission is that of Christ and the Apostles, it seems natural that in order to understand our vocation and our identity well we must look to Him above all else. The argument of the Founder is therefore not surprising:

How, indeed, did Our Lord Jesus Christ proceed, when he undertook to convert the world? He chose a number of Apostles and disciples whom He Himself trained in piety, and He filled them with His Spirit. These men he sent forth, once they had been schooled in his teaching, to conquer the world which, before long, was to bow to his holy rule. (Preface).

The two texts just quoted have proved fundamental to the whole of our spirituality. The difficulties which the Congregation has lived through during the 70's were certainly not caused by a lack of love for the poor, but by the fact that, quite often we have weakened or even cut off links with our sources. Sometimes it looked as if the solution to our problems could come from such and such an organization, from such a program, project or document... At a certain point Christ has claimed his rights as Founder of the Congregation and has made us realize that without Him we can not do anything (Jn 15:5). God has given us the grace to understand, and today "after a period of seeking and groping"<sup>11</sup>, we return willingly to our sources... also when we write new documents; perhaps the best example is the new Constitutions and Rules and also the final texts of the 1896 and 1993 General Chapters.

As regards the subject under discussion two texts come to mind which, even though new, expresses well the Cristo-centric spirituality of our beginnings. Both present to us Jesus the Formator: the first is part of the Constitutions and Rules of 1982, while the second is found in the document of the General Chapter of 1992:

Jesus personally formed the disciples he had chosen, initiating them

into 'the mystery of the Kingdom of God' (Mc 4:11). As a preparation for their mission he had them share in his ministry; to confirm their zeal he sent them his Spirit. This same Spirit forms Christ in those who endeavor to follow in the Apostles' footsteps. As they enter more deeply into the mystery of the Saviour and his Church, he moves them to dedicate themselves to the evangelization of the poor (C 45).<sup>12</sup>

The image that summarizes the whole of what we wish to say is that of Jesus the Formator who calls and re-groups his disciples around him, who creates among them bonds of unity and love, who gives them the power of the Spirit and who sends them as his witnesses (WAC 26).

Summing up this argumentation let's recall: Jesus is our formator because He calls us to be with Him in the Oblate life, because He allows us to live in his school and imitate his example and his virtues, because He sends us his Spirit and because He makes us his collaborators, above all in the evangelization of the poor.

Welcoming the Christian vocation which becomes in us a religious and Oblate vocation further means accepting another kind of call: the vocation for sanctity. Because in fact "what should men do who want to follow in the footsteps of their divine masters...? They must strive to be saints... seeking at all times to reach the very summit of perfection" (Preface).

The call to sanctity is certainly not reserved only to Oblates. The post-conciliar Church willingly indicates that this call is addressed to all, that it is universal.<sup>13</sup> However this does not prevent this call being made in a special manner and addressed above all to those who have chosen the religious life.<sup>14</sup> In any case, Jesus Christ is "the divine teacher and model of all perfection, (who) preached holiness of life to each and every one of his disciples".<sup>15</sup>

All this was evident to Eugene de Mazenod even before the founding of the Congregation. Sanctity seemed to him an indispensable condition for the work which he nurtured in his heart. "We must be truly saints ourselves. In saying that, we include all that can possibly be said" he wrote to Fr. Tempier on December 13 1815. Later on, when the foundation had been launched, the invitation let us be saints became a refrain. In fact the Founder had a good intuition that his Congregation "will always be powerful as long as she is holy".<sup>16</sup>

The desire to be holy pertains to our Oblate heritage; history recounts it clearly enough: Eugene de Mazenod, Joseph Gerard, Charles Dominic Albini, Vital Grandin, Ovide Charlebois, Antoine Kowalczyk, Joseph Cebula and... many, many others. Therefore the conclusion of Fr. General is correct: "Witness to holiness by martyrdom is by no means foreign to our history and to our charism which seals us with the name of Oblates".<sup>17</sup> Who can form us better in sanctity than He who is "the Holy One of God?" (Mc 1:24, Lc 4:34).

## **B. Teach... who Christ is**

Jesus Christ is therefore the formator of the Oblate in so far as he is the one who calls us and makes us discover the full meaning of our vocation. Nevertheless the formative role of the Lord doesn't stop here. Since it is something dynamic it goes beyond the moment of our call and is fulfilled in our mission. The gospel narrative demonstrates this dynamism very well: "Jesus went up into the hills and summoned those he wanted. So they came to him and he appointed twelve; they were to be his companions and were to be sent out to preach" (Mk 3: 13-14). Accepting the fact that "our Founder is Jesus Christ" and that "our first fathers are the Apostles", we must conclude that we too have been called to be with Jesus and to be sent out to preach. Here therefore is our mission: our manner of life and our missionary activity. These two realities of our Oblate mission find their unity in that expression so dear to our Founder "the apostolic man".<sup>18</sup>

At this point it must be noted that to be sent out to preach means for us to evangelize the poor and this in its turn, is realized above all in teaching who Christ is. However it is evident that before teaching who He is we need to know Him and in order to know Him we need to learn Him. Within the perspective of this logic which is completely evangelical, we can

realize the irreplaceable importance of being with Christ. In fact it is only by being with Christ that we can learn who He is. Besides, the fact of being with Jesus preserves us from the danger of becoming mere skillful masters of doctrine or artisans of the word and allows us to be authentic witnesses of a living Person. And lastly, there is a final aspect that I wish to note here: being with Jesus we become his companions, we become community. Summing all this up we see that in his school Jesus forms Oblates in so far as we see that in his school Jesus forms Oblates in so far as He makes Himself known to them, makes them his witnesses and welds them together in community. I pause a little now on these three elements.

1. Who is Christ? Let's turn to Caesarea Philippi (Mt 16:13-17). The community of the twelve has already been well formed for some time. But here, after a fairly easy journey they must begin to face some serious matters. In the conscience and the will of Jesus this is the beginning of difficult confrontations. Everything begins with a dialogue deliberately provoked by the Master: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?". This sounding of opinion has hardly a relative interest for Jesus. In fact immediately afterwards, He puts his Apostles on another plane: "But you, who do you say I am?" The essential element is what his own think, this small group which in a short while would be thrown as leaven into the world. It's not a question of their human opinion, but of their faith in him. It is Peter who responds with characteristic spontaneity: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!". Jesus had to be satisfied: "Simon son of Jonah, you are a happy man!". But immediately, so that Peter not be mistaken, He clarifies: "It was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven". Here we do not find ourselves on the human plane but one the plane of grace.

Today when we re-read this text after twenty centuries of the Church's history, and after almost two centuries of our history, we must acknowledge that the question of Jesus personally touches each one of us Oblates. We cannot live with a person for a long time without knowing that person. We cannot be faithful to a person if we have doubts about his identity. And just as we cannot come to the full knowledge of Christ through our own efforts, so must we be attentive to his manifestations. These belong to the supernatural order. I would assert therefore, that the most important act of formation is completely in the realm of grace, the free gift that Jesus gives to his chosen. "And you, what do you say? Who am I for you? You are the Son of the living God!". The observation of Fr. Jetté about the difference between teaching who Christ is of the Preface and to help them discover who Christ is of article 7 of the actual Constitutions<sup>19</sup> pleases me. Nevertheless I would add to his explanation that the contemporary formulation not only binds the hearer more, but also leaves more room for the action of God, ie., of grace. It is true that our spirituality knows various portraits of Jesus (Saviour, Redeemer, Priest, Master, Model), but it is also true that their strength derives for the fact that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.<sup>20</sup>

It must also be noted that the knowledge of Jesus is not given to us once and for all, ie., it is not a static reality. When it happens, then we are enabled to created and live a personal relationship with Jesus. Nevertheless, precisely because it is linked to the life of each Oblate, and because it is dynamic, it depends a lot on the quality of every consecrated life. Naturally - and article 2 of the Constitutions demonstrates this - we have to enter into a true process of formation, the steps of which are: the knowledge of Jesus, identification with Him and his life in us. If we refer to article 45 on this subject, then we will realize that the total initiative is from Jesus Christ. It is He who sends His Spirit and "this same Spirit forms Christ in those who walk in the footsteps of the Apostles."

Yes, St. Peter had his Caesarea Philippi, St. Paul had his Damascus, Blessed Eugene had his Good Friday... but we, ordinary Oblates? Isn't it a bit exaggerated to insist so much on our experience of Christ? Are we not risking total subjectivism? Personally, I do not have this fear, because I know that an objective reality exists: the Church of Christ. And I believe that for us who have not lived any mystical experience, the Church shows us Jesus as the Son of the Living God, we are therefore strong in the strength of the faith of the Church.

2. The formative process which I have just described, if it is not hindered, permits us to come on to the point of being able to say with St. Paul: "I live now not with my own life but with

the life of Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). At this point our life becomes testimony. In recent years the Church insists a lot on this dimension of the religious and missionary life. Vatican Council II has spoken about it<sup>21</sup>, Popes have spoken about it<sup>22</sup> and the representatives of our Congregation.<sup>23</sup> The statement made by Paul VI in his allocution to the laity during the general audience of October 2 1974 and taken up in part by *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, has become classical:

Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers; when he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses. In fact he feels an instinctive aversion for all that could appear to be mystification, facade, compromise. In such a context we can understand the importance of a life that truly echoes the gospel.<sup>24</sup>

Continuing in the same line, John Paul II affirms the irreplaceability of the witness of the christian life:

Modern man believes more in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in doctrine, in life and facts rather than in theories. The witness of the christian life is also irreplaceable as the first form of mission.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore it is not doctrine alone that counts, nor theories - however beautiful they may be - but what really counts is "a life that truly echoes the gospel", ie., a life that is full of Christ. And so we return once again to article 2 of our Constitutions; in order to be his witnesses we should "know him more deeply, identify with him, let him live in us".

This insistence on testimony, even if so strong in our days, is not in fact new in the history of the Church. This is rooted in Jesus himself and is always linked to the gift of His Spirit: "You will receive power when Holy Spirit comes on you and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria and indeed to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). We know well that the contribution of the Oblates in this task of giving witness "to the ends of the earth" is considerable. This means that we have not received the grace of God (our charism) in vain (2 Cor 6:1) and that the Holy Spirit has really succeeded, and always succeeds, in his task of forming Christ in many of our brothers.

Let us note once again that from the first beginnings of our spirituality, the consciousness was always present that the Oblate should do his best to become an alter Christus. This is expressed in the first Rule, in language a little different from that of today, but clearly and without ambiguity:

Whether out on the missions or at home, their chief study will always be to make progress in the way of religious perfection. They will cultivate especially the virtues of humility, poverty, self-denial, interior mortification, purity of intention, and faith... In a word, they will, in imitation of Christ, spread everywhere the fragrance of his amiable virtues.<sup>26</sup>

It is true that we do not say at this point that the Holy Spirit forms Christ in the Oblate, but it suffices to place this text side by side with the words of Paul to the Galatians - 5:22-23 - to realize that the virtues just barely listed in our text are none other than the fruits of the Spirit.<sup>27</sup>

One exceptional form of witness is the life of the evangelical counsels and of religious vows through which we accept it, *Sequela Christi*.<sup>28</sup> And what does it mean to say that we follow Jesus, if not to be configured to him? We know that we do not enter the religious life simply and above all for the pleasure of living celibate, poor and obedient. We enter it with the will of centering ourselves on Jesus Christ and to place our own life and all that it involves at this disposition: "Oblates are men to leave everything to be disciples of Jesus" (C 2), and they are in reality "ready to sacrifice goods, talents, ease, even their life, for the love of Jesus Christ... (Preface)". John Paul II would say that consecrated life and the profession of the evangelical counsels "constitute a special witness of love".<sup>29</sup> Without this reference to Jesus the religious commitment would be unthinkable and foolish.

Therefore also in the life of the evangelical counsels and of the vows Jesus



becomes our master and formator par excellence. After all, for us who are already called by the grace of God ("No one can come to me unless he is drawn by the Father who sent me" - (Jn 6:44), the vows mean that we want to be truly like Jesus, the Master. Chastity means wanting to be like Jesus; all the secondary reasons that can be adduced vanish before this essential reason. Jesus was chaste! Obedience means wanting to truly be like Jesus; all the secondary reasons that can be adduced vanish before this essential reason. Jesus was obedient! Finally, Perseverance means wanting to be truly like Jesus; all the secondary reasons vanish before his essential reason. Jesus was faithful! In the final analysis such is also the logic of our Rule in the section that speaks of the evangelical counsels: "Our mission requires that, in a radical way, we follow Jesus who was chaste and poor and who redeemed mankind by his obedience" (C 12). Articles 14, 19, 24, and 29, introducing the respective vows, refer also to the example of Jesus Christ. We find a very similar approach in *Redemptoris Donum*.<sup>30</sup>

3. The Lord Jesus is not only the formator of individual Oblates. He also forms the Oblate Community. Our Constitutions are explicit in this regard: "The call and the presence of the Lord among us today bind us together in charity and obedience to create anew in our own lives the Apostles' unity with him and their common mission in his Spirit" (C 3). Our living together has been linked with Christ practically since the first moment of our existence. In fact, and we know this well, when the Founder decided to form his society of missionaries, he wanted it in the image of the apostolic community. Our "prototype" are the twelve united around Jesus. Also on this point the Constitutions are clear: "The community of the Apostles with Jesus is the model of our life. Our Lord grouped the twelve around him to be his companions and to be sent out as his messengers" (C 3). The reference to the gospel is explicit (Mc 3:14). The document *Witnessing as Apostolic Community* of the last General Chapter returns to the community of the Apostles with Jesus, regarded as a model of our common life.<sup>31</sup> I believe therefore that we must say without any exaggeration that the Oblate community is founded on Jesus Christ and its quality and that the mission entrusted to it depend on the quality of our relationship with Him.

It is clear that we share this recourse to Jesus, as foundation of the community, with all religious communities and even with all christian communities. In fact "for the foundation, nobody can lay any other than the one which has already been laid, that is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 3:11). The teaching of the Church on this subject, repeated recently by the Congregation for Institutes of consecrated life<sup>32</sup>, could enrich our reflection.

Before being human construction, religious community is a gift of the Spirit. It is the love of God, poured into hearts by the Holy Spirit, from which religious community takes its origin and is built as a true gathered together in the Lord's name.<sup>33</sup>

And further we find the text that explains the origin of every religious community and underlines what I would call its historic conscience.

The religious community has felt itself to be in continuity with the group of those who followed Jesus. He had called them personally, one by one, to live in communion with himself and with the other disciples, to share his life and his destiny (Mc 3:13-15), and in this way to be the sign of the life and communion begun by him.<sup>34</sup>

Here too we are very close to the formula of our Rules which says: "We bear witness before the world that Jesus lives in our midst and unites us in order to send us out to proclaim God's reign" (C 37).

The Gospel, the documents of the Church and our Constitutions underline two reasons for being in community: to live in community with Jesus, to be his companions, and to be sent. In other words, communion and mission. However we must observe here that between them these two realities are profoundly united; they overlap each other, they mutually implicate each other and they constitute a dialectic unity to the point that communion represents at the same time the source and the fruit of mission; communion is missionary and mission is for communion.<sup>35</sup> It is exactly in this sense that the General Chapter of 1986 affirms that

"Community life is not only necessary for the mission, it is itself mission and at the same time it is a qualitative sign of the mission of the whole Church".<sup>36</sup> These two reasons for the existence of communities is common to many "apostolic groups". However, what is specifically Oblate about them? Personally I see it in the intuition of the dying Founder who tells us: "Among yourselves practice well Charity, Charity, Charity, and outside (the community) zeal for the salvation of souls". Love means communion; zeal for the salvation of souls means mission!

Oblates "witness... that Jesus lives in our midst" (C 37). There is no greater witness than that of love; it may go to the extent of giving up one's life (Jn 15:3). The testament of Bishop de Mazenod seems therefore an echo of the discourse of Jesus: "I give you anew commandment: love one another; just as I have loved you, you also must love one another. By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples" (Jn 13:34-35). We must immediately add that the measure of our reciprocal love consists in the love that Jesus has for us: "Love one another, as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12). And the love with which the Lord loves us finds its source in God the Father: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you" (Jn 15:9), "Among yourselves Charity, Charity, Charity...", but let's remember: if we really love one another mutually, "God will live in us and his love will be complete in us" (1 Jn 4:12), because "anyone who lives in love lives in God, and God lives in him... God is love" (1 Jn 4:16).

John's discourse is wholly theological and supernatural; it could seem almost abstract. However if we look at the reply of our Founder, from whom his sons asked for final advice on his deathbed: "Practice well among yourselves Charity, Charity, Charity", then we have a discourse totally immersed in the life of Oblates. In the reply of our Founder, this little adverb 'well' has always stimulated me; perhaps in using it Bishop de Mazenod has indicated to us his sons, that our mutual love should always seek that perfection of which St. John speaks and which signifies that God lives in us. It's a pity that the English and Polish translators have omitted this adverb; for me personally, it contains great significance.

If therefore true communion exists among ourselves, ie., a communion of charity, this means that Jesus really lives among us and forms a community with us, as he did with the apostles. In fact it is he who today also, through the Spirit, spreads the love of God in our hearts (Rom 5:5). Blessed Eugene knew this well. He could therefore write to his sons about the love that he had for them:

I have always thanked God for it as a particular gift which he has deigned to grant me; for it is the temper of heart that he has given me, this expansive love which is my own gift and which pours itself out on each one of them without taking anything from the others, just like, I make bold to say, God's love for men. I am saying that in this sentiment, which I know comes from him who is the source of all charity, which has evoked in the hearts of my children this reciprocity of love which forms the distinctive character of our beloved family.<sup>37</sup>

I have indicated two reasons d'être of our community: communion (charity) and mission (zeal). After a long reflection on the first, I would like to recall the observation made by the Chapter document of 1992, about the second: "As we become 'one heart and soul' (Acts 4:32), our communities will become more and more apostolic".<sup>38</sup>

In order to complete this section on community I am pleased to note one more fact. After describing the fraternal life of the original community of Jerusalem, St. Luke observes that: "day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved" (Acts 2:47). In the light of this text we see that Jesus Christ starts being formator of Oblates already from the moment that he gives us new vocations, ie., when he adds workers to the harvest entrusted by the Church to us. Therefore it seems to me that our speaking of Jesus, formator of Oblates or of Jesus in Oblate Spirituality has meaning only if we do not forget to pray to the Master of the harvest to continue to call young men to follow him in our Congregation. Since it is certain that He will form disciples until the end of time, it isn't as certain that these disciples will call themselves Oblates.

#### **IV. How is Jesus Christ the formator of Oblates?**

Up to this point we have seen why we absolutely need Jesus as formator. Now we want to see how he forms us. The reply to such a question cannot be exhaustive: Being God, Jesus has his manner of acting, at times very secret, at other times very surprising. Our reflection will therefore be limited to the examination of certain examples typical of our Oblate spirituality.

In all formation, what is of capital importance is the personal contact between the formator and the one being formed. The fact that Jesus has personally called and formed his Apostles has already been noted. We cannot however forget that today also He continues to call and form those whom he wills. In fact it is the call of Christ that unites us as Oblates (C 1) because "Jesus never ceases to call people to follow him" (C 52). It follows that even after his Ascension the Lord continues to be present: "I am with you always; yes to the end of time" (Mt 28:20). He is present in another manner, through the Spirit of truth who will always be with us (Jn 14:16-17). In such a perspective, the first reply to the question: How is Jesus Christ the formator of the Oblate? cannot but be: through His Spirit! It is the Holy Spirit who forms Christ in those who commit themselves to the religious life (C 45). This is therefore the fundamental truth. It is repeated in the recent document of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life:

Just as Jesus was not content to call his disciples but patiently educated them during his public life, in the same way after his resurrection, he continued to lead them to the whole truth by his Spirit. This Spirit, whose activity is of a different type than the data of psychology or of visible history, but who also operates through it, works in the innermost secret of the heart of each one of us, in order to manifest himself through quite visible fruits.<sup>39</sup>

In order not to remain in too general terms we must know how to recognize the presence of this Spirit, who bears witness to Jesus (Jn 15:26) in the concrete circumstances of our life. In fact Jesus has said so: "He will not be speaking as from himself but will only say what he has learnt... since all he tells you will be taken from what is mine" (Jn 16:13-14). Both the Father and the Son operate now (Jn 5:17) but they do so through the Spirit. It is therefore necessary to identify the principal aspects of this formation which we can call spiritual, given that the Spirit is the principal agent. *Pastores dabo vobis*, recalling Vatican Council II says in this connection:

The Council decree *Optatam totius* would seem to indicate a triple path to be followed: a faithful meditation on the word of God, active participation in the Church's holy mysteries and the service of charity to the 'little ones'.<sup>40</sup>

Gathering together these three values which define the content of religious formation, and which are also present in our Constitutions, for the remainder of our reflection I propose the following plan: First of all I will pause on the spiritual level, speaking of the first and second paths indicated by *Pastores dabo vobis*; then consider the ministerial level (the service of love), ie., the third path; finally I will point out the formative role of the Virgin Mary and of the Church.

##### **A. At the level of the Spiritual Life**

The aims of our vocation are grandiose: to follow Jesus, to know him, to identify ourselves with him; in one word - to become other Jesus Christs. However since no one can come to Jesus unless he is drawn by the Father (Jn 6:44), and since the disciples cannot do anything without the Master (Jn 5:15), we must turn to the one who introduces us to the mystery of the Saviour (C 45), ie., to the Holy Spirit. His formative activity is realized first of all on the terrain of our spiritual (interior) life. How does He accomplish his formative activity?

It is true in a certain sense his action is unique, but in spite of this I would say that He has certain privileged channels; our Rules calls them "spiritual resources" (C 33). I do not

intend to make a complete list here of these resources, nor comment on the Constitutions which refer to our life of faith. Fr. Fernand Jetté has already done this in a masterly fashion.<sup>41</sup> I pause at the word of God and the sacrament of reconciliation.

1. I would like to begin with the Word God. Our Constitutions and Rules refer to that many times.<sup>42</sup> Without entering into an analysis of the texts, I will try to show how the Word of God is the first means which the Spirit uses to make us know and live Jesus Christ. At this point I will take the liberty to rely also on my personal experience as formator. In fact I believe a discourse, though less logical but based on what really happens, is more valid than one that considers the situation more theoretically, following the models given in the various manuals. If I speak of Jesus as formator of the Oblate, I would wish this Oblate to be real, and not an Oblate in general, derived for example from the Constitutions or from the General Norms of Oblate formation.

All candidates who come to us have already had some contact with the word of God, they have had a certain knowledge of Jesus, more or less comprehensive, sufficient however to hear his call. However I have seen that the first call, often enough, is not immediately heard as the call of the Lord Jesus, but rather as coming from Jesus of Nazareth, a man powerful in word and deed (Lc 24:19), who went about doing good (Act 10:38). What initially strikes and attracts (them) are his goodness, generosity, his familiarity with the disciples. Looking at this Jesus many young men ask him: "Master, where do you live?" (Jn 1:38). And when they hear the words: "Come and see" (Jn 1:39)... some of them come to us. They come because they really wish to stay with their Jesus, they wish to follow him, they wish to become good like him. The discovery of our preference for the poor and the community dimension of our life reinforces such pious desires in them. Nevertheless we are only at the beginning of our journey; the human face of Jesus has been formed in them. Unfortunately, some of them stop right there; it would be just as well if they left at that juncture; it's worse if they remain and become preachers only of the humanity of Jesus.

Nevertheless the Spirit continues his work of forming Christ and usually at this point a new formative stage begins. Studying and assiduously meditating on the word of God (C 33) the young Oblates discover that behind their Jesus there is a doctrine, a teaching. Now a new task presents itself, the task of searching for the contents of this teaching. If the young men are sincere and open they must inevitably discover that among the contents (of this teaching) there are some that are in accordance with that first image of the good Jesus, but there are also others which apparently go in opposite direction, and which seem to have little to do with human logic. We are thinking of the Beatitudes, of the need for detachment, of the cross; we are thinking of certain requirements, like those of loving one's enemies, of sacrificing one's own life, of dying in order to live... This is a very delicate moment; perhaps it is here that the problem of faith presents itself for the first time. Accustomed to believing in Jesus, they now confront the problem of believing Jesus. Looking for evangelical analogies I would say that even Oblates must one day live the experience of the disciples who say: "This is intolerable language. How can anyone accept it?" (Jn 6:60). And there are some who leave at this point.

A certain person, basing himself on quite a long experience, comes to the simple conclusion that certain proposals of Jesus are impossible to realize. At this point the question might be raised of the possibility of realizing the evangelical counsels. When I read, in reference to formators, that they must be attentive to the movements of grace in those being formed and that they should stimulate them, help them and accompany them in their progressive discernment of the Oblate vocation (C 51) I think especially of this moment. And in fact it is necessary that those who have been called by Jesus, before they cross the threshold of total surrender, should hear his loving voice: "What about you, do you want to go away too?" (Jn 6:67). And they remain, but do so because they find themselves in the faith of Peter: "Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life" (Jn 6:68). Here we see that Jesus has become their Lord. However let us remember: "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' unless he is under the influence of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). Indeed the Spirit forms Christ in those who commit themselves as Oblates (C 45).

Believing that Jesus has the words of eternal life means believing Jesus, it means placing all our confidence in Him, it means being ready to welcome the word with "a listening heart" (C 33), it means accepting the Jesus of faith: "You are... the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16). For Oblates to allow ourselves to be led in this way by the Spirit means: "develop (our) personal relationship to Jesus" (C 56), become "rooted in Christ" (C 65) and reach "maturity in faith" (R 52).

Those who have come to this level of intimacy with Jesus can open themselves to what is the most difficult in his teaching, ie., to the truth of the Cross, to the Jews an obstacle... to the pagans madness...but to those who have been called... a Christ who is...the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:23-28). The truth of the Cross has never been easy; we know well how difficult Jesus found it every time he wished to present it to the Apostles; they could not understand anything (Mc 8:31-34; Lc 9:43-45; 18:31-34). For us Oblates "the cross of Jesus is central to our mission. Like the apostle Paul, 'we preach Christ and him crucified'" (C 4).

And how should we proclaim this? Our vocation is not that of newspaper reporters not that of actors. We have already said it and insisted upon the fact that we should be witnesses! This task of ours is not new, it is not something discovered by the recent General Chapters; this has been expressed by our Founder. In fact he himself has specified how Jesus Christ is to be preached: "not in loftiness of speech, but in the showing of the Spirit, that is to say by making manifest that we have pondered in our hearts the words which we proclaim, and that we began to practice before setting out to preach".<sup>43</sup> I think that in these words we can see a clear invitation to be witnesses. John the Baptist was Christ's witness par excellence; he teaches us how to become witnesses of Jesus: "He must grow greater, I must grow smaller" (Jn 3:30). I am convinced that to accept Jesus as my formator means being ready to repeat the experience of the Baptist.

The acceptance of the mystery of the Cross deemed up to this point to be the sign of our intimacy with Jesus and as the condition of our mission. But there is something more: only in the light of the Cross can we understand in its depths what *Sequela Christi* really means: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 16:24-25). In fact all our personal crosses are included in the Cross of Christ. Our personal cross detached from his is absurd... and the *Sequela Christi* becomes impossible.

2. The word of God is really a marvelous vehicle of Jesus the formator. Naturally however, this is not the only channel through which the Lord communicates with those who wish to follow him. Remaining at the spiritual level we must say that the whole realm of prayer and the sacraments is not to be forgotten. It would take too much time to examine the formative value of all these. On the other hand, it seems to me that it is not even necessary, since we are dealing with a well known reality. What I propose is a brief consideration of the sacrament of Reconciliation. I do this because I am convinced that it is really this sacrament, more than anything else, that helps us to discover an important dimension in our relationship with Jesus.

In the process of getting closer to Christ, to the point of the most intimate friendship, to the point of identification with him, we cannot forget that in his relationships with men, this Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is not only our brother but first of all our Saviour: "For our salvation he came down from heaven". This means that for our salvation He became man, was crucified, died, was buried, rose from the dead, and ascended to the right hand of the Father".<sup>44</sup> Do we wish to accept all of this? My experience has been a bit different: to be friends and brothers of Jesus? Certainly! To be cooperators of the Saviour and co-redeemers of the human race? Yes, this is our vocation! But to be among those who are in need of salvation, this is not so easy to accept! Therefore even here there is a true and proper formation conducted by Jesus who touches human hearts through his Spirit.

To accept the truth of being part of those who are in need of being saved, means recognizing one's own limitations, means recognizing one's own inability to love, means recognizing one's own sin. It is exactly with all this that modern man has serious problems. John Paul II points out: "a culture which, through renewed and more subtle forms of self-justification,

runs the fatal risk of losing the 'sense of sin' and, as a result, the consoling joy of the plea for forgiveness (Ps 51:14) and of meeting God who is 'rich in mercy'.<sup>45</sup> In the meantime we Oblates are indeed "charged with proclaiming God's pardon to the world" (C 33) and called to "announce the liberating presence of Jesus Christ" (C 9). How will anyone do this when he has never felt the need of being saved himself?

The sacrament of penitence, with the examination of conscience related to it, is offered to us by Jesus the formator as the privileged 'field' on which even we can sincerely and genuinely recognize ourselves in need of divine love. Every time that we are effectively pardoned we experience salvation in Jesus Christ offered also to us, we experience that we too are loved by God and are worth the price of Jesus' blood. Salvation after all, means that God loves man: "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost but may have eternal life... so that through him the world might be saved" (Jn 3:16-17). Here we have the Good News The Gospel of God, for which we are men set apart (C 2).

Human pride is not alien even to Oblates, and quite often it suggests other means for saving the world independent of Jesus. And it sometimes happens that unconsciously, after some "wise" congresses, we begin to preach "a different version of the Good News" (Gal 1:6), a gospel deprived of power and of wisdom because it is deprived of Christ (1 Cor 1:24). However no other gospel exists! There exist only some men who wish to corrupt the gospel of Christ (Gal 1:7). In order not to become men of this kind we have the sacrament of Reconciliation in which the Spirit of Christ makes us amenable to welcoming the Saviour, Fr. Jetté points out: "Anyone who has not personally experienced in his own life what it means to have been loved by Christ and have cost Him the price of his blood can never entirely grasp the full meaning of the Oblate vocation".<sup>46</sup>

## **B. At Ministerial level: A service of love**

At first glance the discussion of ministerial level may seem to be a bit outside the theme of this congress which looks at Jesus Christ from the perspective of Oblate Spirituality, and not from that of our mission. I therefore say immediately that I don't want to examine here the problem of the role or the place of Christ in the mission of the Oblates. But since He effectively forms us even at the level of our ministry, we must therefore consider it a little. Jesus educates us at the level of mission first of all because there is such a thing called the reciprocity of evangelization, because there exists the ministry of formators, and finally, because in the exercise of love, He gives us the possibility of verifying the authenticity of all spiritual formation.

1. Let's begin by the reciprocity of evangelization. This is a relatively new theme, but nonetheless very meaningful. Until recent times, Evangelization meant in practice the proclamation of the Gospel, ie., bringing it to others. Our role was therefore very honorable: to offer, to give. The question of receiving something didn't arise (and even if it did, it was reduced to our heavenly recompense or... material recompense). Some documents of Vatican Council II<sup>47</sup> have provoked serious reflection on the situation of the evangelizer, of the missionary. Today we are more humble and we know that we are not only ones who possess the truth. I would say however, that our position has become more advantageous: we are no longer constrained only to give, to teach; we can also receive, we can learn.

The reciprocity of evangelization expresses itself in various ways. First of all it takes place in the normal milieu of Oblate formation, ie., in the community; in fact, in the community "we are all involved in a process of evangelization" (C 48). Personally I see here a great wealth of value in our communities which thus become a field of exchange of gospel values. This way of looking at things can help us to be conscious of the fact that even in our daily life we should be witnesses of the gospel. Thus we have Jesus forming some through others and He is not only my formator, but in this way He becomes the formator of my community.

Another mode of this reciprocity of evangelization is suggested to us in Rule 8 of our Constitutions: "We will let our lives be enriched by the poor and the marginalized as we work with them, for they can make us hear new ways the Gospel we proclaim". Here we see that

evangelization, even of the poorest, is not a one way street! It can happen that we become too familiar with the gospel we preach, to the extent that the Word of God is no longer a "two-edged sword" for us. It can happen that we repeat and repeat the content (of the gospel) so that in time it doesn't say much or even nothing to us. As a result we speak about the requirements (of the gospel), and they don't touch us any more. Then we are to be pitied.

When evangelization is a one way street for us, we run the risk of all these inconveniences. Instead, if we allow ourselves to be evangelized by the poor, the gospel, always understood in a new way, will not lose its vitality. Allow me to share a very personal experience. For a long time to come I will remember that day of last November when I received a letter from my mother. She wrote to me about my brother, a farmer, who was expecting the birth of his tenth child: "Eugene has had to sell the last cow in order to be able to repay the bank loan". I had opened this letter while we, Fathers of the staff, were discussing how many thousands of dollars we should spend to purchase a new organ for the scholasticate chapel! I don't remember if I have ever heard a better sermon about poverty. Indeed, the poor make us understand the gospel in new ways! And Christ thus accomplishes his work of forming Oblates...

Rule 8, just cited, has a theological base in the document *Missionaries in today's world*. There we read: "In the gospel Jesus identifies himself with the hungry, the sick and with prisoners. He wants us to find him in those who suffer, in those who are abandoned or are persecuted for their stands on behalf of justice".<sup>48</sup> Here we have the consequence: the Lord remains the first formator of the Oblate also because he identifies himself with the poor. "In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40).

This reciprocal evangelization is realized even in our collaboration with the laity<sup>49</sup>, and can even have a certain resonance in the process of inculturation.<sup>50</sup> However, I don't feel competent to elaborate on these problems.

**2.** Among the cooperators with the Lord in the process of forming Oblates, a special place is reserved for those who are involved in the ministry of formators. The role of formators is irreplaceable in the process of first formation, but it is also very useful for continuous formation. Without entering into the details of this statement, I would like to recall article 68 of the Constitutions. In it we read, with reference to all Oblates, that they are "instruments of the Word". This is a very meaningful expression. Without taking this privilege away from anyone, I would insist that formators are instruments of the Word par excellence. We have seen already that Jesus personally formed his Apostles; now - in forming new disciples - he works through his Spirit, but the formators must be attentive to the movements of this Spirit in the candidates (C 51) and know how to help them to discern the actions of God (R 21). Our directory of formation, speaking about formators says: "Imitating Christ in forming his Apostles, they help Christians recognize the call to Oblate life that the Lord makes to them, to discover its wealth and to respond generously."<sup>51</sup> The same document further specifies that the educator is a witness and guardian of the Oblate charism" and that "he is also the mediator of grace".<sup>52</sup>

Just as the priest who celebrates the sacraments acts in *persona Christi*, so, analogically, does the formator who accompanies those who have been called: he is truly the instrument of the Word.

Maybe because I teach Philosophy, I ask myself often enough: Up to what point am I a formator, an instrument of the Word? Metaphysics makes the distinction between the principal cause and the instrumental cause. The instrument becomes a true cause only when it is used by a higher agent; therefore because of the "grace" received from the principal agent, the instrument produces an effect more perfect than what it could produce through its own natural activity. The effect is thus attributed to the principal cause. However the instrument - even though only secondarily - truly and really conditions the action of the principal cause. The Holy Spirit forms in the Oblates; in doing so, He also has formators at his disposal. The effect is attributed to the Spirit, but the quality of the formator is not without significance. I am convinced that it would do the Congregation good if formators were aware of these philosophical principles...

Can we say that formators are really instruments of the Word? I can answer only

for myself. I have already said that one becomes a formator. In the process through which I have lived and continue living I can indicate three stages. At the beginning I wanted to dedicate all my efforts to Christ; I wanted to work for Jesus, for God. I believed that I could do a lot; I was proud of it. When I look back at the first years of my ministry, I must say that I was playing the part of a principal agent; it was I who acted. After having discovered that so many of my efforts, so many sacrifices had not produced much fruit, and after some bitter experiences linked to my term as superior of a very large community, I lived through a sort of conversion. I understood that without the help of God one cannot do much in this type of ministry; now at last I wanted to do everything with the help of Christ. This satisfied me for quite some time, but it looks as if not even this attitude can suffice. Doesn't acting with the help of God mean being the principal agent? If I have Jesus helping me, is He not my instrument? I find myself on the threshold of a third stage...which cannot be other than the stage of total abandonment. Let him be the principal agent, let me be his instrument. Anyhow, believe me, it is difficult to take this step; however, I hope to take it one day.

**3.** The fruits of formation should be verified, proved. This is very important, if we wish to walk in the truth. The proof consists in Love which is provided by Jesus himself. No, I do not intend to make an examination of conscience on love. I wish to simply propose a gospel event, that of the examination of Peter... At that moment the school of "living with Jesus" was about to close; the time for Peter's final examination had come: "After the meal Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others do?' He answered, 'Yes Lord, you know that I love you'. Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs'" (Jn 21:15). I stop here because we all know the whole scene well. Let us consider it a little... what a strange examination that of Peter was! Jesus doesn't ask him about his ability to animate the community, nor about the efficacy of his leadership... The question asked refers to his personal relationship with Jesus: "Do you love me more than these others do?"

This examination pertains to the educative process; it is the final stage of such a process. If the examination is failed, it must be repeated. The question always remains the same, even if sometimes expressed in different words: "Is Jesus Christ at the heart of your life?"

The Oblate often finds himself in the situations which put his love to the test; we need not be astounded because the question of love is always difficult. The one asked of Peter has a greater degree of difficulty. In fact Jesus does not simply ask him: "Do you love me?" but "Do you love me more...?" He who wishes to follow Jesus more closely, he who wishes to live in greater intimacy with him, should love (him) more. I should say that precisely this "more" causes difficulties. Our world speaks so much about rights, about justice, about equality... Well, this is OK. But to love more? more than others? Do we not run the risk of being considered naive or silly? Yes, because accepting this "more" means accepting the logic of the Cross. Oblates are men "ready to leave everything to be disciples of Jesus" (C 2).

### **C. The formative role of Mary and the Church**

When a son of Blessed Eugene strives to understand how Jesus Christ is formator of the Oblate, he cannot exclude Mary and the Church. I know well that this last point of my study could well form the basis of another theme and I am aware of the fact that my investigation could end with the previous paragraph.

If I offer a few lines on such a topic, I do it simply because of a certain Oblate honesty.

**1.** In the formative process models are important. Jesus Christ offers us this exceptional model called *Mary Immaculate*: docile to the Spirit, totally consecrated to the person and the work of the Saviour, attentive to receive Christ in order to give Him to the world (C 10). Everything is here!

**2.** What of the Church? She is our *raison d'être*. The phrase of the final declaration of the congress *The Charism of the Founder today* says a lot: "We receive our mission from the Church and we accomplish it in her, a people of believers, in whom the action of Christ becomes actual and efficacious today".<sup>53</sup> When we then think of Our Founder we must conclude that for



Him Jesus and the Church were two inseparable realities: "He who wishes to be one of us... must be inflamed with love of our Lord Jesus Christ and His Church".<sup>54</sup> "To love the Church is to love Jesus Christ, and vice versa".<sup>55</sup> It is therefore not surprising that on the day of his Beatification Bishop de Mazenod was called by Paul VI "a passionate lover of Jesus Christ and an unconditional lover of the Church".<sup>56</sup> The formation of the Oblate must work towards such an ideal if it does not wish to betray itself.

We are born of the love for Christ and for the Church and these two loves point out the path for the future. May the example of Mary inspire us to live "in creative an ongoing fidelity our personal commitments, to Jesus Christ, while serving the Church and God's Kingdom" (C 46).

Oh Jesus living in Mary, come and live in your servants; in the Spirit of your holiness, in the fullness of your power, in the reality of your virtues, in the perfection of your ways, in the communion of your mysteries; have dominion over every power, in your own Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.<sup>57</sup>

P. Pawel Latusek, o.m.i.

#### NOTES:

- 1 F. JETTÉ, *Report of the Superior General on the state of the Congregation 1980*, n. 16.
- 2 *MTW*, p. 63.
- 3 F. JETTÉ, *The Apostolic Man. Commentary on the Constitutions and Rules of the Oblates of 1982*, Rome, General House, 1992, p. 258; for the allocution: *Jesus Christ, the first formator of the Oblate*, see: *Documentation OMI*, n.122/83, p. 1-9, and also F. JETTÉ, *The Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate*, Rome, General House, 1985, p. 215-229.
- 4 *Ibidem*.
- 5 *GS*, n.22a.
- 6 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n.916.
- 7 *PC*, n.6a.
- 8 *WAC*, n.28b.
- 9 *CC RR 1818*, part. 1, ch. I, #1, art. 1.
- 10 *Ibidem*, ch. III, Nota bene.
- 11 *MTW*, n.138.
- 12 With reference to this article 45, see the commentary of Fr. René MOTTE: "Jesus forming the Apostles" in *Vie Oblate Life*, 1987, p. 3-25.
- 13 Cf. *LG*, n.40; *Catechism*, n.2013.
- 14 Cf. *LG*, n.132, 29, 44 & 47.
- 15 *Ibidem*. n.40a.
- 16 *To Fr. Tempier*, 22.8.1817.
- 17 M. ZAGO. *Report of the Superior General on the state of the Congregation for the 32nd. General Chapter*, 1993, n.63b.
- 18 With regard to the two meanings of the notion *The Apostolic Man*, see F. JETTÉ: *The Apostolic Man*, op. cit., p. 50-51.
- 19 *Ibidem*, p. 78-79.
- 20 For Oblate Christology see : J. PETRIN, "Qui est le Christ pour l'Oblat de Marie Immaculée?", in *Études Oblates*, 1959, p. 127-162; and also A.D. ADDIO, *Cristo crocifisso e la Chiesa abbandonata*, Frascati, 1978, p. 32-45.
- 21 Cf. *LG*, n. 31 and 39; *PC*, n. 13 and 25; *GS*, n. 28.
- 22 Cf. *Paul VI: - Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n. 41; JOHN PAUL II: *Redemptoris Donum*, 1984, n. 14 and 15; *Redemptoris Missio*, 1990, n. 42.
- 23 Cf. M. ZAGO, *Report 1992*, n. 62; "Letter to Oblates in first formation", in *Documentation OMI*, June 1993;

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WAC, n. 14-18.

24 AAS, 66(1974) 568; cf. *EN*, n. 41.

25 *RM*, n. 42; cf. M. ZAGO, *Report 1992*, n. 62, and *WAC*, n. 14.

26 *CC RR 1818*, part 2, ch. III, #1, art. 3.

27 "What the Spirit brings is very different: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control".

28 Cf. F. JETTÉ, *The Missionary*, op. cit., p. 84.

29 *RD*, n. 14.

30 Cf. *RD*, n. 11-13.

31 Cf. *WAC*, n. 6-13; see also M. ZAGO, *Letter to Oblates in first formation*, art. cit.

32 Cf. *Fraternal life in community*, Rome, 2.2, 1994.

33 *Ibidem.*, n. 8.

34 *Ibidem.*, n. 10.

35 Cf. John Paul II: *Christifideles Laici*, 1989, n. 32.

36 *MTW*, n. 109.

37 Lettre to Fr. Mouchette, 2.12.1854.

38 *WAC*, n. 13.

39 *Directives on formation in Religious Institutes*, Rome, 2.2.1992, n. 19.

40 John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 1992, n. 46.

41 Cf. *The Apostolic Man*, op. cit., p. 186-219.

42 Cf. *CC 7*, 31, 33, 56, 66, and *RR 3*, 7, 29, 52, 59.

43 *CC RR 1826*, part. 1, ch. III, #1, art. 5.

44 *Necean Creed*.

45 *PDV*, n. 48d.

46 F. JETTÉ, *The Missionary OMI*, op. cit., p. 52.

47 Cf. *Ad Gentes; Nostra Aetate; Unitatis Redintegratio*.

48 *MTW*, n. 13.

49 Cf. *MTW*, n. 66-71; and *WAC*, n. 41-42.

50 Cf. *MTW*, n. 53-57.

51 *General Norms of Oblate formation, General Administration*, Rome, 1984, p. 15; see the whole chapter II, p.

20-30.

52 *Ibidem.*, p. 15.

53 *Vie Oblate Life*, 1977, p. 302.

54 *CC RR 1818*, part. 3, ch. III, paragraph 1.

55 *Lenten Pastoral Letter*, 16.2.1860.

56 *Homily for Beatification*, in A.A.G., 1975, p. 284.

57 *Oblate Prayer*, Rome, 1986, p. 23.

# Jesus Christ Centre of Oblate Spirituality

## Chapters and Superiors General since 1972

### Introduction

General Chapters and each Superior General along with his Council bear a decisive responsibility in the life of the Congregation. The General Chapter, in its capacity as the highest authority in the Congregation, determines the orientation and the missionary purpose of the Oblates. The Superior General is the living link of unity and stimulates the life of faith and the missionary commitment of Oblates. The documents of General Chapters and the Circular Letters of Superiors General constitute a privileged source for knowing the spirit that animates our Congregation. We therefore propose to study these texts published since 1972 in order to respond to the following question: Who is Jesus Christ for the Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate? In other words, we wish to present the fundamental message addressed to Oblates by their religious authorities, with regard to the place and the role of Jesus Christ in their life, spirituality and ministry.

This study is limited to the Acts of the Chapters from 1972 to 1992 and to the Circular Letters of Superiors General published in the *Acta Administrationis Generalis* during the years 1972 - 1994. Of course, there are other important texts of the Superiors General which could be taken into consideration. If we limit ourselves to their Circular Letters, it is in order to remain in the same genre of documents as the Acts of Chapters, ie., official messages addressed to the ensemble of Oblates.

The limits of this brief study oblige us to treat only the broad outlines, the principal aspects of the question of Christ's place in Oblate spirituality. We will not enter into a theological evaluation of the texts nor into a comparison with other Oblate or ecclesial sources. The method used is that of looking for the key notions which express the fundamental elements of our religious and missionary vocation in relation to the Person of Jesus Christ. Around these key notions we will try to synthesize the thought contained in the Christological passages either of a capitular document or of the ensemble of a Superior General's letters.

We have preferred a chronological structure of presentation. Each Chapter and the message of each Superior General will be presented separately. The idea is to follow, from one General Administration to another an eventual evolution in the presentation of Oblate spirituality and to better grasp the particular Christological accents expressed during the last two decades of the Congregation's history.

### I. General Chapters: 1972 - 1992

Among the last five General Chapters that of 1980 has probably accomplished the most important task for the life of the Congregation since it discussed and voted in the new text of the Constitutions and Rules. The four others have addressed a message to Oblates in the form of a final document or letter. The Constitutions are the object of a separate study. Our research is therefore limited to the final texts of the 1972, 1974, 1986 and 1992 Chapters.

#### A. The Chapter of 1972

This chapter took place in the context of lively post-Conciliar expectations, profound social changes, the desire for a renewal of the apostolate in the Congregation and a tangible decrease in the number of Oblates. The Chapter reformed our structures and wished to

give a new impetus and greater vigor to our missionary ministry.

## **1. Missionary Outlook**

The Chapter of 1972 addressed a central message to the Congregation, contained in the document *Missionary Outlook (MO)*, composed of three chapters. The first part describes the actual situation of the world, according to the regions where Oblates minister. Next, a brief glance is given to the life of the Congregation, insisting on the essential elements of our Oblate vocation. It is in the third chapter, dedicated to concrete choices in our mission of evangelization that there is explicit mention of Jesus Christ. It seems that the expressions "proclaim the Gospel" and "Christ Liberator" sum up best the Chapter's message regarding our relationship to Christ.

### **a. Proclaim the Gospel**

The first task of Missionary Oblates is "to proclaim the Gospel to the poor" (MO n. 15a). The Chapter recalls that the worst form of Poverty... "is not to know Christ" (MO n.15b). The ignorance which is spoken of is not principally of the intellectual order. It is rather a question of a failure to encounter Christ personally. Such an interpretation is suggested in the same paragraph, which speaks of those who "no longer feel the need for Christ's presence in their lives" (ibidem). The knowledge of Christ should be understood in the sense of a personal relationship with Him, a profound experience of "the love of the Risen Christ" (MO n.1). Oblates in the first place are called to know Jesus Christ in order to make Him known to others by the proclamation of the Gospel.

Consequently, *Missionary Outlook* declares firmly that "we commit ourselves to a radical return to the Gospel, a profound personal renewal in the Spirit without which all of the above would be merely techniques geared to win the men of our times" (MO n.16f). This is a precise exhortation for conversion to Christ and to his mission.

### **b. Christ the Liberator**

It is through the proclamation of the Gospel that Christ becomes present in the lives of individuals. The document does not develop this theme. Rather, it concentrates on the poor - the privileged recipients of evangelization and on development and integral liberation as an essential component of our mission of evangelization. The capitular text seems to prefer the term "liberation" as a definition of the evangelical message of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Christ is presented principally as the true Liberator who has labored all through his life for the deliverance of men from all types of servitude and has offered us through his Paschal Mystery "a liberation that surpasses all merely human efforts" (MO n.15f). Oblates are called and sent to continue the liberation mission of Christ, and this in a double sense. First of all they endeavour to liberate themselves, or rather, they pledge themselves (to a radical return to the Gospel, a profound personal renewal in the Spirit" (MO n.16f). At the same time, they pledge themselves "to liberate others", to take the Good News to the poor. Though without explicit reference, the Chapter takes the Incarnation of the Word as the model for achieving this Oblate missionary task. In fact, there is an insistence on the importance of "living in communion with men", of "living within the world", by taking on the social, cultural and economic conditions" of the poor (cf. MO n.16a).

*Missionary Outlook* is not a document which can be called "Christo-centric". Rather, attention is focused on the actual world and on the principal lines of missionary activity. There are only three explicit references to Jesus Christ, and these are made almost in passing. Jesus Christ is proposed first of all as a model of activity in evangelical liberation. The Oblates are compared to the Apostles and defined essentially by their personal relationship to Christ which is a relationship of love. They are invited to experience always anew the love of Christ in their own lives and to be "men who are driven on by this love to risk their lives for the sake of the Gospel" (MO n.18) in order to continue Christ's mission.

## **2. The Community**

The General Chapter of 1972 gave the Superior General the mandate of addressing a message to the Congregation about Apostolic Community. It is thus that the General in Council published in 1972 the document entitled *Community (COM)*, which can be considered as forming part of the Capitular message. The document, composed of 24 paragraphs, speaks explicitly about Jesus Christ in only four of them. In nos. 6-9 that we find a brief theological description of community life. It is a strongly biblical text and it makes references to the Person of Christ. The reflection concentrates on the importance of Christ who creates our fraternal communion. *Union in Christ* is the title of the first paragraph and it summarizes well the Christological content of this document.

### **Union in Christ**

a. Christ is presented first of all as the cornerstone of fraternal communion. Jesus has given his life in order to gather together in unity all the children of God; He sends His Spirit, "the agent of unity among men"; "his love and his Spirit are stronger than all the forces of disruption" (cf. COM 6). Jesus Christ is therefore the source and the principle of the Christian community and particularly of the Oblate community.

b. Subsequently the document shows us Jesus as the model and the way toward fraternal communion, Jesus, by this new commandment to love one another, calls us to constantly build up the community. He invites us to follow his example and to "share our lives with others" (COM 7), and thus find the path to unity. In this manner the importance of a personal decision and of our conscious cooperation in welcoming Christ into our community relationships is underlined. This becomes more evident in moments of separation and disagreement when we are called to pardon and reconciliation. In these moments "we are called to welcome Christ who makes us return to our brothers and travel the same road with them once again" (COM 7). Our relationship with Christ remains therefore at the center of our community life.

c. Community includes also a third invitation to remain in contact with Christ: give witness to Christ. The unity which Jesus has established among men, the gift of communion that we experience in Christ, these we must manifest to the world "so that the world may believe" (COM 8). An authentic community rightly reveals "that the power of Christ's love is stronger than egoism and cupidity" (ibidem.). The community therefore does not exist only for itself. "Community has an apostolic orientation" (COM 9). It has the task of becoming the visible sign of salvation effected in Jesus Christ. The document thus recalls that Oblate Communities have the mission of rendering the Risen Jesus present to the World "by our manner of life" (COM 8), but also, following the example of St. Paul, in accomplishing our missionary task in apostolic teams (cf. COM 9).

### **B. The Chapter of 1974**

In the Acts of the 1974 Chapter explicit references to Christ are found in two documents: The letter of the capitulars to Oblates and formation, especially in the Appendix to the second document. This Appendix is a text on formation voted in at the 1972 Chapter, but which was published only two years later. Thus it became known in the Congregation as though it were part of the 1974 Chapter documents. It seems better to consider it in the context of this Chapter.

#### **1. Letter of the Capitulars to Oblates**

The resignation and unexpected departure in 1974 of the Superior General Fr. Richard Hanley in 1974 produced a shock in the Congregation and affected the atmosphere of this election Chapter. The Chapter limited itself to a letter addressed to all Oblates, instead of a systematic elaboration. The letter transmits the "shared conviction" of the Capitulars about their experience and at the beginning gives a long list of questions about the world and about our missionary task.

##### **a. The Only Saviour**

The letter begins with an ardent profession of faith in Jesus Christ the only

Saviour. It describes the reality of salvation in terms of liberation. Jesus Christ is the only Saviour, because He alone frees men through a total liberation.

The liberation which He brings is neither solely political nor solely spiritual. It is total. All of humanity is led by it toward the final achievement of resurrection. Such liberation takes place in us from this moment on by virtue of our consecration to his Person and to his message; it is in Him that we discover the final and only meaning of our life and deeds. (Acts of the General Chapter 1974, p. 12).

It is interesting to note that the authors of the Letter explain immediately how this liberation is realized in us, and what its existential significance and practical consequences are. It is through our consecration to Jesus Christ and to evangelization that we share in his liberating work. The Person of Jesus renders us free because He gives "the final and only meaning to our life and deeds" (Acts, p. 12). Evangelical liberation provokes action. Of course this refers to missionary action. Oblates, called by Jesus Christ to evangelize the poor, wish to proclaim this liberation to all peoples, to render it present and efficacious especially among the most poor.

#### **b. Encounter with the Lord**

Another key expression in the Christological reading of this Letter seems to be: Encounter with the Lord. In fact, the Chapter addresses each Oblate by the following question: "Where am I in my encounter with the Lord?" (Acts, p. 13). For it has been proved that "a 'lived' answer to the questions put by the world lies in encountering the Lord" (ibidem). And how do we encounter Christ? Through our religious consecration; through our vows of poverty, chastity and obedience we meet Jesus Christ poor, chaste and obedient. This encounter puts us in solidarity with the poor, capable of quality relationships with others, of being responsible men who are capable of listening.

Encountering the Lord seems like another aspect of the liberation which Jesus brings us. But here the accent is on a personal relationship with Christ and on the fact that Jesus Christ should always become more and more the living center of our existence. In fact when the Chapter speaks about the vow of chastity, it says that "this vow obliges us to be men for whom Jesus Christ is EVERYTHING" (ibidem). Besides, a personal encounter with Christ is required as a necessary condition to be "witnesses who can bring about an encounter with the Lord" (Acts p. 14). Authenticity of life and evangelical radicalism make Oblates credible witnesses.

In conclusion it can be said that the Chapter of 1974 wished on the one hand, to affirm the actuality of the "Missionary Outlook" of 1972. On the other hand, it completed it by its letter, since it granted to more deeply root our missionary vocation and our bringing Christ's message to the world in a profound, personal and a unique relationship with Jesus Christ. One can also say that the Chapter of 1974 directs our regard and draws our attention to the quality of our relationship with Christ. While the Chapter of 1972 wanted to make us more aware of the problems of the contemporary world and of the earth's inhabitants' need for salvation, that of 1974 appeals to us not to lose sight of the Person of Jesus Christ.

### **2. Text of the 1972 Chapter on formation**

In two passages of this text there is explicit reference to Christ: when it speaks of vocations and of first formation. Face to face with the crisis of vocations the Chapter invites Oblates to listen to Christ who tells us again to pray to the Father for missionary vocations (cf. Acts, p. 3) 74). When speaking of first formation Christ appears above all as the model. First of all as the model of the formator, as He is also described by the Founder in the Preface. Then the Chapter recommends the development of an authentic evangelical poverty among young Oblates, according to "the model who is the poor Christ" (cf. Acts, p. 78-79). But the message seems to be centered on fidelity to Christ.

#### **a. Fidelity to Christ**

In a passage of the text on first formation our formandi are described as "human persons called by God to total discipleship and following of the Lord, and this as an Oblate

Missionary Religious' Priest or Brother" (Acts, p. 77). The disposition to follow Christ in a radical manner seems therefore to be the essential trait of our young candidates and immediately the Chapter clearly underlines the fact that fidelity to Christ is one of the fundamental values which ought to permeate Oblate formation.

Fidelity to the crucified Christ and Risen Lord, to his Church and her teaching, to our Immaculate Mother Mary, to the Founder and to the authentic tradition of the Oblate Congregation is a most fundamental value to be communicated in our formation (ibidem).

Fidelity to Christ is placed here in a concrete context. It is linked to fidelity to the Church and thereby becomes concrete; it is linked also to Our Immaculate Mother, to the Founder and to Oblate tradition. Our fidelity to Christ includes other aspects, which appear as concentric circles. At the center we find the Person of the Lord, but this fidelity also embraces the authentic Oblate tradition. In reality, this text tells us that we cannot separate fidelity to Christ from fidelity to his Church. We find here the attitude so dear to our Founder, for whom to love the Church meant to love Jesus Christ.

It must be added that the expression used here in the citation given above: "fidelity to Christ the Lord crucified and risen" is rather rare in Oblate texts. Evidently it corresponds to the Christological title "Saviour", but it makes a more direct reference to the paschal mystery and to the fundamental experience of the Apostles. In this sense it seems to make more explicit the meaning of *sequela Christi*, mentioned a short while ago. Oblates are called to follow Christ and to be faithful to Him, to Him who freely gave his life on the cross and recovered it in its fullness. He is alive and accompanies us on the path of the mission. Therefore fidelity to Christ also signifies a life conformed to the logic of the Lord's paschal mystery.

#### **D. Chapter of 1980**

The new Constitutions were at the heart of this Chapter. The new text of the Constitutions and Rules, discussed and voted by the Capitulars, is practically the only written document offered to the Congregation by this Chapter. As was mentioned earlier, the Constitutions and Rules will not be object of this study.

#### **E. Chapter of 1986**

The message this chapter presented to the Congregation is contained in *Missionaries in Today's World (MTW)*. The references to MTW are generally dealt with in the second section of each chapter which treats of a "reflection in the light of the Word of God and of our Oblate charism". The two other sections are respectively - a glance at the situation, a strategy of action. In the *corpus* of the capitular document there are 25 paragraphs, which speak to us of Jesus Christ. A primary analysis of these passages allows us to group them around two principal themes: "proclaim Christ" and "contemplate Christ".

##### **1. Proclaim Christ**

The title of the document, *Missionaries in Today's World*, already indicates the Chapter's major preoccupation: how we can be missionaries today, in the face of the challenges which the present world poses. From the introduction a clear conviction is expressed that "the first need of all people is 'to know who Jesus Christ is'", and that "our mission is to proclaim Jesus Christ and his kingdom" (MTW, n. 12). The reason is simple: because Jesus Christ brings us hope and evangelization is the way that leads to the fullness of life.

For Oblates "to proclaim Jesus Christ" to the poor and the most abandoned is at the center of the evangelization process. This is a service that should distinguish us in the Church. However evangelizing the most abandoned implies witnessing at the same time, actions "which might transform individuals and society, to denounce whatever is an obstacle to the coming of the kingdom" (MTW, n.14). In other words, the proclamation of Jesus Christ is not limited to preaching, it pushes us to enter into communion with the poor, to devote ourselves to

serve them, "to accompany the poor in their efforts to construct a 'world born of his resurrection'" (C 9; MTW, n.25). Jesus himself has shown us this way when, in order to liberate us, he embraced our condition and united himself in fellowship with sinners. This integral approach to evangelization puts us also in the line of fidelity to Eugene de Mazenod who, to proclaim the Gospel, lived close to the people and devoted himself to the service of the most abandoned groups of Provence.

The Chapter reminds us that the first objective of the proclamation of Jesus Christ is to proclaim his liberating presence, "to bring a message of joy and reconciliation to the world" (C 4; Mtw, n.40), "to bring the witness of a life unified in Jesus Christ" (MTW, n.41). It is thus that we can give a response to the world. In fact in its document the Chapter devotes a lot of space to the description of the world today and to its need of salvation. The world appears wounded by sin, by injustice, stained by secularism, divided and broken, in constant change, but this world also aspires toward unity, seeks authentic values and is the place where salvation is attained by the action of God. Oblates are called to be cooperators of Christ in his work of salvation. On the one hand compassion for the man of today permits us to dare everything in order to lead him to God. On the other hand, the power of the Risen Jesus Christ gives us strength and "is the basis for the hope which we want to bring to the world" (MTW, n.40).

Besides, the Chapter reaffirms the importance of community life linked with our mission of proclaiming Jesus Christ. It is a mission in the Church, in communion with the pastors, in obedience to superiors.

It does not belong to individuals but is a mission within the Church, which prolongs the mission of Christ. Thus it is the community which sends, and the mission is received in obedience and guaranteed by perseverance. The missionary is responsible to his community to his superiors and it is with the community that he gives thanks (MTW, n.115).

We simply underline the truth that the work of evangelization is entrusted to a group and that we can proclaim Jesus Christ in an effective manner in so far as we are united to this group which is the Church. Thus the Oblate charism - the love of Christ and the zeal to evangelize the poor - is inseparably linked to love for the Church. The Chapter therefore insists on the community dimension of the proclamation and recalls that if the Oblates have the right and the courage to bring the Gospel to the world, it is because in the first place the presence of the Risen Lord among them unites them in charity and obedience. Such a missionary task accomplished in community, according to the expression of Paul the Apostle, "is the spiritual worship which the Risen Jesus offers to God his Father in the Spirit" (Rom 15:16; MTW n.117).

## **2. Contemplate Christ**

In order to respond to the requirements of our apostolic task, each Oblate needs "a spirituality adapted to our situation as missionaries" (MTW, n.141). "This spirituality", the capitular document continues, "is founded upon the contemplation of Christ who was available to respond to the needs of those whom he met and who also spent many silent hours praying in the presence of his Father" (Lk 5:15-16; ibidem). The missionary is therefore called to model his life on the example of Christ and to walk in the footsteps of the Master. His ideal is on the one hand "compassionate love and availability to people" (MTW, n.39). On the other hand he sees that Jesus could not live without prayer. Thus, with their eye of faith fixed on Christ, Oblates can find a balance between ministry and prayer, live in availability at the service of others and at the same time jealously protect moments of prayer in the presence of the Father.

The life of Christ finds its center and its achievement in the paschal mystery. It is not surprising that the Chapter invites Oblates to turn "toward the Cross of Christ, a sign of hope and a call to live the paschal mystery" (MTW, n.91). The immediate context of this quotation is an indication as to how we can rise above the tensions in the Church and in the world. But at the same time, the Chapter shows us what is essential in an authentic Christian spirituality in general, and that of the missionary in particular. It is rooted in the paschal mystery and nourishes itself in the contemplation of Jesus Christ crucified and risen. The paschal mystery literally means "the



mystery of passage", the passage from death to life, from slavery to liberty. The cross of Christ can thus be called the "sign of hope", since it has become the only place where the love of God for men shines, and where God has overcome death and sin and has opened to us the way to life. In reply to Jesus' total gift to the whole of humanity, to his humiliation unto death on the cross, the Father has responded by raising him to a new life. The Cross of Christ is therefore the door which leads to eternal life, and it is a constant reminder that in losing our life we rediscover it in abundance.

There is still another aspect of the contemplation of Christ in *Missionaries in Today's World*. First of all it means recognizing Jesus Christ in those who suffer:

In the Gospel Jesus identifies himself with the hungry, the sick and with prisoners. He wants us to find him in those who suffer, in those who are abandoned or are persecuted for their stands on behalf of justice (MTW, n.13).

This appeal must have been painful or even upsetting for each generation of Christians. It is always easier to contemplate Jesus in the silence of prayer or in an icon, than to discover him in someone who is miserable or is excluded (from society). The Chapter does not develop this trend of thought too much, but it is present as the basis for the first part of the document which deals with "Mission, Poverty and Justice".

Besides, the Chapter calls us to look at the poor, through the eyes of the crucified Saviour (cf. MTW n.16). This text refers to C 4 and it must be interpreted in this perspective. "Through the eyes of our crucified Saviour we see the world which he redeemed with his blood" says the text of our Constitutions. Each human being, even the most abandoned and despised has a great value in the eyes of God and we are called to respect him as Jesus' brother and ours. Then those who suffer, we regard them as sharing in the passion of the Saviour and we desire that they may know the power of his resurrection. This type of contemplation is indispensable for the missionary, because it transforms our outlook on the world and our relationships with others.

In summary, it may be said that the capitular document *Missionaries in Today's World* tends in the first place towards an analysis of the situation of contemporary society, of the Church and of our Congregation. The center of its preoccupation seems to be the people of today. But the document also reminds us of Oblate values and it indicates the lines of an apostolic response to the problems and needs of man's salvation. Precisely in Oblate values and in the recommendations for missionary action appears the centrality of Christ in Oblate spirituality. He should be at the heart of our prayer, of our evangelical proclamation and of all our missionary activity.

## **F. The Chapter of 1992**

During the last Chapter, many voices have expressed the desire to address a short message to the Congregation instead of producing another capitular document. In the end the prevailing desire was drawn up a rather elaborate message, composed of 45 paragraphs and, as the title *Witnessing as Apostolic Community (WAC)* indicates, it centered on the apostolic community and on bearing witness. Differing from the preceding Chapter, WAC devotes only five paragraphs to describe the need for salvation today. The accent is placed clearly on the quality of our response: in community life, in our fidelity to the vows we have taken, in the formation of young missionaries and in our collaboration with the laity.

There exist already a serious study by Fr. M. Zago, o.m.i., about the centrality of Christ in Oblate spirituality according to the capitular message of 1992. (Cf. M. ZAGO, omi: "Christ, the Source of our Being: Witnessing as Apostolic Community", *DOCUMENTATION OMI*, n.193, June 1993). He analyses the Christological texts in depth and synthesizes them very well according to three themes: "Christ calls us", "Christ center of the community", "Christ source of our witnessing". For our presentation we will look for other key expressions and perhaps place the accents differently, however in line with to the conclusions of the study mentioned.

In *Witnessing as Apostolic Community* explicit mention is made of Jesus Christ in

20 of the 45 paragraphs. There is a passage which summarizes well the role of Jesus Christ in our missionary and religious life. Jesus is described as a formator "who calls and gathers his disciples around himself, who builds bonds of unity and love between them, empowers them with his Spirit, and sends them out to be his witnesses" (WAC, 26). A deep analysis of the capitular message seems to confirm that it underlines in a special manner those moments of Jesus Christ's activity in our regard: He calls us, He brings us together in community, He empowers us, making us his witnesses. We will try to synthesize the teaching of the Chapter around the themes of the call, communion and conversion.

### **1. Called by Christ**

Oblates acknowledge themselves above all as called by Christ, It is He who took the initiative in meeting us and asking us to follow Him and to be schooled by Him (cf. WAC, 32). In the first place we are called to become disciples of Christ who "was chaste and poor and who redeemed mankind by this obedience" (C 12). The following of Jesus leads us to profound personal relationships with Him, relationships which transform our whole life. At the same time, we are called to share in the mission of Christ. "By becoming disciples who follow Jesus, they can by that fact better share in his mission as Apostles" (WAC, 15). The Chapter wished to underline the actuality of the call of Christ to be his disciples and apostles. We read: "Christ is still calling us today to follow Him and to bear witness to his life and mission. Hence we feel compelled to emphasize the present reality of his call, his invitation to follow Him, and the urgent need of being credible in the service of his mission" (WAC, 27).

Like He did for so many generations of Oblates, Jesus calls us today in a special manner: "through people's need for salvation, especially through that of the poor" (WAC 1). He opens our eyes to see the evils that beset the world and the Church, He puts in our hearts compassion for the powerless, of those bereft of hope and deprived of their rights, He makes our ears sensitive to the cry which expresses their desire for salvation (cf. WAC, 2). Christ thus calls upon us today: He puts us again on mission, awakening in us "our missionary concern for the needs of the world" (WAC 24). For He continues his divine mission of saving men and of leading them to the Father. He needs us therefore as his collaborators, who will render Him present in the midst of people who yearn for salvation.

In the same line the Chapter reminds us that "the vocational ministry is not optional", because "Jesus never ceases to call people to follow him" and to do so "as sons of Eugene de Mazenod" (WAC 28). This basic conviction should impel us to make the call of Jesus heard by young people, and that this call be concrete and nurtured (cf. WAC 30). Hence also the importance that the Chapter attaches to formation. Above all it is a school which makes us disciples who follow Jesus, and prepares us to share in his mission as apostles (cf. WAC 15).

### **2. Gathered around Christ**

"Witnessing as Apostolic Community" clearly reaffirms that community life forms an essential part of our Oblate vocation, because to become disciples and share the mission of Jesus we need the community. It constitutes the milieu and the indispensable means through which our response to the call of Christ becomes concrete, matures, develops and is achieved. "The community of the Apostles with Jesus is the model of our life...the presence of the Lord among us today binds us together in charity and obedience to create anew in our own lives the Apostles' unity with Him and their common mission in his Spirit" (C 3).

From this perspective, it is clear that the objective of community is much more than merely gathering a group that functions well together: its aim is to establish interdependence and profound communion between its members (WAC 10).

In this passage the Chapter recalls the model according to which we are invited to build our community. First of all an apostolic community gathers around Jesus Christ and He is the center. This conviction is repeated many times in the capitular document: "We seek to gather around the Person of Jesus Christ" (WAC 6). "We can build such apostolic communities

only if we again choose as our center the Person of Jesus Christ" (WAC 9; see also n.8 and 26). At the same time it is clear that with our human efforts alone we cannot achieve anything more than a group that functions well. Our efforts to gather around or be centered around Jesus Christ presuppose his presence, or better still express our faith in his active presence and in the power of his Spirit who creates among Oblates "bonds of unity and love" (WAC 26), which "unite us in charity and obedience" (WAC 10).

Oblates are gathered around Christ "not as coalition of free-lance ministers, but as a united missionary corps" (WAC 7). In Jesus Christ and through Him they achieve the unity of their life, a profound communion, interdependence: as one heart, they become transparent to each other (cf. WAC 10 and 12). For by this cross Jesus has reconciled us with God and among ourselves; He has broken down the barrier which used to keep us apart... to create one single New Man in Himself out of the two... to unite them both in a single body... through Him, both of us have in the one Spirit... our way to come to the Father (cf. Eph 2:14-18). Thus the insistence on the primacy of divine grace in our life and fraternal communion, understood above all as a gift of God.

Gathered around Christ, animated by the same Spirit, forming one body, we are sent on mission. The Chapter uses strong figurative expressions to underline the importance of this community mission. It describes our community ideal, toward which we should tend, in terms of "solidarity of compassion, (to become) a single heart that can be food for the life of the world" (WAC 6), "flesh for the light of the world", "the banquet table to which we invite mankind" (WAC 8). The Eucharistic references are evident. The man of today, assailed by individualism, disunity and the fickleness of power, thirst for communion, for a sense of belonging; he needs signs "of the new world born of the resurrection" (WAC 9). The unity of the disciples, for which Jesus prayed before his passion, is an indispensable witness so that the world may believe in the love of God, in his saving compassion revealed in Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Jn 17:21-23).

Our union in Jesus is a fact. It is He who has gathered us together through the same vocation and who actually "unites us in charity and obedience" (WAC 10). At the same time the building up of the community always remains a call and a duty, because it is never finished: on the one hand because the forces of disunity are at work among us, and on the other because communion is a promise which will be realized only in the kingdom of heaven. We live therefore in the eschatological logic of the "already" and of the "not yet". It obliges us to accept a creative tension between reality and the model to achieve. From there too is born the constant need "to seek to achieve quality in our community life and in our being" (WAC 7), in order to be credible witnesses. This presupposes a true personal and community conversion, a continual conversion to Christ.

### **3. Converted to Jesus Christ**

"Witnessing as Apostolic Community" recalls that Oblates "Truthfully live out their Christian vocation by witnessing to their personal experience of God's love for them and their conversion to Jesus Christ" (WAC 17). We should try to understand how and why the Chapter expresses the reality of being witnesses of Jesus Christ in terms of being "converted to Jesus Christ".

Conversion in the capitular message is described in terms of "an encounter with Christ" (WAC 25), "a personal experience of Jesus Christ" (WAC 15). In the light of the New Testament the conversion of the disciples is a progressive process which finds its center in the paschal events of the passion, death, resurrection of Jesus and Pentecost. The Apostles follow Jesus, they love him passionately, but their life reveals itself through the gift and the power of the Spirit. They saw their sins, they had acknowledged the mercy, pardon and the peace of the Risen Lord; they had undergone the experience of the gratuitous gift of the Spirit who had made free men of them and allowed them to become "a single heart and a single soul". A similar conversion should therefore be at the base of our missionary vocation.

At the same time this conversion to Christ is a constant commitment. "Life-long conversion renewed daily is indispensable if our witness is to be credible, free from inconsistency,

contradiction or falsehood" (WAC 18). In the first place it's a question of "deepening our personal intimacy with Jesus" (WAC 45; see also 12); "united to Him in prayer and joined in communion to all our brothers in a love that has Him (God) as its source" (WAC 17). Constant conversion then signifies a daily effort so that our "style of life corresponds to the values they (we) profess by their (our) religious vows" (WAC 18). But it also implies the availability to keep ourselves in "readiness to learn and to change in response to new demands" (WAC 37).

The Chapter of 1992 insisted on the fact that this whole process of conversion to Christ is essentially communitarian. "Therefore we choose community as a way whereby we are continuously evangelized and can be witnesses of the Good News in this graced moment of today's world (WAC 17). We have a constant need to deepen our relationship with Jesus Christ as persons, but also as communities (cf. WAC 12 and 15). The community is the normal milieu where we learn to share our compassion, where our reciprocal responsibility matures, where we share our life of faith and learn to pardon and to receive pardon. The community is the privileged place where we experience a world born of the Resurrection. Since it is in the community of his disciples that the Lord makes Himself present and the gift of the Spirit creates in them "a single heart and a single soul" (Acts 4:32). Faith lives, is renewed and is transmitted in the interior of a community. Missionary dynamism is also linked to the quality of the community life. Consequently Oblates are called to practice community life as the way to their fidelity always renewed, to Christ and to our mission of being his credible witnesses.

The Chapter has called on the Congregation to focus its attention and its efforts on the quality of our community life, because in the face of the salvation needs of men we can respond through an evangelical message, above all in the form of a collective witness. The word needs witnesses of Jesus Christ and these we can be principally in apostolic community, ie., as a 'corps' gathered around Christ, animated by his Spirit in the constant movement of conversion and walking in the footsteps of the Lord of history.

## **II. Superiors General**

We will deal with the ensemble of the circular letters of each Superior General as a single source. It would be interesting to attempt a chronological presentation and follow the development of thought of the respective Superior. But here will be satisfied with synthesizing their message addressed to Oblates regarding the place of Jesus Christ in our spirituality.

### **A. Richard Hanley (1972-1974)**

During his brief mandate as Superior General, Fr. Richard Hanley addressed seven circular letters to the Congregation. In four of these letters, eleven different passages speak explicitly of Jesus Christ. Evidently, it would be difficult to draw any general conclusions from these brief texts, which do not develop his thought on the role of Christ in the lives of Oblates.

Nevertheless an in-depth analysis of these texts allow us to say that the Christological theme which was dearest to Fr. Hanley is the Incarnation. He wanted to transmit to his confreres his profound conviction that Christ is present and that He is at work in the world. In order to recognize Him, we should discern well the signs of the times. "We are committed to search with men in humble docility to find anew the light of Christ and to be faithful to our mission of comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable" (*Acta Administrationis Generalis O.M.I.*, vol. I, pars 1, p.22. Future references will be abbreviated to I.1,22).

The Incarnation signifies above all the solidarity of God with humanity. "His incarnation preceded and made possible his solidarization with all humanity, and as sons of De Mazenod we are *cooperatores Christi* in his becoming the flesh and bones and blood of mankind today" (I.1,35). Oblates are therefore called and sent to announce Christ to the world. Our mission is to continue the mission of Christ, ie., to be one with the poor and the suffering, to work with and for others. "We have been sent, missioned to publicly announce, disclose, and release the presence of Christ in the world, to share intimately in the Paschal Mystery made possible by the Incarnation..." (I.2,192). The Good News is that the Son of God is the "Christ for us", that the

Kingdom of God is among us. We too are called to live "for others" (cf. idem., 193-194).

Christ then, should be our model, especially for those who are called to the service of authority. Fr. Hanley reminds us that "structures... are useless, even harmful... unless they are embodied in persons who pattern their leadership after the Person and manner of Christ" and that "leadership is service within the community and for the community", and "authority in the Church is rooted in its relationship to Christ" (I.1,25). In his letter during his visit to Latin America, the Superior General says that "Jesus is championed as the Liberator" (I.2,178), and is therefore the example of an integral liberation.

The Christological title which Fr. Hanley uses the most when he speaks to Oblates is that of "Saviour". Oblates cooperating "with Jesus, our Lord and Saviour" (I.1,27), at Christmas they celebrate "the birth of the Saviour" (idem,36; see also I.2,192,194). Besides, this is not surprising, since it is the title so dear to our Founder, who invites us to meditate on the paschal mystery in which is revealed the love of God "who sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through Him the world might be saved" (Jn 3:17).

Father Hanley insisted much more on the work of Christ in the world and our sharing in his mission and much less on our personal relationship with Jesus.

### **B. Fernand Jetté (1974-1986)**

As Superior General, Father Fernand Jetté addressed 39 circular letters to the Congregation. His message on the role and the place of Jesus Christ in the lives and ministry of Oblates seems to have been marked by the three special moments of his mandate: a) The visit to Aix-en-Provence at the beginning of his Generalate; b) The Chapter of 1980 which voted in the new text of the Constitutions and Rules; c) His last circular letter which contains as it were his spiritual testament.

1. In the letter written on January 12 1975 in the former Carmelite Monastery in Aix-en-Provence, he wished to make us relive the grace of the Founder during the year of his beatification. He presents us two essential traits of the relationship of Eugene de Mazenod with Christ: his encounter with Christ and the proclamation of Jesus Christ to the poor.

Fr. de Mazenod was first and foremost a man who encountered Christ in his own life and who knew him as Saviour... It was Good Friday in the year 1807. Eugene de Mazenod was 25 years old. He was profoundly struck on this occasion by the realization that he himself was redeemed by the blood of Christ, and this realization left its mark on his life. Deeply moved to the point of tears, he wanted to give an answer to Christ's love by a complete gift of self(...). And the Church that he so passionately loved, he loved in Jesus Christ.

As a young priest he soon felt the need to go to the poor, the most abandoned, those to whom others would not go, and to go to them in order to teach them in their own tongue 'who Christ is' and what their dignity is in the eyes of faith (II.2,335).

Fr. Jetté speaks more at length in the same letter about the community dimension of the missionary vocation of this young provençal priest.

2. Again during the course of the 1980 Chapter Fr. Jetté writes a letter and invites Oblates to interiorize the new Constitutions. He stresses how much Christ is at the center of our spirituality.

The spirit that animates them is that of the Founder: 'to identify with him (Christ)'(C 2), 'to cooperate with him'(C 2), 'to reproduce in ourselves the pattern of his life' (C 2), 'in a radical way, we follow Jesus' (C 12), 'to proclaim Christ... to the most abandoned' (C 5), 'to be witnesses of the justice and the holiness of God' (C 19), 'listen attentively for the Father's voice so that we may

spend ourselves without reserve to accomplish his plan of salvation' (C 24),  
'walk with Jesus in faith, hope and Love' (C 30) (V.1,55).

At the basis of the new Constitutions, the Superior General therefore outlines a "Christocentric" program of spiritual renewal of the Congregation. In another letter he will say that the Congregation

has to renew its radical choice of Jesus Christ and its mission of evangelizing the world. To this end, the sincere and unanimous acceptance of the new Constitutions would be a grace for the Institute (V.2,194).

3. The last circular letter of 21 May 1986 contains a kind of spiritual testament of the retiring Spiritual General, in the sense that he wished to synthesize the exhortations addressed to Oblates during his mandate. In it he speaks of the most efficacious means of helping the Institute to strengthen itself in the future:

The Oblates' attachment to Jesus Christ and to his Church, an attachment that is deep and very simple. We bind ourselves to Jesus a living person whom we love more than anyone else and whom we never separate from the Church and her Pastors, beginning with the Pope. Charity and unity among ourselves...(.)enables us to speak of Jesus Christ quite naturally to those outside our ranks. Zeal for the poor, a zeal that is genuinely missionary (...) a zeal that is fully satisfied only when it has brought them to know the ineffable mystery of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. Devotion to Mary (...). If we remain faithful to her, she cannot fail to help us today (IX.193).

In the three quotations above two themes or major traits return, indicated by Fr. Jetté to Oblates as being essential to their relationship with Christ: love Jesus Christ and make Jesus Christ known. Around these two themes we will try to synthesize the Christological thinking of Fr. Jetté, just as he presented it to Oblates in the course of his mandate. The first theme groups the texts which refer to our personal relationship with Jesus Christ and our religious life, whereas the second looks rather at our relationship with the world and our missionary attitudes.

#### **a. Love Jesus Christ**

Since his first message to the Congregation, Fr. Jetté speaks about the love of Jesus Christ "to be lived completely and without reservation 'in the midst of men' especially the poorest (...)" (II)2.333). This supposes that we have encountered him, like Eugene de Mazenod, that we have known him as Saviour and that our life was deeply influenced. At the same time, in order to love Christ on a daily basis, a constant conversion is needed and "we have to work at self-evangelization. It is our task to discover anew that Jesus Christ is at the heart of our lives (...). It is a matter of building, without any reservation, an apostolic friendship with Christ" (II.2,337). This love is neither sentimental nor disembodied. It is linked to the recognition of Jesus Christ in the poor. "We are born, says Fr. Jetté, in the heart of a priest knowing Jesus Christ and able to recognize him in the poor" (III.1,34). This love is expressed in solidarity with the people. There are Oblates "who love Jesus Christ and the people he confided to them enough to accept suffering with and for them so as to build a better world" (II.2,350).

Love for Jesus Christ and for the poor is inseparable and Fr. Jetté speaks to us of a "total love". It is a matter of a profound option "that makes of us a complete gift (...) to Christ and to the service of the Church" (IV.1,64), "We are Oblates first of all by what we have in our heart; the total gift of self to Jesus Christ, the love for the poor and the most abandoned" (idem,90; see also IV.2,314). This total gift of self is indispensable in order to know Jesus Christ well and it presents itself as an constant appeal to allow ourselves to be transformed by this love. It is a progressive process of conversion to Jesus Christ which we can call the second conversion in the actuality of each one's history.

A second conversion is often more painful than the first because it penetrates to greater depths, it draws us out of attitudes and habits that are

more firmly rooted, and it reveals to us an attachment to our own self and will that we may never have suspected (V.2,196; see also VI.2,226; VII.64; VIII,32).

In other words to love Jesus Christ means to truly opt for Him, make Him little by little the center of our lives, to endeavor to know Him more intimately every day, to identify with Him, to allow him to live in us" (VI.2,242; IX.160).

The love for Jesus Christ and our brothers is nourished by prayer.

Prayer, formal prayer, save exceptions, remains essential for the apostolic man. He prays because he has a need of closeness with the Lord, because he feels the necessity to intercede for his fellowmen and because prayer will help him to remain faithful to God in the midst of human struggles (IV.1,57).

Prayer unites us to Christ, disposes us to let ourselves be led by his Spirit. "Every Oblate is called to be a man of prayer". And "to become a man of prayer, an Oblate must exercise himself in prayer in a way that is generous, constant, disciplined and internally free" (VIII.64-65).

Fidelity is the ordinary expression of love for Christ. Oblates are servants of the Gospel and it is expected that the servant be faithful: faithful to Jesus Christ, to his Church and her teaching, faithful by his perseverance (cf.VI.1,35-36). Another term of fidelity is "deep attachment to Jesus Christ" (II.2,348, 349: VIII,30). "Without a deep attachment to the Lord Jesus, we risk failure in our lives and a sterile missionary activity" (V.1, Suppl.,14). And we understand clearly the realism of Fr. Jetté when he translates the sublime theme of loving Christ in terms of "silent dedication in the midst of the poor" and gives examples of Oblates who worked during long years "in ministries that are ordinary, without glamor". He says that

the vast majority of the Congregation is made up of such men. They too are prophets, and they are so by their silence, their humble dedication, their unswerving faithfulness. They are the backbone of the Institute (III.2,237-238).

During his mandate as Superior General Fr. Jetté insisted very much on the quality of our relationship with Christ. It can be said that he has indicated it as the priority and the first condition of personal and community renewal. But he has done so while taking account of the principal aim of the Congregation which is the evangelization of the poor, and in relation to this end.

#### **b. Make Jesus Christ known**

Evangelization is nothing other than "apostolic love" which "finds its source in Jesus Christ - it is Christ's look upon the world and his love for the world. And it leads to Jesus Christ: to make Him known and loved by the witness of our work and life, and finally by the explicit proclaiming of salvation in Him, through man's liberation as He himself announced it and made it real" (III.2,226).

Fr. Jetté has often recalled that making Jesus Christ known to the most abandoned remains at the heart of our mission. "Proclaiming Jesus Christ to the men of today remains our primary mission in the Church" (III.2,236). It's a matter of "telling the poor who Jesus Christ is" and "making ourselves poor with the poor (...) in order to reveal Jesus Christ to them" (II.2,380), "to help them discover who Jesus Christ is and to possess fully the salvation and life he brings to mankind" (VI.2,234,241; see also VII.64). The simplest way of evangelization is explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ, the open and direct proclamation of the Gospel (cf. II.2,337; IV.1,54; VII.64). Because the Christian faith gets its life from preaching and "we must not be afraid to preach Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ crucified" (VII.67,79). If Father Jetté insists very much on the direct proclamation of Christ, it is because today "Are we not too often tempted to put Jesus Christ under the bushel-basket? to think that people will discover him in our actions (...)? But how will they find him if we never mention his name?" (IX.166). Oblates are therefore invited to make Christ known through the word.

However, the proclamation of Jesus Christ to the people of today cannot be limited to the word. "To proclaim by word, yes, but still more so (...) by deed and life. It is impossible to preach charity, dialogue, peace between men if there is no fraternal community and love between us" (III.2, 236-237). The apostle is first of all a witness of the power of the Risen Lord and of his Spirit who transform his heart and his existence. It is by the witness of our life that we render our message credible, by the authenticity of Christian and religious existence, that we will become prophets of the Kingdom of God.

Your primary prophecy is that of your life. The authenticity of your being poor, chaste, obedient, the authenticity of fraternal communion among yourselves and with other apostolic laborers, is more effective in the long run to proclaim the Kingdom and to bring the salvation of Jesus Christ to men than is exterior activity. The two are essential to an Oblate. He must develop the one and the other, while taking care however to base the second on the first (V.1,41).

This is one of the principal texts of Fr. Jetté for understanding the link he constantly makes between the direct proclamation of Jesus Christ, witness and action on behalf of the poor. They form integral parts of evangelization, of the involvement in making Jesus Christ and his salvation known to the world. It is making Jesus Christ and his salvation known to the world. It is therefore not surprising to see him, on many occasions, encouraging Oblates in his circular letters to undertake or continue actions for the promotion of justice. For "proclaiming the Gospel cannot be done without promoting justice" (VII.65), the salvation in Jesus Christ is the "full liberation of the poorest" (VI.2,234) and "it is impossible to have evangelization of the poor as our aim unless we are preoccupied with the problem of justice" (III.2,228; see also IV:1,60; VI.2,232).

All of the missionary spirituality of Fr. Jetté, so to speak, is based on the meditation of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word. The mystery of the Incarnation of Christ is the model par excellence for the missionaries of the poor. He willingly wished to live the life of men in a poor situation.

The same obligation holds for us today (...); to make ourselves poor with the poor to go to them and live with them in order to reveal Jesus Christ through our love and our goodness, through the witness of our works and the proclamation of the Gospel message. (...) For the Oblate, incarnation in today's world still remains the normal way of evangelization. It is therefore necessary to proceed on this path with confidence and courage, but to do so all the while having Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, in mind (II.2,380)382).

In other words, in order to make Jesus Christ known to the world, the Oblate must be present to this world, love this world and especially love the poor with the heart of Christ. And he becomes an authentic witness of the Gospel through his life, his actions and his works, and through the open proclamation of Jesus Christ. In this sense, the Oblate becomes a cooperators of the Saviour, according to the title so dear to the Founder.

### **C. Marcello Zago (1986- )**

From 1986 to 1994, Superior General Father Marcello Zago has addressed 31 circular letters to the Congregation. According to the method we stated at the outset, our study of these letters is restricted to those published up to now in *Acta Administrationis Generalis*. We need to be aware, however, that a wealth of theological thinking and reflection on our Oblate spirituality and charism can be found in other articles published by Father Zago, e.g. in his letters to Oblates in first formation. These latter texts would merit a separate study.

A first analysis of the circular letters reveals that Father Zago uses two expressions to describe Oblates' relationship to Christ: "disciples of Christ" and "co-workers with Christ". These two expressions usually occur together in his writings. Here are a few examples: "The effectiveness of our missionary commitment rests on the quality of our lives as disciples of and co-workers with Christ" (XI,80); "being in this Church disciples of Christ and co-workers in his mission for the world's benefit is a great encouragement" (XIII,58); "no matter what our condition may be, the Lord calls each one of us to be his disciple and co-worker" (XIV, 20); "the life which



makes us disciples of and co-workers with Christ" (XIV,25); "a formation that enables them to grow as disciples of and co-workers with Christ" (XV,129).

The terms "disciples" and "co-workers" found in the Superior General's writings often seem to underline the double basic dimension of our vocation: called to holiness and sent to evangelize; *sequela Christi* and sharing in his mission; consecration and mission. If Father Zago in his circular letters insists greatly on these two aspects, it is because they are clearly evident in our Constitutions:

The Constitutions are clear on this point. Nos. 5 and 7 define the nature and duty of evangelization. The religious apostolic life commits us to follow Christ in a radical way, to grow and become saints (cf. C 11-30) for the very reason of our missionary being, co-workers with Christ and co-redeemers of the human race. That is why our life finds its unity in our intimacy and identification with Christ (cf. CC 31-36), and its meaning in a commitment that has no limits (cf. CC 45-49, 68-70) (XI,55).

Let us try, then, to make a synthesis around the terms "disciples" and "co-workers" of the Superior General's message regarding the Oblates' relationship to Christ.

### **1. Disciples of Christ**

It is true in Father Zago's circular letters the missionary apostolic aspect of the Oblate life is more manifest than are exhortations concerning our religious consecration. Nevertheless, he himself indicates a certain primacy of the *sequela Christi* in our spirituality.

We must constantly rediscover the deep meaning and requirements of our religious consecration; it ought to make of us witnesses and prophets in the world in which we live, and it makes us missionaries and co-workers with Christ (XV,141).

It is therefore useful to follow first this line of reflection on the religious life as response to the call to become a disciple in order to define what constitutes the basis of our being sent on mission.

Like He did for his Apostles, Jesus first of all calls us to follow Him, to enter his schooling and to become his disciples. In our life there is first of all Christ's word which challenges us. Our consecration follows afterwards as a response to the call of Jesus who takes the initiative in calling us (cf. XV,26).

According to our Constitutions, it is "usually through peoples' need for salvation that Christ calls us as Oblates" (XV,100). The Oblate vocation can first reveal itself in the form of a "missionary anguish" that the Spirit arouses in our soul, or of an apostolic preoccupation "when confronted by humanity's missionary needs" (XV, 121). We must not forget, however, that at the root of an authentic Oblate vocation there is something more than human sensibility to persons suffering or to social injustice. The starting point is a personal encounter with the crucified Saviour enabling us to see the world through his eyes (XV, 172).

Now this seeing things with the Saviour's eyes enables each one to see before all else his own sins and limits as well as the riches of God's mercy. Hence, the Christian vocation first of all appears as a call to holiness (cf. XII, 40). In its turn, the response to follow Christ takes on the form of a commitment to become a saint.

The *sequela Christi* (...) expresses above all the personal and communitarian commitment to become saints. To believe that we are truly and personally called to sanctity remains a challenge for each of us throughout our entire life (XV, 162).

In other words, the call to holiness means the vocation to love: "to love God with all one's heart and one's neighbour as oneself. On the occasion of the Synod on the consecrated life, Father Zago spoke of religious as those who are called to love" and he mentions several

elements of this call.

The call to holiness is the point that came up the most often throughout the Synod and many of its elements were underlined: from the priority of seeking God to the *sequela Christi*, from the radicality of the vows to the life of prayer, from asceticism to prophetism, from witness to a life of martyrdom (XVIII, 50).

But already before this the Superior General had described the call to holiness in similar terms (cf. XI, 37, 59; XIII, 10-12, 64, 82, 111).

According to Father Zago, there are characteristic traits that ought to mark the Oblate in as much as he is a disciple of Christ. He speaks to us about this especially when he presents the example of our Blessed Founder and of Blessed Joseph Gerard who put Christ at the center of their lives, who sought intimacy with Christ in prayer, who lived a constant conversion and who consecrated their lives to making Christ in the world.

"Father Gerard lived his commitment to follow Christ through his religious consecration. Christ was truly at the center of his life, not only of his prayer" (XI, 36). Oblates are invited to respond generously to Christ's love and "to center their life always better on Christ, the center and the end of all human history, be it personal or social" (XIII, 103). More concretely speaking, it is a matter of placing the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection at the center of one's life, for He is "the source and model of every Christian life" (XV, 89,96). C 4 is even more precise: "If we bear in our body the death of Jesus, it is with the hope that the life of Jesus, too, may be seen in our body" (cf. 2 Cor 4:10). It is in this sense that we must interpret such expressions of Father Zago when he speaks of "identification to Christ" (XI, 52,55), of being "incorporated into Christ" (X, 58), "rooted in Christ" (XIV, 45).

To be sure, such a profound union with Christ is made possible by a life of faith, hope and love, by our "living the theological virtues". Thus Father Zago says: "Without faith our life makes no sense. Faith is a gift which is nurtured especially by listening to the Word by prayer, that is to say, in a personal relationship with God" (XV, 155). Prayer is of prime importance in a disciple's life. It nourishes our personal relationship with Christ (cf. XIII, 61, 82) and is the expression of our missionary concern and love for persons (cf. XV, 184). In this sense, "prayer that has become intimacy with Christ" (XI,55), brings about a oneness in the Oblates double commitment, namely that as a religious and that as a missionary, that of the disciple and that of co-worker with the Saviour. At the same time, prayer made each day "implies constant conversion to the Gospel which is the norm of our life" (XV, 191).

The disciple who is listening to the Master is called to a radical conversion to Christ, "constantly to renew himself in the spirit of his vocation, by walking in the footsteps of Jesus Christ" (XIII, 104). From this perspective, the life of the Oblate as a disciple implies a twofold dynamism. First, it requires fidelity to the one who has called us, perseverance in commitments made and a constant return to one's "first love". At the same time it requires a constant effort, a surprising of self and growth towards greater devotedness. "A Gospel imperative invites us constantly to evaluate, modify and renew our lifestyle as well as the modalities of our missionary commitment. Conversion, in fact, requires faithfulness and growth" (XV, 44: also see XV, 169).

Hence consecration enjoys a certain primacy in our apostolic vocation. Oblates are "sent because they are consecrated" (XVII, 52). The baptismal and religious consecration thus become more concrete. Just like Mary, we personally receive Christ in order to give Him to the World (cf. XV, 88). At the same time, Father Zago insists that consecration and mission be closely integrated:

Consecration and mission are interdependent. Our love for Christ, becoming more tangible through the evangelical counsels, gives the dynamism and apostolic authenticity to our action. It is countenance of Christ, perceived in

the many different kinds of poor people and the many needs, that urges us to give ourselves (...) This integration of consecration and mission indicates not only the essential relationship between living the evangelical counsels and the apostolate, between prayer and action, between community living and missionary commitment, but much more: consecration is mission (XVII, 55-56).

This clear and profound text leads us to the missionary dimension of our vocation. But before treating the topic of our co-working with Christ, if we are to understand well our relationship to Jesus Christ in Father Zago's message, we must first speak of the community life of Christ's disciples. Indeed, "in order to be missionary, we must conform our personal and community life to Christ and to his message according to the charism of Blessed Eugene de Mazenod" (XIV, 84). Personal conversion and *sequala* do not suffice. A communitarian dimension is needed. For Father Zago community seems to be *un voussoir* in the structure of our missionary and religious charism. Here is the structure of our missionary and religious charism. Here is another basic text of his to the Oblates:

We carry on our mission and achieve hominess through the community... We are missionaries through this community and in it. It is a sign of our charism and, consequently, a power that attracts vocations. We come together both to follow (Christ) and to share in his mission in word and work (C 1). We cannot be content with being happy together; we must allow ourselves to be guided by the Spirit who impels us to go further afield... Oblate community life, like the beating of the heart, implies a double movement: we are ceaselessly brought back to community fraternity, then sent out to be missionaries. This life is apostolic both within and outside the community. Both of these movements are witness' (XV, 215).

Apostolic community life clearly reveals how much Christ is at the centre of his disciples and co-workers. The Lord it is who brings together his disciples within the unity of his Church (cf. IX, 195; X, 58-59), who "continues to bring us together to live with Him and to send us out as his co-workers into his mission" (XII, 15), and who gives us brothers and companions to love (cf. XV, 189). In this vein Father Zago has elsewhere said that "community is built only in Christ, around Him who is the centre" (M. ZAGO, "Christ, the Source of our Being", *DOCUMENTATION OMI*, no. 193, p. 9). Thus we can understand that Oblates as an apostolic corps share in the Saviour's mission.

## **2. Co-workers with Christ**

When Father Zago speaks to Oblates about their missionary vocation, one notes his predilection for the title "co-workers with Christ". To be sure, he is referring to a long standing Oblate tradition. Nevertheless, he seems to want to make us understand that our first task is to be servants to the work of salvation. "We must be well aware that we are only the collaborators and co-workers of Him who is the principal Agent of the mission, namely, Christ" (XI, 201). Then he reminds us of the need for a personal and community commitment to become saints, of the need for constant conversion in order to put ourselves "in line with the Spirit, who is the principal Agent of the mission..." (XV, 182). At the same time this title well expresses the nobility and sublimity of our apostolic vocation, of our participating in the divine work of the redemption of the human race, beginning with those who are most poor.

At the core of the Charism is evangelization as the proclamation of Christ. We are thus co-workers in making Christ known to the nations. "The aim, the major commitment that has characterized our history from our founding onwards has been to teach who Christ is" (XV, 173). This ministry is called direct evangelization and this includes, in the first place, the proclamation of the Word which "obviously is carried out by many ordinary and extraordinary ministries" (XV,125). Oblates, however, in proclaiming the word are called first and foremost to give witness to the Good News (cf. XV, 213), to be credible messengers who have experienced the power of Christ's resurrection and who are "men totally given to Christ and to his mission" (X, 47), who love the people to whom they are sent (cf. XI, 35). As we have already seen, we accomplish our mission in community and it is mainly by their fraternal communion that "Oblates bear witness before the world that Jesus lives in our midst and unites us..." (C 37).

Father Zago like to emphasize that co-workers of Christ are called to an "integral mission that includes dialogue and inculturation" (XV, 176). Indeed, we participate in the mission of God's Son who became incarnate in order to transform the world, who humbled himself and took on our condition in order to be close to us and be burdened with our sufferings and sins. In this way He revealed God's love and respect for each human being. In fulfilling their mission, Oblates are to follow the logic of the Incarnation.

The feast of Christmas comes to remind us of the Incarnation of Christ and of our own incarnation in the midst of the people, most especially in the midst of the poor. But if Jesus had only been a man, nothing would have changed, or at best but little. Everything is changed because the Christ who is God became man so that we would become gods. Our presence, our very mission can transform the world if we are holy, if we live according to the divine dimension (XII, 39).

In the light of the text just quoted we must read the passages where the Superior General speaks of evangelization in dialogue and adaptation, of inculturation and the commitment for justice. For co-workers with Christ take into account "different socio-cultural contexts", they approach "new areopagi", that is to say, groups and situations where Christ ought to be and can be proclaimed in dialogue and adaptation"; and this supposes "a presence qualified with respect, sharing, dialogue and witness" (XIII, 76). At the same time, each Oblate must remember that "the proclamation of the Gospel is incomplete if the social demands of the Gospel message are not proclaimed. The social doctrine of the Church is a part of the new evangelization" (XV, 176; also see XIII, 76-77).

Now the Oblates are not forgetful of the fact that there exists a multitude of other co-workers with Christ in the work of salvation, namely, the laity, for at the very basis of the missionary vocation is the baptismal consecration. That is why Father Zago has several times spoken to the Congregation, especially after the Synod on the laity, about the Oblate mission in collaboration with the laity (cf. X, 25; XII, 16-17; 36-39; XIII, 78-79). "Our life ought to be such that it recalls to all the faithful laity that we are called together to holiness, and that together we are called to further the Kingdom of Christ, whose disciples and co-workers we are" (XII, 40). This brief passage aptly sums up the Superior General's thought on our specific vocation as disciples and co-workers with Christ, in the Church that consists of baptized persons: laity, religious and priests.

## **Conclusion**

At the close of our presentation, it is useful to draw some general conclusions. First we must note that the theme of Christ in the Oblate spirituality has not been exhaustively treated and that there remain other aspects to be explored in the Chapter documents and letters of the Superiors General. We have only tried to underline certain salient points and a few major only tried to underline certain salient points and a few major elements of this spirituality centered on the Person of Jesus Christ.

Here are some other final observations.

**A.** One notes a strong alternation in the points stressed by the Chapters of 1972-1974 and of 1986-1992. The 1972 Chapter looked at the world and its need of salvation and thereby proposed an Oblate missionary outlook. That of 1974 rather insisted on our personal encounter with Christ and our faithfulness to Him. --- The 1986 Chapter showed great apostolic sensitivity to the questions of today and wanted to point out a whole strategy for missionary activity. The 1992 Chapter made us understand the need above all to be credible witnesses for an effective evangelization. And it called for personal and community renewal in the quality of the apostolic community gathered together around Christ.

**B.** Oblate spirituality comprises two essential and interdependent aspects of the presence and role of Jesus Christ in our life. They can be stated thus: call and sending into

mission, consecration and mission, encountering Christ and making him known to people, loving Christ and loving the poor, fidelity to Christ and insertion into the world, contemplation and action community living and apostolate.

**C.** An available tensions exists between these two fundamental aspects. The documents of alternate Chapters reflect this tension, a tension that is nevertheless creative. The Superiors General show how much our consecration and our mission motivate each other mutually. The prime task of proclaiming Christ to the world constantly challenges us to encounter Him personally in the Word and the sacraments; in its turn, our conversion to Christ and our fraternal communion arouses missionary zeal in us.

**D.** Our missionary spirituality must constantly nourish itself on the mystery of the Incarnation of God's Son and the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ and be modeled on it. Love for Christ urges us to dedicate our lives, to be in solidarity with the poor, and even identify with them. On the other hand, we insert ourselves into the world as persons who are entirely consecrated to God. In line with the paschal mystery, Oblates are sent to make known to the world Christ crucified, because they have first experienced in their own lives his love and the power of his resurrection. This movement of losing our life for Christ and his Gospel, and of receiving it from Him in abundance, ought to mark our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Ryzsard Szmydki, o.m.i.

In one of his studies on Oblate spirituality, Father Germain Lesage states:

Our ideal of sanctification, firmly determined by the Founder, is clearly and unquestionably Jesus Christ, and, one would say, in an auxiliary way the apostolic college. In the primitive Rule we read: 'The end of the Institute of the Missionaries called of Provence is to form a society of secular priests who live together and strive to imitate the virtues and examples of our Saviour Jesus Christ principally by preaching God's word to the poor.' This text, repeated in all the subsequent editions of our Constitutions, proves that our spirit is basically Christological.<sup>9</sup>

The Founder's love for Jesus Christ, in its various facets, is known to all. It is not by chance that in the homily for his beatification Paul VI defined him as "one passionately in love with Jesus Christ"<sup>10</sup>, words that are engraved in the spirit and heart of every Oblate.

The relationship to Christ's Person that every Oblate has lived and is called to live is incarnated and expressed in different forms, according to time, place, cultures, personal and ecclesial sensitivities.

The aim of this study is to describe some of the main spiritual traditions which in

the course of our history have translated and expressed the relationship between Eugene de Mazenod's sons and Jesus Christ. We are exploring some avenues of research which will have to be taken up again and completed, as far as possible, by going deeper and beyond this initial research.<sup>11</sup>

In this study we are only exceptionally going to consider our Founder's thought and writings: these are the topic of other research; and we stop our inquiry with the generalate of Father Deschâtelets: those of Fathers Jetté and Zago, as well as the Constitutions and Rules of 1982, are studied in another paper.

In a study on the sources of our spirituality<sup>12</sup>, Father Ovila-A. Meunier seeks out the elements which could have influenced our life and spiritual tradition: he tries to go back to our Founder's "favoured authors" in whose company "he withdrew to the chateau of his Fathers to draw up the code of his Rule".<sup>13</sup> Of the spiritualities that influenced that of Eugene de Mazenod the most, the author mentions as a major importance that of St. Alphonse de Liguori, St. Vincent de Paul and St. Ignatius of Loyola; and from among the others, St. Leonard of Port-Maurice, St. Philip Neri and St. Charles Borromeo.<sup>14</sup>

In the second part of his study where he treats of M. Olier and the French school, Father Ovila offers a distinction that is needed if we are to trace the history of our spirituality, namely, between the inspiration and the "formula" that incarnates it. While the relevant authors and the schools mentioned above did place an important role in terms of inspiration, other elements inspired the "formula" in which our spirituality is incarnate. First among these elements is the "French school".

It is in fact clear that the formulas in which our exercises of piety are couched all consist of French material. Three of them are of Sulpician origin: morning prayer; the *O Jesus vivens in Maria*, and the Marian consecration *O Domina mea* which culminates the particular examen.<sup>15</sup>

We will consider this more closely when we speak of Jesus Christ in Oblate prayer.

Three studies of Father Lesage are an important follow-up to that of Father Ovila-A. Meunier.<sup>16</sup> Questioning the Founder "on the basic characteristics with which he wanted to mark the spiritual life of his Congregation", the author lists ten: three merit our special attention: 1. imitation of the virtues of Jesus Christ and the Apostles; 5. love for the Saviour in his work of Redemption; 6. devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.<sup>17</sup> In the second part of this same study, Father Lesage seeks out the common unifying center on which all these aspects converge: he finds it in Christ the Redeemer<sup>18</sup> and concludes that "Oblate spirituality is one that seeks to reproduce concretely the Saviour's apostolic life."<sup>19</sup> This brings us to the first area of our research.

## **I. Jesus Christ in Oblate Prayer**

### **Morning Prayer**

The morning prayer that is presented to us in our manual is the typical prayer of the *French school*. A tradition that expresses in an excellent manner the Oblate's relationship to Jesus Christ is that which flows from Oblate prayer. This tradition has formed generations of Oblates and it developed under their influence. We are going to study this tradition according to the different editions of our prayer manuals and according to our exercises of piety.

We must of course start with the *Manuel de Prières* published in 1865 during the generalate of Father Fabre and thereafter several times re-published and updated.<sup>20</sup>

Even though it is next to impossible to distinguish the Founder's prayer from that of the Oblates of the first generations, I will nevertheless try to study the elements of Oblate prayer that obtained after the Founder's death. With the study of Father Cosentino as a guide, I

will cover the day of an Oblate as it is programmed by our prayer tradition of *spirituality of the 17<sup>th</sup> century*. It flows from the two doctrines of adherence to Christ and the theological appropriation regarding the Persons of the Trinity.

-- We are called to adhere perfectly to Christ, to copy in ourselves his life, virtues and sentiments, in order to give glory to the Father. Father Gilbert, when explaining how our spirituality is dependent on the French school, writes:

M. Olier, convinced that 'we ought to live as Jesus Christ lived on earth', put on the lips of Christians in this prayer the sentiments of a true son of God. Father de Mazenod also wanted his Oblates to be living copies of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The Founder, following the Lord's example, wants to form us in the piety of and fill us with the Spirit of the Son, in a word, to reproduce him live in our conduct, before sending us out to work for the glory of God. In imitation of Our Lord, with the aim of having us fulfill in a holy manner this first exercise of the day, he proposes this beautiful prayer to us.<sup>21</sup>

-- In regard to the "Trinitarian" part of this prayer, we will simply indicate some Christological traits. As the eternal thought of the Father, the Son is at the origin of wisdom, the order of the universe and of the truth that enlightens each person who comes into this world. The Incarnate Word is also our Redeemer, who has saved by his the examples of his life, the doctrine of his Gospel, the sufferings of his passion and the institution of the sacraments.

After having asked the Holy Spirit to Bring to life within us the very sentiments of Jesus in order to do our duty in regard to the heavenly Father, we address ourselves to the divine Persons in adoration, thanksgiving, petition for forgiveness, and offering. Here are some Christological marks of these prayers:

-- Adoration:

Eternal Word, I adore you as my Redeemer, who, being equal to your Father, became by your Mother like unto us, taking on the form of a servant to live in poverty, to die in shame, but to resurrect in glory, in likeness to your Father, in order to teach us to live as penitents, to die as criminals full accepting their sentence of death, in order there-after to enter by the resurrection into the glory of God's sons.

-- Thanksgiving:

"Son of God, I thank you for having preserved me countless times from hell by the toils of your life and your sufferings unto death, and for having earned for me the blessings that are found in your Church".

-- Petition for forgiveness:

"Son of God, I ask your pardon for having derived so little benefit from the example of your life, the precepts of your Gospel and the grace of your sacraments".

## **Meditation**

By means of this exercise

we contemplate the heavenly Father to whose service we have dedicated ourselves, and Jesus, the model of religious perfection, and we ask them what we ought to do during the new day to please them and to become like them...<sup>22</sup>

In regard to the method of meditation, Father Cosentino considers in chronological order the documents that have given directives on this point<sup>23</sup>: the prayer manual of 1865; the directory of novitiates and scholasticates of 1876; the meditations of Father Boisramé of 1887; the directory for juniorists of 1891; the piety manual for juniorists of 1891.



Our Congregation knows three meditations methods: the Sulpician, the Ignatian and the Liguorian. Our usual method, the one we find in our piety directories and manuals, is the Sulpician one. It is the characteristic method of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century French School: its central idea and broad outlines take their inspiration from Pierre de Berulle, Charles de Condren and Jean-Jacques Olier.

This method rests on the doctrine of our incorporation in Christ and on our duty to adhere to him by reproducing in ourselves his sentiments and virtues. The central idea of this method is union with and adhesion to the Incarnate Word. Its broad outlines are: **adoration** of God and of Jesus in each of his mysteries and in each of his virtues, participation (**communion**) of this mystery or this virtue, **cooperation** with the graces received during this exercise.

Gautier sums up these three parts in the expression: "to have Jesus before one's eyes, in one's heart, in one's hands":

-- **adoration** ("Jesus before one's eyes"), which consists of contemplating the subject of the meditation;

-- **communion** ("Jesus in one's heart"), which consists of taking part in the subject contemplated, drawing into us the virtue or fruits of this mystery;

-- **cooperation** ("Jesus in one's hands"), which consists of effectively corresponding to the subject of the meditation by making real the virtue of Jesus that has been contemplated (adoration) and requested (communion).

Mr Olier wrote:

Christianity consists in these three points; and this entire method is contained therein: that is to say, to look at Jesus, to unite oneself to Jesus and to work in Jesus. The first leads to respect and to religion; the second to union and oneness with him; the third, to action, not alone but as joined to the virtue of Jesus Christ which we have drawn into ourselves through prayer. The first is called adoration; the second communion; the third cooperation: to know, to love, to do.<sup>24</sup>

This method is an exercise that facilitates our adhesion to Christ because

it evokes and recalls to mind the different mysteries of the Saviour's life, making us sharers of the grace attached to each of them, and creating anew in ourselves the sentiments, motives and dispositions of the Incarnate Word.<sup>25</sup>

In regard to the **Ignatian method**, Oblates occasionally have recourse to the method of contemplation, when they meditate on the mysteries of Our Lord or the Blessed Virgin or on other topics such as death, judgment, sin, hell.

After the immediate preparation (which includes preparatory oraison and 2 preludes), this method is especially adaptable to historical and concrete topics, especially to the mysteries of Our Lord. It consists of imagining the mystery or the event chosen and contemplating it with pleasure until one is fully satisfied. It also consists in contemplating the persons of the mystery chosen, to hear their words and consider their actions. All of this is done with the aim of rendering our due to God, to Jesus Christ, to the Virgin, to know and imitate them better.

The **Liguorian method** has formed generations of juniorists. It has a popular and universal character. Its aim is to unite us to God and to obtain for us the graces needed for this end, to persevere in God's grace and to progress in charity and union with God. It has nothing particular that refers to our relationship to Jesus Christ, except for an article in the Rule of St. Alphonse that concerns meditation topics, an article which our Founder adopted to the letter in the Rule of 1818: "These meditations will focus especially on the theological virtues and on the

life and virtues of Jesus Christ whom they are vividly to reproduce in themselves".<sup>26</sup>

Among us, the choice of meditation topics has been left free according to the personal taste. Our directories advise the following topics: on Sundays and feast days, the Gospel or the mystery of the day; on Thursdays, the Holy Eucharist; on Fridays, the passion; on Saturdays, the mysteries of the Blessed Virgin.<sup>27</sup>

The Sulpician influence also extends to the choice of meditation books, even though the freedom left in choice of topic also requires that the choice of book be left free. Our Congregation had no special meditation book until 1887, when Father Boisramé published his *Méditations pour tous les jours de l'année à l'usage de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée*.<sup>28</sup>

The end of meditation is, according to the Sulpician practice, marked by the prayer *O Jesu vivens in Maria*, composed by C. de Condren and improved by J.-J. Olier. This Christological prayer has nourished the piety of generations of Oblates. Its text is:

O Jesus, living in Mary, come and live in your servants:  
  
in the spirit of your holiness,  
  
in the fullness of your power,  
  
in the reality of your virtues,  
  
in the perfection of your ways,  
  
in the communion of your mysteries; have dominion over every  
adverse power,  
  
in your own Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

We find in it the themes of Christ's dwelling in the soul, the imitation of his virtues and perfection, communion with his life and mysteries.

## **Holy Mass**

"The Oblate will find the peak of his day in **his Mass**... His Mass wherein his own holocaust, humble but total, is daily linked to the sublime and only Sacrifice of the Redeemer...".<sup>29</sup>

Our traditional method of attending holy Mass comes from the Sulpician spirituality which, in its turn, advised the liturgical prayers and that of St. Leonard of Port Maurice (four ends of the sacrifice). Our tradition added the consideration of Jesus' passion.<sup>30</sup>

### **1. Method of the liturgical prayers**

It consists of reading in a pious book the ordinary of the Mass. By means of this reading, this method invites the participants in the Holy Sacrifice to offer their life to God by uniting their sufferings to Jesus' sacrifice for the glory of God, their salvation and that of the world, and, finally, to unite oneself to Jesus by an oath of eternal fidelity in love and suffering.

### **2. Method of the four ends**

The *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats* of 1876 explains this method, which originates with St. Leonard of Port Maurice.

It consists in uniting oneself to the priest who is celebrating, and to offer the holy Sacrifice in view of the four main duties we ought to render to God and which are the four ends for which Jesus Christ himself offers himself to God

his Father. The first duty is praising and adoring God's infinite majesty; the second is satisfying his justice for our sins; the third is thanksgiving for his gifts; the fourth is presenting our needs to Him as the author of every grace. Now the holy Sacrifice of the Mass is at one and the same time a sacrifice of adoration, *sacrificium laetiticum*, a sacrifice of expiation, *sacrificium propitiatorium*, a sacrifice of thanksgiving, *sacrificium eucharisticum*, a sacrifice of petition, *sacrificium impetratorium*.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. Method of the passion

This method consists "in an affective consideration of Our Lord's passion of which the Mass is the memorial".<sup>32</sup>

In regard to the **celebration Mass**, our tradition offers us methods of preparation (both liturgical and general) and indications how to celebrate the Mass. We quote in this regard Father Fabre's commentary on the article of the Rule which invites our priest to celebrate Mass worthily:

What shall we say that you do not already know concerning the most august and holy act that we have the happiness to accomplish every day? Ah! our Founder only speaks of it once to us, but in what a vigorous way! *Ita vivant presbyteri ut singulis diebus sacrum facere digne possint.. Ita vivant ut digne*: holiness of life ought to correspond to the dignity of the priesthood... May faith animate us in such a precious moment; the altar is a new Calvary; at its feet it is easy to understand how God has loved us and what rights he has acquired to our love and devotedness. We cannot find a more eloquent pulpit: there Jesus Christ gives us the example of every virtue and invites us to walk in his footsteps, offering to our weakness in order to sustain and help us the bread of the elect and the vine that produces fruit. *frumentum electorum and vinum germinans vigines* (Zach. 9:17). If we always keep the altar in mind, we will always be in everything and everywhere perfect religious...<sup>33</sup>

Having contemplated our model Jesus, who immolates himself on the cross for God's glory and the world's salvation, we are called to follow his example and immolate ourselves throughout the day and thus fulfill our duty, give glory to God, and save souls.

### Communion

Communion, which effects our union with the divine victim, makes us sharers in the fruits of the Sacrifice, gives us the gift of fidelity to Jesus Christ and obtains for us the strength needed to accomplish our duties. This intimate and transforming union with Jesus is the very essence and aim of every spiritual life. It makes us go out of ourselves in order to enter into Jesus' spirit and to live his life (cf. Gal 2:20) and leads us into a special union with the Trinity (cf. Jn 14:23).

Here is what the Directoire des noviciats et scolasticats says on this point:

That is what Holy Communion brings us. Jesus Christ, whom we have the happiness to receive therein in the reality of his humanity and divinity, is the light for us: *Ego sum lux mundi* (Jn 8:12), the strengthening nourishment of our soul: *Ego sum panis vitae* (Jn 6:48), the fire of divine love: *Ignem veni mittere in terram, et quid volo, nisi ut accendatur* (Lk 12:49). As we nourish ourselves on his adorable Body and Blood, we not only become the recipients of all his graces, virtues and the fullness of his life, but we are given unto him and become one being with him: *In communione Deus et homo unus est Christus*, one of the holy Fathers says.<sup>34</sup>

Because the aim of communion is the intimate and transforming union of the soul that has come to dwell in, the soul must dispose itself favorably to this union by means of an adequate preparation. Once again, our traditional method is that used at St. Sulpice: it includes

three kinds of preparation: remote (or general), proximate and immediate (the evening before).<sup>35</sup>

**1. The remote (general) preparation**, which consists in being always ready to receive communion, is achieved through the absence of all that could be an obstacle to full union with Jesus; through mortification of the senses and the purification of the soul of everything that could displease Jesus; through recollection which creates in the soul dispositions apt to welcome Jesus.

**2. The proximate preparation** consists in adopting a disposition congruent to the next day's communion by directing one's thoughts and desires to that event. It includes a preparation the evening before and one on the morning itself. Several texts in our family tradition suggest different ways of living this preparation<sup>36</sup>:

**a) The evening preparation**

It consists of thinking about the next day's communion, of desiring it and of ordaining everything to that event; and, in view of this:

a/ carrying out as perfectly as possible all our duties in order to please Jesus *Qui placita sunt ei facio semper* (Jn 8:29). This is the best preparation; it consists in: 1) directing all the activity of the day with the intention that they may serve as disposing oneself for the next day's communion; 2) offer especially all one's prayers to God in union with Our Lord Jesus Christ as so many acts of preparation for this great event; 3) watch over oneself more attentively, be faithful to the Rules, to one's resolutions and the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, with the idea that one cannot do too much to dispose oneself well to receive our divine Saviour.

b/ maintain oneself in a state of deep recollection, staying more closely united to God, invoking Mary and the good Angels, yearning ardently for the coming of Jesus Christ, whom the Oblates will frequently invoke by ejaculatory prayers and whom they will try to draw into their hearts by oft-repeated spiritual communions.

c/ do some special act of mortification, humility and charity, so that a soul ornate with merit is prepared for Jesus.

d/ often think of the happiness of tomorrow's communion. One has to think of communion, desire it, be taken up with this great thought and tell oneself: Tomorrow... I have the good fortune of going to communion... For example, it is good to interrupt an intellectual work for a moment and ask oneself: Who is it that is coming to me tomorrow? It is Jesus Christ himself. Who am I to receive him? A poor worm of the earth, a miserable sinner. Why is he coming to me? To make me a holy religious, a worthy Oblate in his immaculate Mother. Why should he lower himself thus? Why offer me so great an honour and such great happiness? Because he loves me excessively, because he is goodness itself, and because goodness tends to spread and communicate itself: *bonum est diffusivum sui*...

e/ remember one's communion during the evening oraison; for the evening oraison always has Jesus Christ as its goal, in whose presence we have the immense joy of being: what an opportune moment to ask him to receive him with great fervour on the morrow!

f/ Finally, before dropping off to sleep, we ought to think again of tomorrow's communion, also during the night, should we awaken. We can tell ourselves: still so many hours and I will receive and possess Jesus in my heart, the God of heaven and earth, Jesus, my dear Saviour! Oh! how I wish the

happy moment of receiving him and uniting myself to him were already here! How I would like to be in nocturnal adoration in order to prepare myself better for communion! O holy Angels, and especially you, my Guardian Angel: all you holy men and women of God, you specially my holy patron Saints, deign to do for me what my strength and obedience do not allow me to do.

#### **b) Morning preparation**

a/ One of the first thoughts at wakening should be that soon Jesus Christ will be coming into our hearts.

b/ When reveille is rung, we get up willingly and promptly we turn our thoughts and hearts to Our Lord in the holy Tabernacle.

c/ Steps are taken to pay a short visit before oraison and vocal prayer.

d/ Once in chapel, during meditation and the time before Mass, should we not, in thinking of the happy moment of communion that is drawing near, say to Jesus *Veni Domine Jesu et noli tardare. Veni cito. Ecce quem amas infirmatur. Surgam et ibo ad patrem.*

**3. The immediate preparation** includes, according to a method used at St. Sulpice and that even St. Alphonse recommended to the faithful, acts of the different virtues which indicate the main dispositions one ought to have before communion: act of faith, trust (and hope), love, humility, contrition and desire.

In regard to receiving communion, let us recall the "communion of reparation" which the Directory prescribed for juniorists:

All (juniorists) are members of the Association for Communion of Reparation, and are designed, each in turn, to make their holy communion... The aim one ought to have in this communion is to recognize the love Jesus Christ shows us in the sacrament of the Eucharist, to repair for the outrages he receives there, to compensate for the indifference, ingratitude and forgetfulness of so many people for whom he resides there night and day.<sup>37</sup>

Father Boisramé comments:

At the moment of holy communion, we can imagine our heart as being another stable of Bethlehem where Jesus has just been born. Let us kneel before him with sentiments of the most vivid faith and ardent charity. Let us adore him, love him with Mary, St. Joseph, the angels, the shepherds and the magi, and let us give free to all the emotions that cannot but fill our souls.<sup>38</sup>

Even in regard to **thanksgiving after communion** our tradition takes its inspiration from the practice of St. Sulpice and speaks of two kinds of thanksgiving, one remote and the other proximate. The **proximate thanksgiving** is well described in the *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats*:

What a precious moment wherein we possess God in our hearts, and what a misfortune if we let the least part of it go to waste! There is no prayer more pleasing to God and useful to the soul, says St. Liguori, than that made in this moment. And in fact, giving thanks is not only a duty of justice and gratitude towards God, but it is also for us the source of the most precious graces and sweetest consolations. The acts made after communion have greater merit, for the soul is then in a more intimate and higher union with our Lord; it is also better disposed to pray with confidence and fervour. For his part, our divine Saviour seems more inclined in this moment to fill us with all this gifts. He comes into hearts for that purpose and what can he refuse someone to whom he gives himself? *Quomodo non etiam cum illo omnia nobis donavit?* (Rom 8:32). Also, as all masters of the spiritual life say, we can never take too much care and effort to make our thanksgiving well. It ought to surpass the fervor of our preparation in many ways. Finally, on it depend in large part the fruit of our communions.<sup>39</sup>

The Directoire des Novices says:

The time that immediately follows communion is precious and it is important not to lose a single minute of it. It is good to remain for a time without making any formal act, keeping silence in deep adoration, united to the holy Angels who are certainly around us to pay their homage to the Lord Jesus. Thus one savors during the first moments the joys of possessing God and we give ourselves to him so that he may deign to act as master in our soul and transform it according to his good pleasure.<sup>40</sup>

The ordinary method of this thanksgiving includes, after the first moments, acts which can prolong internal recollection and conversation between the soul and Jesus. These acts are suggested by the word *ardor*<sup>41</sup>:

- a) **adoration**: adore and praise the divine majesty and respond to his love for us.
- b) **thanksgiving (remerciements)**: gratitude because Jesus has given us the grace of coming to us with his graces.
- c) **petition (demande)**: present to Jesus our petitions for ourselves, for persons dear to us, for the good of the Church according to the Pope's intentions, and for the needs of our Congregation.
- d) **Offering**: in response to Jesus' total gift, let us give ourselves entirely to Him and let us dedicate ourselves to his service: "to renew the entire consecration of self by promising him again greater fidelity in his service and in our heart listening a little to what he asks of us".<sup>42</sup>
- e) **Resolutions**: every good communion ought to result in resolutions by which we commit ourselves 'to render to Jesus Christ the tribute of a constant and unshakable fidelity in his service'.<sup>43</sup>

At the end of the proximate thanksgiving, our directories advise, among other things, that we recite the prayer to Jesus crucified *En ego o bone Jesu*<sup>44</sup> and to ask for a special grace for the day.<sup>45</sup> Here is the next text of this prayer:

O good and most kind Jesus, on my knees in your holy presence, I pray and beseech you with all the fervour of my soul, to deign engrave in my soul vivid sentiments of faith, hope and charity, true repentance for my sins and a most firm will to correct myself. While I ponder and contemplate in spirit your five wounds with great affection and deep sorrow, having before my eyes the words that the prophet David put into your mouth, O good Jesus: "They have pierced my hands and my feet; they have counted all my bones".

Other occasional methods allowed one to vary his thanksgivings.

Among the methods we have used, I underline the **thanksgiving according to the titles of Jesus**:

"One can also take as a thanksgiving method that conversing with our Lord present in our hearts according to the different titles of Saviour, Brother, Friend, Teacher, and ask oneself three questions: *Quis adest? In quonam adest? Ad quid adest?*<sup>46</sup>

Proximate thanksgiving ought to continue in the **remote thanksgiving**<sup>47</sup> which consists of "keeping during the day the dispositions one had immediately after communion, thus passing the day in recollection, in union with Jesus in the Eucharist and doing our work in his presence and for him".<sup>48</sup>

### The Divine Office

On this topic, I shall mention only some aspects concerning the general dispositions required to enter into the spirit of prayer that ought to animate an Oblate during the

divine office.

The *Directoire des novices* requires three general dispositions: a deep spirit of faith, sustained attention and sincere devotion. By means of the spirit of faith, "one is as though transported into heaven in the midst of the angel choirs to unite oneself to the blessings and glory their render unceasingly to the Sovereign Lord of all things".<sup>49</sup> This spirit of the faith ought to be accompanied by great attentiveness of which the first goal is he to whom our prayers are addressed, the "Our Lord Jesus Christ who is really present in our midst and on whom we ought to have the gaze of our souls fixed at the same time as we direct our eyes to the altar which is the place where he dwells".<sup>50</sup>

The directory for the novices suggests general methods which are helpful to accomplish "the sublime action of psalmody". Among these methods, two are linked to the mysteries and sentiments of Our Lord. To quote the text:

A second method that can be used in reciting the divine office is to be taken up in each hour with some point of mysteries of Our Lord Jesus Christ, with the passion especially; for example, at Matins one is attentive to Our Lord's prayer in the garden of olives; during Lauds, to the insults received during the night in Caiphas' house; at Prime, to the humiliations endured in Herod's palace; at Tierce, to the insults and sufferings endured because of Pilate; at Sext, to his crucifixion; at Nones, to his death; at Vespers, to the descent from the cross; at Complines, to his burial. From this one can also get an idea how one can be taken up with the joyful or glorious mysteries, dividing them according to each hour of the office.<sup>51</sup>

There is a third way of being intent during the recitation of the holy office: it is gentler and requires from us less formal acts than the two preceding ones. It consists of uniting oneself simply to Our Lord Jesus Christ in the prayers that he himself addresses to his heavenly Father; to the homage that he pays through the Blessed Virgin, the heavenly spirits, the saints who are in glory, and all the faithful servants who are still on earth; in the homage he also pays through every creature, for each in its own way manifests the Almighty's glory. In this way one does not change his focus of attention as the different hours are recited, nor when one changes psalms; but one remains gently united to Jesus Christ our sovereign Mediator, trying to enter into his sentiments of respect, adoration, abasement before his Father and in his desires to glorify him and make him loved by all creatures. Besides this general effort to remain united to Jesus Christ our divine Saviour, one can at the same time, in order to involve our spirit more actively, want to comprehend the spirit of the office one is reciting. If we are singing the praises of an Apostle, we seek to envisage Our Lord Jesus Christ living in this Apostle, we honour him as the author of his successes and the principles of the virtues which have raised him to eternal glory. One entertains similar sentiments when the office of a martyr, a virgin, etc. is celebrated. If the Church asks us to honor some mystery of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we again unite ourselves to Jesus living in his most holy Mother and always according to the spirit of the office one is reciting. This method becomes easier when we must celebrate a mystery of Our Lord Jesus Christ himself; for then one simply enters into the sentiments that then animated him. We humble ourselves with him, if it is a mystery of the hidden life that the office commemorates; we share his compunction and sorrow if it is a matter of his passion and sufferings; and we are animated with sentiments of joy, triumph and gratitude if it is a matter of a glorious mystery.<sup>52</sup>

### **Visit to the Blessed Sacrament<sup>53</sup>**

Even though this exercise of piety appears in our prayer manual only in the 1929 edition, its practice is already found in the 1818 Rule.<sup>54</sup>

What an honour but above all what happiness to live under the same

roof as one's God, to being admitted at any time to visit him, like the angels to be able to adore him, bless him, expose to him one's miseries, disappointments, interior sufferings, to go and draw in his heart from the sources of life and to take on the Spirit of Jesus Christ without which we will never be true religious.<sup>55</sup>

Our traditional method of making the visit to the Blessed Sacrament is in large part taken from Sulpician practices<sup>56</sup> and has been enriched during the course of its history with several other elements.

The first directory to offer us a formulary for the visit to the Blessed Sacrament is that of l'Osier in 1853<sup>57</sup>:

In the evening there is the visit to the Blessed Sacrament. There we recite the *Tantum ergo Sacramentum*, then we read from the visits of St. Liguori or from some other work of this kind, and finally, after 4 or 5 minutes of recollection, we say the litanies in honour of Our Lord, of the Bl. Virgin or of some other Saint. In the last minutes, one can sing a hymn to the Blessed Sacrament or to the Sacred Heart.<sup>58</sup>

The *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats* of 1876 includes a paragraph on the manner of doing these visits: after having pointed out the faults to be avoided, it proposes the intentions to be entertained and the method to be followed:

#### **Intentions to be entertained:**

- 1) to adore Our Lord in his divine sacrament of the Eucharist and to pay him homage;
- 2) to honour his real presence among us and to thank him for so great a gift;
- 3) to repair as much as possible the insults he receives;
- 4) to obtain the graces we need, especially an increase of his divine love in our hearts.

Method to be followed

We begin by meditating the *Pange lingua*, which is recited in two choirs; then we make a short reading, ordinarily taken from the visits of Saint Liguori. We stay some moments in silence, then we sing a hymn in honour of the holy Sacrament Heart.<sup>59</sup>

The following testimony of Father Boisramé is significant:

Let us take care to maintain great respect, even exterior, in the presence of Jesus Christ; let us adore him with sentiments appropriate to his infinite greatness; but nevertheless let us converse affectionately with him as a friend with his friend, as a child with his father; let us not always be speaking to him, but also listening to his inner word and making, according to the inspiration of the moment, acts of faith, hope, love, thanksgiving, contrition. Only with reluctance let us take our leave from the presence of such a good Master.<sup>60</sup>

Our Rules and traditions prescribe other visits to the Blessed Sacrament: before going out and when returning<sup>61</sup>, after meals<sup>62</sup>, before morning prayer<sup>63</sup>, after morning prayer<sup>64</sup> as well as on other occasions.<sup>65</sup>

#### **Particular Examen**

In this domain, our tradition takes its inspiration from the Ignatian, Sulpician and Liguorian methods. We shall study the Sulpician method especially here, because it sees this exercise as within the context of a direct relationship to Christ.

If according to Ignatian the goal of the particular examen is the correction of a definite fault, for M. Olier and his school the particular examen

will consist first of all in considering one virtue or other, preferably



one which we lack, realized in a concrete fashion by our Saviour; it will consist in offering oneself to the divine Spirit, in wanting to apply to oneself 'the states' of him who is in every way our shortcut towards what is good, our truth and our moral life: *via, veritas et vita*. Finally, it will consist in seeing "how we have used Jesus Christ", how we imitated him, and to ask for the grace of a stronger adherence and a more perfect imitation. We take it for granted that the examen, thus understood, comprises three main points which correspond to the three points of Sulpician oraison: adoration, or having Jesus before one's eyes; communion, or Jesus and his virtues drawn into our hearts and animating our life; cooperation followed by a resolution, or Jesus in our hands.<sup>66</sup>

According to the witness of Faillon,

another means for living Our Lord's life that M. Olier recommended to his followers was the assiduous study of this divine Master's actions recorded in the Gospel and the interior sentiments that accompanied them. For this purpose, he established an exercise which has since spread to most seminaries under the name of particular examen, and which is, strictly speaking, only the study of Our Lord. First one listens to his divine teachings in the Gospel from which a chapter is read while kneeling and with one's head bare; then one ponders one of his actions or virtues and finally each one enters into himself, examines what were his own dispositions when doing the same thing, when practicing the same virtues; and this exercise is called the particular examen.<sup>67</sup>

The Rule of St. Alphonse asks that one adopts each month "one of these virtues (that is to say, the theological virtues and the virtues of Our Lord Jesus Christ) in order to practice it better and exercise oneself in it more specially".<sup>68</sup> According to the Liguorian method, these virtues of the month are also the topic for the particular examen.

Our method comprises four parts of which the first three are of Sulpician origin. The first is a reading of the New Testament. Since the aim of the particular examen is to correct our faults and to practice virtue in such a way as to resemble as perfectly as possible our Lord, our Master and model, the New Testament and especially the Gospel, show us what Our Lord said and did, so as to make us contemplate of our perfection. His words show us what we have to do to please him, imitation of his virtues urges us to act with the same interior dispositions and the same external perfection, to think and act as he so that he lives and reigns in us to serve and glorify his heavenly Father.<sup>69</sup> The reading of the New Testament is followed by the examen properly so called: it opens with the recitation of the *Veni sancte Spiritus* and consists of examining very concretely how we have lived according to the ideal we have contemplated and how we are to do so in the future. On this point our tradition is more that of St. Ignatius: our sources, however, are divided on this point.

### **Sanctifying our meals**

Among the things to be read during meals, I underline Holy Scripture, and the book of the *Imitation of Christ*. The aim of these readings was to help us grow in love for and identification to Christ and in imitating his example.<sup>70</sup>

### **The Rosary**

Though a Marian prayer, the rosary as "lived" in our tradition also bears an important Christological dimension. For this prayer, our tradition uses two methods: that of meditating the mysteries and that of the corresponding grace. The first is a contemplation which consists of "being gently taken up in each decade with the Rosary mystery that corresponds to it".<sup>71</sup> The second is due to Saint Grignon de Monfort and consists of asking at each decade for the grace that corresponds to the mystery one is meditating. Among these graces, in the fourth sorrowful mystery, we ask Jesus faithfully by carrying our cross with patience and resignation until death.

### **Study of Holy Scripture**

The practice of this exercise of piety goes back to Cardinal Pierre de Berulle, founder of the Oratory in France: he made it an obligation for his priests.<sup>72</sup> From the Oratorians the practice passed to the Sulpicians and our Founder followed it at St. Sulpice and remained faithful to it even after he had left the seminary.

The usefulness of such study is evident in that we can find therein an inspiration to conform ourselves to the plans of God and to imitate Christ. In one of his meditations, Father Boisramé, after having quoted Rom 15:4 ("All that has been written has been written for our instruction, so that we may perceive firm hope through the patience and consolation the Scriptures give us"), says:

Are we in fact tempted, overwhelmed, desolate? We find in our Holy Writ a countless number of examples of patience, reasons for encouragement, joy and consolation in the examples of the saints, and above all the example and promises of the Holy One par excellence, Jesus Christ Our Lord and Saviour.<sup>73</sup>

### **Spiritual Reading**

The article of our Rule concerns this exercise of piety was taken literally from St. Alphonse, even though among us this reading was done in common, something that we owe to Sulpician influence.<sup>74</sup> The aim of this exercise is eminently individual: it tends only to one's own spiritual perfecting. The Founder and the Oblate tradition have attached great importance to this exercise. Two texts offer some elements relevant to our research.

The first concerns the choice of texts for this practice. Father Boisramé writes:

Before all else, the book has to be selected. St. Philip Neri recommended that preference be given to books composed by Saints or which treat of the lives of Saints. Need one mention the Imitation of Christ, the Spiritual Combat, the Christian and religious Perfection of Rodriguez, the works of St. Francis de Sales, Louis of Grenada, of Saint-Jure...<sup>75</sup>

The Directoire du noviciat de Notre-Dame de l'Osier says:

One must find Jesus Christ in the core of these readings; to adore the living word in these mute characters, to read with devotion and prayerful spirit, so as to be edified and become better, without too much haste, without dissipation, resisting natural curiosity, seeking less food for the mind than nourishment for the soul.<sup>76</sup>

### **Evening Oraison**

Evening oraison is the exercise "to which the religious man is happy to come in order rest peacefully in the Saviour's presence from all the toils of the day, to seek consolation, gain new strength, and acquire a strong source of light".<sup>77</sup> This exercise also highlights the intimate relationship that exists between the Oblate and the Person of Jesus Christ, contemplated in his virtues and mysteries, so that one may one know him better and love him better and love him more. According to the Oblate tradition, this oraison is to focus on the life and virtues of Our Lord Jesus Christ:

In the evening, at the end of the day, oraison brings us together at the foot of the altar, in the presence of the divine Eucharist, in order to ponder in a more special way the virtues and examples of him whose august mission we are to continue.<sup>78</sup>

The Sulpician method of oraison in use in seminaries commits the students

to contemplate... with religious attention the life of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist: a humble and hidden life wherein Our Lord is abased more than during the years he passed on earth; a life of prayer, for he never ceases to plead with the Father on our behalf *semper vivens ad interpellandum pro nobis* (Heb 7:25); a life of devotedness wholly consecrated to God's glory and the good of souls; Our Lord always welcomes us, encourages the just, sustains the weak, never rejects sinners whom he attracts mercifully unto himself... The visit ends by an act of self-offering and of love for Our Lord, an act that is a spiritual communion, for through the desire to love this divine Master and to unite ourselves to him, we enter into his inner dispositions.<sup>79</sup>

Here is what our *Directoire des frères convers* says on this subject:

During the half hour that we spend before the Most Holy Sacrament, it is better to converse in a familiar manner with Our Lord, to establish between him and us an affectionate dialogue wherein we ponder this good Master in the examples he gives us in the Eucharist, now of one virtue then of another, according to the need we experience. It is also good to ponder his perfections, such as his love for men and for ourselves in particular, his holiness, purity, power, etc.<sup>80</sup>

The text invites us to use great simplicity of language in this exchange<sup>81</sup>:

Let us not be afraid to enter into detail about our little miseries; let us tell the Lord everything: he makes himself so small in this Sacrament only because he wants us to approach him without fear, with a free heart; he wants to help us, console us, but he wants our confidence, he demands that we tell him everything that goes on inside of us. To be sure he is God and he knows everything; but does not use this knowledge as our friend and confidant; we must tell him whatever we would tell a friend, that is to say, everything: our joy, satisfaction, fears, dreams, worries: otherwise he will be as though he does not know these things.<sup>82</sup>

This familiar character of oraison also comes from our Founder who made it the daily rendez-vous of our family in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, in the heart of the divine Saviour.

## Night Prayer

According to our Rules and first prayer manuals, this prayer is made up of three parts: 1. **general examination of conscience** in five points: thanksgiving, petition, examen, contrition, purpose of amendment. 2. **night prayer properly so called**, for which the Founder chose the prayer of the people.<sup>83</sup> The examination of conscience that this prayer comprises ends by a petition for forgiveness:

Here I am, Lord, filled with confusion, full of sorrow at the sight of my faults; I come to detest them before you with a real sense of disgust for having offended a God who is so good, so lovable and worthy of being loved. Is it in this, O my God, that you were to wait for my gratitude, after having loved me to the point of shedding your blood for me?...<sup>84</sup>

3. **special prayers and pious practices** which may have been said separately, like the examination of conscience at the beginning.

I mention here a tradition linked to our topic: the introduction of special prayers for the Congregation among which there are invocations to the Sacred Heart.<sup>85</sup> They are for the first time mentioned in the 1879 General Chapter. A motion had asked the Chapter "to seek other ways of manifesting daily our devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus". This motion was rejected, but beginning with the following year, these invocations appear first in a provisory fashion and in a definitive way thereafter.<sup>86</sup> Even though the 1893 Chapter decided to make the

recitation of these prayers definitive, that only came about in 1926:

In all the Houses of the Congregation will be added to night prayers, after the suffrages for the deceased, three times the invocation *Cor Jesu sacratissimum, miserere nobis...* These prayers are already in us in several of our Houses; henceforth they are to be recited everywhere and mainly with the intention of obtaining the beatification of Mgr. de Mazenod...<sup>87</sup>

### **Weekly, monthly, annual exercises of piety**

Other exercises of piety also reveal how Oblates lived out their relationship to Jesus Christ.

The **Sacrament of Penance**, for example, the purification of our soul in the precious Blood of Jesus Christ, is "one of the greatest gifts Our Lord has given us".<sup>88</sup> In the weekly confession, after the examination of conscience, we must ask Our Lord for sincere contrition. That can be achieved by several means but there is a simple and almost infallible way of achieving it: "to throw ourselves in spirit at the foot of the cross of our good Saviour; to let ourselves be vividly penetrated by the sight of his sufferings as though we were assisting at his painful death..."<sup>89</sup>

In regard to absolution, the *Directoire des novices* expresses well the link between the Sacrament of Penance and the passion of Jesus:

In this moment when the sacramental words are applying to him the merits of Jesus Christ's blood, he ought to place himself at the foot of the Saviour's cross, as though Jesus' adorable blood were really flowing upon him from every wound.<sup>90</sup>

A monthly exercise that in a particular way expresses a special relationship with the Person of Jesus Christ is that the **First Friday**. Its practice originates with the apparitions of the Sacred Heart to St. Marguerite Mary Alacoque at Paray-le-Monial in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This exercise was practiced by us from the beginning of the Congregation.<sup>91</sup> The *Directoire des novices* of 1831-1836 prescribes it for the novices<sup>92</sup>, our *Manuel de prières* contains this exercise already in the first edition (1865), the 1873 General Chapter recommends this practice by decree<sup>93</sup>, something that subsequent Chapters will renew. We will return to devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the tradition of Oblate spiritualities.

We can situate the practice of consecrating certain months of the year to prayer and reflection on a particular aspect of the life or Person of Christ in the line of imitating his virtues and examples.

In this vein we find here and there in our houses of formation the practice of consecrating the month of January to the cult of the Child Jesus.<sup>94</sup> It goes back to the beginnings of the Congregation. Here is how the *Directoire des junioristes* expresses it:

They ought to strive to have an ardent devotion towards Our Lord in his infancy, for therein especially Jesus wants to be their model. It is to them that he especially speaks when he says: 'If you do not become like little children, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven'. In the Congregation it is the juniorists who resemble the Child Jesus most, by their age and height; they also ought to resemble him the most in imitation of his virtues.<sup>95</sup>

**The Exposition of the Forty Hours**, linked at first to the idea of reparation for the insults committed against Our Lord by bad Christians, can be the starting point for knowing how the Oblates lived their relationship with Jesus in the Eucharist.<sup>96</sup>

Even though we do not know exactly when we adopted the practice of consecrating the month of June to the *Sacred Heart of Jesus*, we find it mentioned in the *Manuel de piété des junioristes (1891)*.<sup>97</sup> "The whole Congregation", our 1958 prayer manual says, "is dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, especially since the 1873 Chapter, by a consecration renewed in all our houses on the first Friday of each month".<sup>98</sup>

## Annual Retreats

The annual retreats is an Oblate piety practice that would deserve a deeper study. This exercise has contributed much to the formation of Oblates and their own spirituality. A recent article by Father Y. Beaudoin studies the annual retreats in the Founder's time.<sup>99</sup>

According to Ignatian method, which we have inherited via St. Sulpice<sup>100</sup>, the two great themes of the retreat were: 1) the last ends, and 2) the life and virtues of Jesus Christ. According to the retreat notes of several Oblates, meditation on the passion surpasses all other topics. There is a practical reason for this, one of lesser importance<sup>101</sup> and the other more profound. According to Father Beaudoin,

in this the Oblates appear as the recipients of a spirituality that was still widespread during the last century. This spirituality invited a person to contemplate and imitate Christ crucified by adopting a style of life centered on mortification and voluntary humiliation; it was sustained by a theology of the cross with little reference to the resurrection. This victim-spirituality was not only a popular devotion, but also a theological doctrine already formulated by Pierre de Berulle...<sup>102</sup>

What strikes Father Beaudoin in his study is the fact that "according to the retreat notes kept from 1818 to 1861, an Oblate passed his life meditating the same truths during the course of most annual retreats".<sup>103</sup> There are many reasons for this: knowing in depth the great truths that the Oblates expounded in all their missions helped them in their own conversion and in their preaching. This also helped them achieve, the end of their Society: "form a gathering of priests...who live together and strive to imitate the virtues of Our Lord Jesus Christ".<sup>104</sup> Moreover, this also helped them "to know better, in almost experimental way, Jesus' life, teaching, mysteries, in order little by little to become other Christs".<sup>105</sup>

## Some Retreats

1. In Rome the first "De Mazenod Retreat" took place from October 3, 1954 to April 10, 1955.<sup>106</sup> It was conceived as a "second novitiate". I quote only the program for this month, which was decided into four periods:

Each period must have a psychological centre characterized by a precise act to be performed. A general confession for the first period... For the second, going back to the beginning of our vocation, an inner return to the impressions of our first days of religious and priestly life. Remain in Christ's presence; between instructions, reread the Gospel, the exchange of Our Lord with his Apostles (here we link up the Preface of the Rules).. Christ's physiognomy is vividly reproduced in us, it shapes and penetrates our human paste that was purified during the first eight days... Last day of this period: prepare for a new confession 'of perfection' which will precede an individual private act before and during the Mass by which we again give ourselves to Christ who has called us. The third period will deeply root in the soul this new configuration to Christ who is our Founder. Each one will draw practical consequences of his configuration to the divine model. It will be the deep renunciation of all that is human so that it can be divinized. Meditation of Christ on the cross; remain a long time in his presence. It will be a more intimate and crucifying purification, the accomplishment of the great sacrifice that each one will do with exactitude, for it will have been prepared just as the new adhesion to one's vocation has been prepared. Finally, in the fourth period, one will strive for love in peace, for effectively one has interiorly followed Christ right to the cross...<sup>107</sup>

The retreat of thirty days<sup>108</sup>, with its 94 instructions, deepened the following among other things: the imitation of Our Lord Jesus Christ (instr. 43-36); Christ, Master and

Model of our prayer (instr. 49); the Mass and the Eucharist (instr. 55); Mary, the Eucharist and the Oblate priest (instr. 56); the virtues and the vows in relation to the life and example of Jesus Christ (instr. 59-82); suffering (instr. 92); the triple role of Christ in our life and ministry (instr. 94).

2. In the same line is an interesting Oblate retreat project according to the method of the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius, elaborated by Father Paul-Émile Charland, o.m.i.<sup>109</sup> This retreat was used to prepare novices for their first profession. It has a precise orientation: "It is a matter...of choosing Jesus Christ, of choosing him completely and advancing in following him in the way of abnegation and God's service, according to the divine will made manifest in each soul".<sup>110</sup>

Conceived and written in the light of our Rules and of our Founder's Preface, this retreat lasts for eight days and treats of the main themes of our spirituality.

Conquer oneself in order to respond to God's call and to work only for his glory in the salvation of souls: we all know that this is the Spirit of our holy Rules. But there is another point where they meet the spirit of the Exercises: the contemplation of Christ and imitation of his example. Place the participants in Christ's school: that is the means the Exercises use to lead one to a choice, a choice totally in conformity to God's designs on oneself. It is the same inspiration that moved our venerated Founder to address the following questions to us: "What did Our Lord do when he wanted to regenerate by faith the whole world?... What, in their turn, must men do who are desirous of walking in the footsteps of Christ their divine Master, in order to bring back to him so many souls who have thrown off his yoke?" (Preface of the Rule).<sup>111</sup>

3. The "De Mazenod Experience" (Aix-en-Provence), 1990 - ). The first De Mazenod experience of our days held in Aix-en-Provence from September 3 to December 8, 1990. On this experience, we have only the texts distributed to the participants. The heart of this experience is the thirty days retreat.

It would be rather interesting to read this experience in the context of our research, but we must still wait until that is possible. I limit myself to pointing out a very significant text that is meant for the first day of the retreat and which gives it its fundamental orientation. It is an excerpt from Father Zago's report to the 1990 Inter-Chapter meeting:

#### **Becoming other Jesus Christ:**

Finally, there is another challenge that both attracts and is frightening at the same time, because we know our limits and its demands: that which asks us to be apostolic men, to become saints, a challenge so well described by the Founder in the preface of the Constitutions... For the Founder... the mission implies first and foremost being and from that our action flows. This missionary logic that is so vigorously stated in the Preface, must be constantly taken up and transmitted to the younger generations because it is the very soul of our dynamism. Oblates, in fact, "are called to be the co-workers with the Saviour, the co-redeemers of the human race"... In this journey we are responsible for each other. It is a matter of our common goal. This commitment "to become other Jesus Christ" was for the Founder both the aim of missionary activity and of personal and community living...<sup>112</sup>

#### **Devotions proper to us**

Under this heading we can also place a matter linked to the exercises of piety and which concerns the devotions that were established in our traditions and which are, in some sort, proper to us. An article in *Études Oblates* some years ago published the text of a 1831-35 Directory concerning devotions proper to our family.<sup>113</sup> A chapter of this study is dedicated to devotion towards Our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>114</sup>

After having invited the novices to have a tender piety for all the mysteries and states of life of Jesus, this Directory offers to their devotion three states of life of Jesus so that, by

contemplating them, they may be enflamed with his love and learn to practice the highest virtues: they are his infancy, the passion, and the Saviour's presence in the Eucharist.

In the mystery of Jesus' infancy, the novices "will find a very simple means of acquiring the main virtues of their own state. In the school of the Child Jesus they will understand what is humility, simplicity, abnegation, mortification, prayer".<sup>115</sup>

The mystery of the Saviour's passion "will hold a very first place in the hearts of the novices". After having said that the pain and sadness the soul experiences when confronted by this mystery are only an apparent reality, the text invites the novices to ardently embrace the devotion to "Jesus, humble and suffering":

May the very term of Passion, Calvary, etc. make their soul rejoice and fill them with love for Jesus Christ and the desire to imitate him. May the cross be one of their dearest objects of piety. May they come often to fix at its feet their dwelling place; and may the Saviour's wounds, especially that of his Sacred Heart, be their dearest home and their refuge against all trouble, against all the onslaughts of their enemies. They must often have in mind and faithfully practise this sentence of the author of the Imitation: *Requiesce in passione Christi et in sacris vulneribus ejus libenter habita. Qui se intente et devote in sanctissima vita et passione Domini exercet, omnia utilia et necessaria sibi abundanter ibi inveniet.*<sup>116</sup>

The third mystery towards which the novices ought to nourish a very particular devotion is that of the Eucharist, the "centre of love" and the "shrine of divine charity":

Therefore, they will take the fullest care to maintain in themselves this devotion by every means that an ingenuous love can inspire in a loving heart. They will unceasingly reproach themselves for not loving Jesus in the Eucharist enough and they will often ask him in their prayers for the grace to love him ever more. This love, once it is master of their hearts, will not be sterile, but will soon produce the happiest results and will make them run speedily in the way of perfection and in the career of virtues.<sup>117</sup>

According to the Directory, the attraction for the Person of Jesus Christ and the desire to know and love him belongs to the spirit that is proper to our family.<sup>118</sup>

Linked to the novices' love for Jesus in the Eucharist is devotion to his Sacred Heart:

They will embrace with joy all the practices that piety has invented to honor this adorable Heart...; they will seek to penetrate gently into this shrine of divine charity and will willingly keep their own heart beside the most loving Heart of Jesus in order to receive his divine impulse.<sup>119</sup>

## Conclusion

This long chapter leads us into our topic through the direct relationship that is established between the Oblate and the Person of Jesus Christ in prayer - both personal and communitarian -, the practices and exercises of piety, the devotions that nourish our Oblate life. From all that we can, by way of a conclusion, attempt a synthesis which in an overview takes up most important aspects of this relationship.

What is most striking is the end of Oblate prayer: perfect adherence to Christ, to the point of being able to "copy" within ourselves his life and his virtues, his sentiments, and all of that in order to give glory to the Father and to complete his work of man's salvation. The instruments of this salvation that the Oblate must use are the examples of Christ's life, his teaching, suffering and the sacraments he has instituted.

If in Oblate prayer we are called to contemplate Jesus, the model of religious perfection, it is again in order to clothe ourselves in him, to resemble him, to imitate him. This

contemplation progressively is adoration, communion, cooperation: adoration of Jesus in his mysteries and virtues, communion in these mysteries in view of "incarnating" them in one's life. That of the cross occupies the first place among these mysteries: it is celebrated in the Eucharistic sacrifice where communion, adherence and configuration of the Oblate to his Saviour are most fully achieved. Through communion in this supreme mystery the Oblate shares in the fruits of the sacrifice of the cross, receives the gift of fidelity to Jesus Christ and the strength to transform these gifts into life.

Since imitation of Jesus' virtues and examples are a way to perfection, it must be subjected to examination by which, through reading and meditating God's Word, the Oblate learns to situate himself and to take up his road to resemble Jesus Christ as perfectly as possible.

Even the moments of oraison are privileged times to grow in this resemblance by means of a familiar and friendly conversation with Jesus, in the desire to love him more and be one with him.

Annual retreats also play a most important role in the growth of the Oblate's relationship to Jesus Christ. The theme of the imitation of Jesus and his virtues sometimes cedes to that of the school where Oblates are gathered around Jesus in order to hear him and allow themselves to be formed by him, just like the Apostles in the Gospel. The end of either perspective remains the same: to become other Jesus Christ for the world of all times: that is the heart of the Oblate vocation and mission.

When all is said and done, we can say that the Oblates's life of prayer, his exercises of piety and his devotions confirm Father Blanchard's statement: "the primordial doctrine, the cornerstone of the whole Oblate spiritual structure is the imitation of Christ".<sup>120</sup>

## **II. The Oblation of Christ the Saviour**

The imitation of Christ and his virtues which the Oblate's exercises of piety mention so often, tends to imitate Christ in a perspective that is quite well defined. This is what this chapter wishes to show.

Father Pétrin dedicates a few pages of his study to Christ the Saviour, the angle from which Oblates are to contemplate their divine Master in order to be associated to his redemptive mission.

The special vocation of the Oblate is located in the very centre of Christ's saving mission. We must be able to say in everything that we do as Oblates this word which Christ applied to himself as a definition of his mission, a word that has become our motto: "He has sent me to evangelize the poor; the poor are being evangelized".<sup>121</sup>

We have stated that Oblate piety consists in contemplating Christ in order to imitate him. Here we can add that in the life of an apostolic Oblate, this imitation is translated into imitation of Christ the Saviour, of this particular aspect of his being and work which becomes the model for our meditation. We can say that if the object of our adoration and contemplation is Christ the Master and Christ the Victim, the object of our imitation is Christ the Saviour, he to whom we ought to conform our whole life.

After a long paragraph on the topic of Christ the Saviour<sup>122</sup>, Father Patrin responds to the title of his study:

No doubt, Christ is of interest to us in all the mysteries of his human-divine being, his divinity, humanity, his role as Saviour, his priesthood, royalty, his magisterium, his mercy, etc. If there is a more special aspect, an aspect which however excludes no other mystery but rather contains them all, it is the role of Christ the Saviour, the Redeemer, whose collaborators we are by reason of our special vocation. We are called to propagate among men, but more especially among the poor, the Good News of salvation he brings us on earth;



then to be the agents of his mercy to sinners whom we bring back to him through our preaching. And so we must cultivate in ourselves the sentiments of the deepest veneration, the most devoted love, and, consequently, we must walk in his footsteps, imitate in everything his virtues and example.<sup>123</sup>

### **Christ Redeemer and Saviour**

Even though our study concerns the Oblate tradition, our starting point can only be the Founder. In regard to these two aspects in his aspiration and life, we refer to other in-depth studies.<sup>124</sup>

M. Bélanger writes: "For the Oblate of the Rule and of tradition there is a double ideal which in some way must be reincarnated, which must enter into each day's life: the **Saviour** of men and the Virgin in her **Immaculate Conception**."<sup>125</sup>

Developing the first "ideal", this study presents the Oblate vocation in liaison with divine mercy: "born from a merciful thought", the Oblate is called to become a reflection of that mercy, and for that he is called to the school of the Immaculate word, of word considered in his function of Saviour.<sup>126</sup> After having spoken of "the intelligence of the divine mercy incarnate", this study concludes:

In action... and through action, the Oblate ought to prolong the Saviour and the Virgin in our times, in our milieux... He owes it to himself to reincarnate the Christ who showed mercy to the crowds of Judea and Galilee...<sup>127</sup>

The book of Father Gueguen which we have already quoted returns several times to Christ's Person:

The Oblate's life-center is certainly the Person of Christ adored, ardently contemplated, admired, loved. Like in St. Paul this name, ideal, person who attracts appears on every page of the Rule. The Oblate gives himself completely to him and to his Kingdom. The Oblate fixes his eyes on him in a heart to heart during daily oraison; by observing him he hopes to be permeated by his attitudes, thoughts, worthy ambitions of the apostolate. And when his gaze focuses with a marked preference on the loveliness of the Master's love, his devotion naturally is oriented to the Sacred Heart: here we have a completely traditional form of our piety and we can say that the Congregation "came forth from the divine Heart", so intense, unanimous and remarkable in its period was the cult and love that the Father and the first disciples addressed to it... Let us mention, in passing, that this particular devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, well known to Cardinal Guibert, who had received it himself from the Founder in the first years of the Congregation, explains and justifies the option made by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate to be the promoters of the National Cult to the Sacred Heart at Montmartre.<sup>128</sup>

The insistence of our spirituality on co-working with Jesus the Saviour - rather than with his Person in general - removes it from and characterizes it in regard to the French school.

Father Lesage has deeply studied Oblate spirituality in three articles published in 1945-1946. In the third of these studies, this Father finds that "this idea on co-working with the Saviour in the redemption of the human race takes on, in the pen of and spirit of Mgr de Mazenod, a different form from that of the other schools".<sup>129</sup>

Called to be an effective co-worker with Christ the Saviour, the Oblate responds to this vocation by achieving a triple purpose: working for God's glory, being useful to the Church and in the salvation of souls.

An aspect which characterizes even more our co-working with Christ the Saviour is linked to the different works to which we are assigned. Among these, the one that comes closer to the Saviour is preaching God's word to the poor, to the most abandoned souls.

The ideal that our spirituality asks us to choose in order to fulfill better our role as the Saviour's co-workers is Christ the Redeemer. Our model is therefore the apostolic life of Jesus, the Saviour in his ministry, especially evangelization.

The idea of co-redemption with the Saviour is incarnated in certain practices of the Christian life that the Founder has chosen - and that the Oblate tradition has appropriated - seeing them more suitable for achieving our ideal once they have been permeated with the idea of coredemption with the Redeemer.<sup>130</sup>

Father Deschâtelets launched the research into Oblate spirituality and states its meaning and the reasons for it:

At the present time, in spite of the publication of a certain number of serious articles that are based on reliable documentation, and the fact that some points have been definitively established, the study of our spirituality resembles quite simply a high cathedral in the process of being built, where a number of qualified workers are laying the foundations while the terrain is all covered with materials that await workers. Research in this field is going ahead. But we are still looking for a competent architect who will carry out this monumental work. I can also state that the study of a religious spirituality or the spirituality of a Congregation meets particular difficulties because it can never be completed. The reason for this is that each successive generation in such a Congregation adds to the richness that the teachings of its Founder contains. Thus, we must not look upon the teachings of our venerated Founder and our Holy Rule as something old or inanimate, but rather we should see them as an eternal source which constantly animates our religious and spiritual life. That is like the treasure of a father of a family that contains *nova et vetera*.<sup>131</sup>

Further on he writes:

The Oblates love Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, our Saviour. To love Jesus is to love Love itself, to love God's love for mankind... The Oblate loves Jesus in such a way that he makes real *per ipsum cum ipso et in ipso* of his daily Mass. This love asks each Oblate to consecrate himself totally to the service of Jesus in a true spirit of adoration and also of expiation of all the world's sins...<sup>132</sup>

When we ponder the word "Oblate", we are obliged to disjoin it from the rest of the expression ("of Mary Immaculate"<sup>133</sup>) and to consider only the places where this word is understood in relation so that he may be a living presence for the world of our day.

In a study of an article from our former Rule (*Tota vita sodalium Societatis nostrae perpetua debet esse animi recollectio*: art. 246), Father Dugal analyses in depth the relationship between the Oblate and the Redeemer: called to contemplate him in the Scriptures, in history, faith and the mystery of the Cross, the Oblate will see him prolonged, in his person and work, across the centuries up to his own time, by means of the Church, his Mystical Body. The Oblate learns to look at everything - himself, others, events and every other reality - in this light and through this vision of redemption.<sup>134</sup>

Redemption - never separated from the Redeemer - is the angle from which the Oblate looks at reality: history, the world, people. From two outlooks which meet -- the Redeemer's and that of the Oblate -- springs forth the Oblate's love for his Saviour, a love that gives a well-defined orientation to his life. "If we never lose sight of this ideal, we will be able to possess a very precise meaning to all the exercises of our Oblate life and apostolic activities..."<sup>135</sup>

Through our priestly character we are called "to play the role of the Saviour himself in the great drama of Redemption, to regenerate the world and souls".<sup>136</sup>

The closest resemblance between the Oblate and the Saviour consists in that the Oblate, like the Saviour, goes to the most poor. "Faithful to his vocation, as a perfect imitator of

the merciful Saviour, the Oblate prefers to go to the poor"<sup>137</sup>, to those who are without spiritual and material help.

These first texts already show us that the Oblate's gaze, turned towards Christ the Saviour, is a gaze which turns him to the most poor, to whom he offers salvation by proclaiming the good news, by evangelization.

*Études Oblates* launched an inquiry in 1950, inviting all the Oblates to send in their replies to a questionnaire about Oblate spirituality.<sup>138</sup> Of the four headings under which the various questions were grouped, the one that interests our research is the second (*quid sit*), which had the following questions:

1. What main elements constitute Oblate spirituality?
2. What is its center of unity?
3. What is the hierarchy among them?
4. Can we speak of an Oblate asceticism?
5. What is the normal mystical crown of our spirituality?
6. Could we formulate a definition of Oblate spirituality?

In 1951 *Études Oblates* published a report of the replies received.<sup>139</sup> Let us consider the replies to the second heading of the inquiry (*Quid sit*) which is of greater interest for us. They underline the double character of the Congregation, Christological and Marian. Here are some expressions used: "reproduce in oneself the virtues and example of our Lord Jesus Christ"<sup>140</sup>; "prolong the Saviour's work by identifying oneself to him as such"<sup>141</sup>; Jesus Christ with his main titles of Saviour, Master, Sanctifier, Glorifier.<sup>142</sup> One reply gives the following synthesis:

The fundamental elements of our spirituality are: a) devotion to Christ the Redeemer and to all that which is linked to him: the cross, the altar of his merciful love, the Eucharist, sacrifice and sacrament of his love, the Sacred Heart, seat of this same love..."<sup>143</sup>

To the question *What is its center of unity*, the replies are more precise. One of them is formulated thus: "The centre of our spiritual life is 'love for the Saviour who thirsts for souls, in the mode of St. Paul'".<sup>144</sup> Other formulations are: "To Christ the Redeemer through Mary Immaculate Co-redemptrix", "reproduce Christ in his oblation to the Father and to souls through Mary Immaculate".<sup>145</sup>

This expression introduces us to another element of our spirituality, the aspect of *oblation* conceived as an offering of one's life in union with that of Christ for the salvation of souls.

### **The Oblation of Christ Victim**

This dimension of our charism comprises two inseparable poles: on the one hand a manner proper to us of seeing the Person of Jesus Christ and his work, on the other hand our sharing in this work through our configuration to Christ in this typically Oblate perspective.

A text of Father Yves Guéguen introduces us there to:

One has only to read the Preface, among other passages of the Rule, to be persuaded as to how much this yearning to be a worker in the divine work prods Oblates towards perfect conformity to the Redeemer who loves and evangelizes the people, pleading with great cries for men his brothers and "offering himself as a holy victim for them" (Jn 17:19). Likewise through the apostolate, that is to say, by the surrender-gift of his whole being to God's cause, that of the Church and of souls, he wants to achieve the royal commandment in which total perfection lies. From this comes this trait which is at the same time a supreme requirement of the gift of self which his name of

"Oblate" signifies and a broad freedom before every form of mathematical asceticism. From this also comes the special form of his attachment to Christ" a personal, direct homage, an absolute commitment to the adored Master, the laborious Saviour, the King who must reign and who deigns to need his missionary. With what enthusiasm he replies to the call and engages in the Cause the whole of himself, without thinking of self, but assured that the Incomparable Friend will think of it: *Scio cui credidi* - I know in whom I have believed (12 Tim 1:12).<sup>146</sup>

A little further on the author presents the reality of our religious profession, which we call "oblation", in the light of this exchange between the Oblate who gives himself to Jesus and Jesus gives himself to the Oblate:

'Oblation', that is to say, 'offering without reserve of his whole being, is what we call the public profession by which we become Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate... And while the priest who is present receives the formula of his vows and lays it on the altar, Jesus Victim gives himself totally to him who has given himself to him; and this gesture seals the deep meaning of the religious offering.'<sup>147</sup>

Towards the end of his study, when speaking of scholasticate formation, the author says:

In the austere cloth of this life of work and prayer, the Oblate will patiently embroider, in lines of love and sacrifices, the image of Christ, Priest and Victim. For his daily secret efforts and the uninterrupted devotedness of his Directors have but one purpose: "To form Christ in them"...<sup>148</sup>

When explaining the nature of the love that ought to characterize the Oblate, Father Becker writes: "The name *Oblate*, he who is offered up", expresses this idea marvelously. He recalls St. Thomas' definition of religious profession: *holocaustum quo quis se et sua totaliter Deo offert*.<sup>149</sup>

In his reply to the inquiry question about Oblate spirituality which asked about the hierarchy between the main elements of our spirituality, a correspondent expresses the key lines of a synthesis formulated around the central idea of oblation. His reply is as follows:

The supreme norm for a religious life is not an abstract doctrine: it is a person, Jesus Christ, who is to be lived again in the present. We have to appropriate, on the human level, the acts and states of the Man-God. Now it has pleased God to assign to each religious family the imitation of this or that special aspect of Jesus' life, the observance of some particular virtue, in such a way that while practicing all of them, it distinguishes itself through the eminent exercise of one or the other, and this constitutes the dominant feature of its spiritual physionomy. When God imposes a name, he also at the same time determines the mission to be accomplished, a mission to be carried out, a program to be followed. The Church too, mandated by God, when she decreed for us the title of Oblate, one so dear to our hearts, seems to assign to us as a proximate goal: that of honoring, reproducing, reliving the oblation of Christ, to practice specially the virtues implicated in the Christ's oblation: his ardent love for God and souls, his zeal, abnegation, obedience, humility. Christ is the great Oblate. The epistle to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus' first act on entering into this world was an act of oblation. This initial act of oblation continued without interruption for 33 years right to the solemn oblation of the Cross. For this oblation at every minute was in fact consummated on Calvary, for then God accepted forever the oblation of his Son.

Christ is the Oblate of Mary: this way of speaking is strictly theological. At the Incarnation, he offers himself in Mary. Not content with being the altar of this oblation, as M. Olier puts it, Mary associates herself to it

actively and freely by offering him whom God has given her for the world's salvation. At the presentation in the Temple, Jesus offers himself to his Father through the hands of Mary. God thus receives Jesus from Mary: all his life it will be like that; it will be like that at his death. Mary is perpetually associated to the oblation of Jesus and that to a degree and in a manner that is exclusively her own: Jesus is her exclusive treasure and she offers this treasure to God for the salvation of people. Who would dare to say calling Jesus an Oblate of Mary is a pious exaggeration?<sup>150</sup>

The author concludes that it is perfectly legitimate to call Jesus Christ the first Oblate of Mary Immaculate. To reproduce, relive Christ's oblation through Mary Immaculate, as our title seems to oblige us, do we not find here our program for holiness? How are we to achieve it? By copying Christ's life viewed above all from the angle of oblation.

Another approach proposes a synthesis around the Founder's love for the Church perceived in her state of being abandoned: to rebuild the Church is the dream that explains our Christocentric character; it is from the Founder's love for the Church that our preferential devotions to the Eucharist and Sacred Heart flow...<sup>151</sup>

These same themes recur in other forms in the replies to the fourth question (*Can we speak of an Oblatye ascensis?*) and the fifth (*What is the normal mystical crown of our spirituality?*):

The Oblate should come to the point where all his reactions, even the most spontaneous, are for the benefit of souls and of Christ the Saviour... A fervent Oblate, even though he may not be a mystic, certainly possesses in some fashion the apostolic spirit of Jesus Christ. He no longer belongs to himself but only to Jesus Christ and his work. Each day he dies more to his own self in order to let himself be possessed by Christ the Saviour; in his life of prayer as well as in the works of his ministry he tries to react like Christ in the service of souls and for the Father's glory.<sup>152</sup>

In regard to the *mystical crown*:

And so little by little (through the work of ascensis which for us takes on the form of a disowning of self in order to be possessed by Christ) a new personality is formed, the apostolic personality of Jesus Christ. If God wants to crown our work - that would be completely normal, at least for some of our members - he will find material that is ready and that will not resist. The soul, already dead to self and determined to die always more, will allow itself to be guided with docility by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ. Its union with Christ the Saviour becomes passive. The Holy Spirit will enlighten it from within, enflame it with zeal, will guide it in choosing the most effective apostolic means, and sometimes will consume it as a victim for souls. Its intelligence will habitually rest in contemplating the redeeming mystery of Jesus Christ, and its fire will burn with an inextinguishable apostolic fire.<sup>153</sup>

According to Father Gilbert, the heart of Christ's sacrifice is the gift he makes of himself for his brothers whom he wishes to ransom, an oblation which is the alpha and omega of his life.<sup>154</sup> "Jesus offered through the hands of his Immaculate Mother in the Temple and the Calvary: that is the most perfect, the most striking prototype of the Oblate of Mary Immaculate".<sup>155</sup> Father Gilbert says that we touch here the deepest point of our Oblate spirituality which, in this sense, can be called a "spirituality of oblation". In this perspective,

the 'yes' pronounced at the moment of our first vows ought not to be simply a religious profession - something that is common to every religious - but an oblation, an offering of oneself as a reply of love to our vocation as co-workers of our Saviour, the reproduction of the *Ecce venio* of Christ entering the world and the *Ecce ancilla Domini* of the Virgin at the Incarnation.<sup>156</sup>

This is the sense of several paragraphs in the Preface of our CC&RR.<sup>157</sup>

Our Oblation, the gift we make of our life at the moment of our religious profession in order to continue with the Redeemer the work of redemption is grafted on that of Christ who offers himself to his Father in order to accomplish this redemption.

### **The Sacrifice of the Cross and of the Altar**

Christ's oblation was consummated on the cross in unceasingly renewed in the Eucharist, which thus also becomes our sacrifice by which we are assimilated to Christ in his redemptive oblation.<sup>158</sup>

After the publication of the replies to the questionnaire on Oblate spirituality, studies on this topic multiplied and went into greater depth. Two studies appeared in 1956: that of Father Simon<sup>159</sup> and that of Father Lamirande.<sup>160</sup>

The first of these authors elaborates a synthesis of dominant traits of our spirituality around his key idea, that of oblation. His first gaze is focused on Christ. His life, from the time he entered into the world, has been a total and perpetual oblation:

The whole of Christ's life was oriented to Calvary as to its only pole of attraction; Jesus lived in the thought of his supreme sacrifice, in the perspective of Calvary; from his entry into the world the cross was raised up before him, he did not cease to see it... If then, we want to relive Christ's oblation, as our title program seems to obligate us, should not our whole life turn around the sacrifice of Calvary reproduced each morning on our altars?<sup>161</sup>

To this text, also quoted in the report of the replies to the questionnaire on Oblate spirituality, the author adds other considerations:

The whole of Jesus' life was pointed to the sacrifice of Calvary; our entire day should be pointed to the next day's Mass. All our actions should be accomplished in such a way that they are a spotless offering, worthy in all respects to be laid on the altar beside the oblation of the Saviour. Mary Immaculate is to help us throughout the day to forge the precious material of our oblation; besides our oblations will be presented to God through her hands: *Ita vivant presbyteri, ut singulis diebus sacrum facere digne possint* (art. 299). According to the teaching of St. Augustine taken on by St. Thomas, we know that the exterior sacrifice is the sign of the personal interior sacrifice; it has no meaning if it does not refer to a state of soul, its real value flows from the personal acts it is intended to incarnate. The sacramental immolation of the Mass translates Christ's interior oblation, his love for the Father and for the men. But the Mass is not only the sacrifice of Our Lord Jesus Christ; It is also the Church's sacrifice, our sacrifice. Thus the Host at the Mass should signify our interior sacrifice as it signifies the interior oblation of Jesus. The Mass, sign of our oblation, does not say it all. Our victim is the very cause of the sentiments of which it is the sign, an efficacious sign. Thanks to transsubstantiation, Jesus becomes our victim, and if we do not place any obstacle in the way, he brings out in us this interior oblation of which he will be not only the sign but the cause.<sup>162</sup>

Our whole life offered on the altar through the hands of Mary Immaculate: that is the faithful replica of the life of the Great Oblate. Thus the title of Oblate of Mary Immaculate, inherited from Jesus himself, becomes the expression of a lived ideal. That could be the deep expression of our Oblate spirituality, for from this spirituality and oblation flow, as from their source, the other characteristics of our life. This is what the author shows briefly at the end of his study where he has touched the question as to whether the spirituality of oblation is an apostolic, missionary spirituality.

The second part of Father Simon's study treats of the main points of the theology of sacrifice: he underlines the distinction between the sacrifice signified, or the interior sacrifice,

and the sacrifice sign, or exterior sacrifice, and shows these two characteristics present in the sacrifice of the Cross and in that of the Mass. By the sacrifice of the Cross "Christ loved us and gave himself over to God for us as an oblation and a most acceptable sacrifice" (Eph 5:2). In this sacrifice

there is the external and visible sign: a man dies, and there is the hidden significance: Christ's whole life of oblation, all his redemptive acts, his love for God his Father and for us his brothers, who were incarnated in this bloody death.<sup>163</sup>

"The blood of Christ therefore has its value, but it possesses it only because it translates a love".<sup>164</sup>

In its external rite the sacrifice of the Mass expresses Christ's internal oblation, his love for God and for men.<sup>165</sup> Father Simon concludes: "Christ is the first Oblate of Mary Immaculate. He is therefore at the head of the file we are to join and walk, striving to copy his life seen first and foremost from the special angle of oblation".<sup>166</sup>

Father Guéguen says:

It was normal to look for Jesus in the Eucharist. "I would like to spend my life at the foot of the Tabernacle," write the Founder in the register of a pious association of adorers... The thirst of souls tears him away from his mute contemplation, but without interrupting the dialogue of love which, in his turn, brings him back to the foot of the altar. This spirit he has bequeathed to his own: the Eucharist of their morning Sacrifice, of their breviary, of their evening oraison..., that is the very life of their days. Their little number and active life do not allow them solemn liturgies; but they cultivate this soul of the liturgy which is the presence in their midst of Christ, the redemptive Victim and Supreme Priest.<sup>167</sup>

### **Christ's Oblation for the World**

The third part of the above-mentioned study seeks to show that the spirituality of oblation is an eminently apostolic and missionary spirituality. Once again our gaze is turned towards Christ: his whole life was an oblation that turned around the sacrifice of the cross, but this oblation is expressed by the gift he gave of himself, of his life.

From henceforth, in conformity to this ideal, every apostle worthy of the name, will make of his life a gift of self. The apostle is the man who spends himself, who sacrifices himself entirely for others; he is the man for other men; what makes an apostle is concern for others and forgetfulness of self; he is a man who no longer belongs to himself. It is then not a matter for him of measuring, of parcimoniously handing out his donations, to let them escape drop by drop: no! his ideal obligates him to a total absolute offering. His motto is to serve and to serve with joy...<sup>168</sup>

Our Oblate ideal is an ideal of sacrifice. It consists in sacrificing oneself, as did Jesus the Great Oblate, so that the sacrifice of Jesus will benefit many... A vocation of total and perpetual oblation is too cruel, too sad, the wise and prudent people of this world will say, as St. Paul tells us. No vocation is more magnificent, reply those who have tasted the folly of the cross; it is better because *beatius est dare quam accipere*. The best way of living one's life is to give it.<sup>169</sup>

As a follow-up to the study of Father Simon, Father Lamirande attempted a historical approach to the spirit of oblation, asking Oblates who have incarnated this spirit and, in the second part of his study, the Founder.<sup>170</sup>

A recent study took this subject up again with a global approach that includes its entire complexity. It is a licentiate thesis in missiology presented by an Italian Oblate who is

presently a missionary in Korea.<sup>171</sup> After a first chapter on martyrdom in the mission, this study treats of the ideal of martyrdom in Eugene de Mazenod from 1807 to 1814 (formation period and first years of priesthood); then, after having dedicated the third chapter to the study of martyrdom of charity and the spirit of oblation in Eugene de Mazenod's charism, the author in the last chapter extends his study to the whole Congregation of the Missionaries of Mary Immaculate. It is this chapter that is of special interest to us here.

The spirit of oblation was transmitted from the Founder to his sons just like the blood of the mother begins to circulate in the veins of her child from conception onwards. On this point we have several testimonies, for example, the letter to Father Guigues in which the Founder expresses his admiration for the spirit of oblation that animated the Oblates during the cholera epidemic of 1835:

As for our Oblates, it is impossible to narrate the heroism of their devotedness... May God bless their zeal and reward their charity! They are at the post. I never cease to pray and to have others pray for their safety, but I envy them a lot and I don't insult them by feeling sorry for them. How happy they are by being able to sacrifice themselves for their brothers whom they are sanctifying, saving, placing in glory, at the price of their lives, like our divine Master who died for the salvation of men! How admirable they are! But also how fortunate, these dears martyrs of love! What a beautiful page in the history of our Congregation!<sup>172</sup>

And again this letter to Father Maisonneuve in which the Founder expresses his participation in the sufferings of his sons at Red River:

How could I be insensitive to the sufferings you are enduring to extend the kingdom of Jesus and to respond to your beautiful vocation, which has called you to the most meritorious mission that I know. There is no doubt that you are buying souls at the price of your own blood, you, the first apostles of those souls whom God wishes to save by means of your ministry. If there had not been you to seek them as far as the end of the earth, what would have become of them? I can understand that the consolation of seeing so many creatures made in the image of God enter into the sheepfold of Jesus Christ as a result of your care for them is a great recompense for all your efforts, an unutterable consolation; it is this that sustains your courage, and I can say to you, softens the pain that I feel in being separated from you.<sup>173</sup>

### **Some Testimonies**

To the testimonies that Father Lamirande brings from Oblate history<sup>174</sup>, Father Giorgianni adds others that are equally eloquent and striking.<sup>175</sup> Even though this would amply suffice to show that the spirit of oblation is an essential characteristic of our family's life and spirituality, we would like to enrich this beautiful item with two or three other examples.

### **Father Tempier**

Writing to Father Tempier in Paris to share a humiliation with him, he begins with these words:

We have to admit God is treating us with a lot of goodness, since he lets us share in the same gifts that he gave to his own Son when the latter was on earth... With the few things that we have done, how did we ever merit this grace to share in this way in the precious cross of God's Son?<sup>176</sup>

Father Tempier is generally quite sober in his letters. The gift of his life is read between the lines of his writings; with difficulty personal considerations escape him, but here and there we sense that his heart has been given, as for instance these lines he writes to Mgr de Mazenod to convinced him to accept an episcopal see:



I think this is the last time that I shall speak to you about all this, for I am sick and tired of it. I can tell you that if a rest is so pleasing to you, I also call and desire a rest at least as much as you. Why is it that I have to be here and let my blood run dry for twelve years, forever harnessed to the cart, in most difficult situations! Providence has always arranged things in such a way that, whatever the crisis we have had to undergo, no matter what its nature, I have ended up all alone to taste its sweetness. All the difficult moments that I have had to experience in diocesan business and for you especially in countless instances, have worn me out, have wearied me to the point that business annoys me to no end: I am fed up with it. Why shouldn't I enjoy a bit of rest? It seems to me that is justly due to me.<sup>177</sup>

When he replied to Bishop Ignace Bourget of Montréal who had asked Mgr de Mazenod for missionaries he said: "...there isn't a single member of the family to which I belong who does not crave the happiness of working under your auspices at converting these good Canadians and the native peoples of your diocese".<sup>178</sup>

Or again when he wrote to Bishop Jeancart after the Founder's death to ask him not to count on him for the post of Capitular Vicar:

I have paid my debt of devotedness and zeal to this diocese by 38 years of service. At the age I have reached and after losing that which I held most dear in this world, I long only for solitude and rest.<sup>179</sup>

And after being named Vicar General of the Congregation:

During the interim of my duties, I shall be more than ever exclusively to you, heart and soul, happy that I am able to give you, more than in the past, all the strength and life that the good Lord will give me. This I owe you, this I owe to my beloved Father.<sup>180</sup>

## Father Gerard

Father Gerard's texts are well known.<sup>181</sup> It is worth the while to stress that oblation spirituality characterizes him in a very special way.

A prayer that he wrote during his noviciate already gives us a glimpse of this spirit:

Holy Virgin, my tender Mother I acknowledge my blindness. I am unworthy for your beautiful Congregation, this flower-garden you have chosen, because I do not love you enough, nor Jesus, my God and your divine Son. Well! yes, I want to love you, I want to immolate myself for your glory and that of my God. Do with me whatever will please so. Help me in this resolution because, I say it again, I am only a rebel nothingness. O Mary, my Mother, I want to be your most faithful child! Pray, pray for me and I shall be all to you and to Jesus.<sup>182</sup>

What comment can we make on this marvelous page where the young novice explains the meaning of our family name?

There, it is a name which, it would seem, was given to us by heaven. This name has touched me, struck me with a charm I cannot express. In fact, it is the most essential name of Our Lord Jesus Christ: *Oblatus est quia voluit* (Is. 53:7). From eternity Our Lord Jesus Christ is constantly in a state of sacrifice and immolation for us and on our altars he leads a life wholly of immolation and of love; unceasingly he offers himself as a victim to his heavenly Father to thank him, adore his divine majesty, halt his avenging arm and obtain graces for us. The Oblate of Mary Immaculate must always have this beautiful name before his eyes, must always be in a state of victim awaiting the knife of the one sacrificing, and that because of his sins and those of the people he is

evangelizing.

One day I will have the happiness of being an Oblate, by God's grace and my Mother, the holy Virgin. Well! Oblate means a man immolated, a man offered as victim to Our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, to enter into the meaning of this beautiful name which Our Lord Jesus Christ essentially bears, I must offer myself as a victim to the Heart of Jesus, and that constantly and totally, for my sins and those of others. Ah! what glory, what happiness it is to be similar to Our Lord Jesus Christ and Our Lord Jesus Christ crucified! My God, while the world persecutes you, despises you, tramples you underfoot, may the world also persecute me, despise me, reduce me to dust, so that I can imitate you in all things, and that I may truly be an Oblate your companion and disciple...

The virtue that constitutes the spirit of an Oblate of Mary Immaculate is the spirit of sacrifice. As this name implies, it is a victim in the hands of the good God and presented by the most pure hands of our good Mother. Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Eucharist: there is my model. Thus an Oblate of Mary Immaculate ought to be like a small host in the priest's hands. Ah! great God! what a spirit of sacrifice! You, great God, my Saviour, to be no more than a little bread! What humility! You, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, you no longer even look like a man but an animal! Ah! shall I then complain when everybody steps on me? what obedience to leave heaven at the word of a bad priest, what a mortification!<sup>183</sup>

We find this "Oblate vocation" of making a gift of self for others many times in his spiritual writings, even in most difficult moments. During his 1886 retreat he wrote:

I think of a priest, a Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate in his mission. He wants to see everything with his eyes, know with his heart, bring joy to all by his presence, make himself everything to everybody in order to win them to Jesus Christ. His ingenious charity knows how to use everything, thinks of everything. He is not content with general relationships whereby the priest is the priest of all but not sufficiently the priest of each one. The latter priest would seize opportunities to give individually to his people private and direct marks of his esteem, devotedness, so that each one would see himself loved by him...<sup>184</sup>

How many examples we could add to those we have already quoted! As a whole, these testimonies constitute a true family tradition, of which the key elements for our purpose are:

- the spirit of oblation is particularly suited to our Congregation; we could even see therein the characteristic mark of our vocation;
- this spirit is readily expressed by the terms "sacrifice", "immolatio", "consecration";
- this oblation is made in union with the oblation or sacrifice of the Saviour;
- this consecration to God, in union with Christ and the Virgin Mary, implies a gift of self to the Church and to souls.<sup>185</sup>

Father Lamirande's study end with a quotation from a circular letter of Father Deschâtelets, wherein he finds synthesis of his inquiry:

From the texts which truly constitutes us in our vocation and mission we clearly see a certain *superior degree of commitment to the service of God and of souls*, a surrendered donation to God's service, of his glory, of his love and infinite mercy. It is an elan, a special intensity of priestly charity, of zeal for the most difficult works, let us say the word - and we cannot use a stronger word - it is a *limitless oblation of ourselves* which brings it about that we cannot be defined in other terms except "they are *Oblates par excellence*".<sup>186</sup>

## A Biography

In our hagiographical literature we find a literary genre which presents the life of some Oblates in the perspective of Oblation. We examined two of them: the life of Father Gabriel Bosse, written by Father Edmond Thiriet<sup>187</sup> and that of the scholastic Paul-Émile Lavallée, written by J.M.R. Villeneuve.<sup>188</sup> We shall cover the first of these two biographies and underline rapidly how the spirituality of Oblation was incarnated in an Oblate and how it is read by another Oblate. This example can well illustrate how much and how deeply this reality has entered and is anchored in our spiritual tradition, in the way we "read" our life.

This biography is totally filled with the idea of oblation, from its title (*Oblation*) to the title of the last chapter (*Oblatus est*). We shall read a few passages.

A first significant element: how an Oblate sees the presence of Jesus Christ in the formative journey of the Oblate. In the example of Mary who daily renewed the oblation of herself in the Temple:

Our young postulant was happy to be in the sanctuary of the novitiate which is indeed the house of God, more august than the Temple of Jerusalem, for the little chapel contains the habitual presence of him who is delighted to live among the sons of men. Here Jesus grants him audience at any hour of the day and immolates himself on the altar. He also repeats fervently the formula of oblation. According to the Apostle's words, *Exhibeatis corpora vestra hostiam viventem, sanctam, Deo placentem* (Rm 12:1), he offers himself, immolates himself, surrenders himself body and soul into the hands of the Almighty. The novitiate is God's House like the Temple; for him it was the *house of prayer*. He poured forth his ardent supplications at the foot of the Tabernacle. He took on the attitude of the poor man who begs for his bread each day and he opened his soul to the morning dew. For in this year of intimate union with Jesus Christ the future missionary must accumulate treasures of virtue, strength and zeal in view of the struggle to be endured on the battlefields of the apostolate.<sup>189</sup>

Equally significant is the oblation hymn the brothers sang when Brother Gabriel made his first oblation before Father Simon: "Sacrifice of love, sublime holocaust! And ardent and pure heart is about to immolate himself to God. Heaven is overjoyed, contemplates its victim. Peace and happiness flood this holy place".<sup>190</sup>

The spirit of oblation is accompanied by an attitude of total availability to the Lord's will. The telegram which informed him of his first "mission" post found him ready:

Without examining whether the professorship corresponded to his tastes, he left that same day. An obedience to Africa or the island of Ceylon, as he was expecting, would not have affected him more. He had prepared his mother for the sacrifice of a definitive separation and on part of either it would have been the same generous acceptance of God's will.<sup>191</sup>

From a human point of view, this first obedience was a disappointment for him, for "his gaze was turned to other horizons; he was by preference looking out of the bark for the most abandoned souls..."<sup>192</sup>

The wise and the prudent are astonished, critical, and shrug their shoulders. The man of God does not assess situations from their viewpoint; he knows that the designs of Providence are marvelous and inscrutable and he takes the road of abnegation, even if he should, to reach the goal and go to the very end, pass by the rough path of Calvary and endure the torments of a perpetual martyrdom.<sup>193</sup>

Father Gabriel knew well the meaning of life's trials:

If it pleases God to permit a trial that makes me suffer, such a trial is a forerunner to an era of social regeneration. Trial refines gold, strengthens steel, polishes iron, hammers marble, this raw marble from which each one must make the statue of his life according to the image and likeness of the divine Crucified One. Trial is God's work on a soul that he loves...<sup>194</sup>

The last chapter, significantly entitled *Oblatus est*, opens with the information that Father Gabriel had been inscribed, shortly after he began his ministry at Commercy, in the *Petite Association des Victimes*<sup>195</sup>:

Everything for Jesus and souls through Mary: that was the Society's programme. This is precisely what fascinated Reverend Father Bosse: 'I am not priest for myself, he said, but for others. I must save souls, that is my sole raison d'être. My time, prayers, sufferings, life: my whole being belongs to that. Excuse me if I do not reply to your invitation; it is impossible for me to dodge my duty. Duty wants me at the post of devotedness so that each one can come and find me at any moment of the day -- unless for reasons of ministry or charity I am constrained to be away'. As an Oblate of Mary, it is in the hands of this good Mother that he puts his commitments. To her he has recourse, as before, in all the grave circumstances of his life; it is through her intermediary that he offers himself to God without reserve. He especially loves to contemplate with the eyes of faith the co-redemptrix of the human race in the mystery of her sorrows. 'On Calvary, Mary offered her divine Son and offered herself for the salvation of men. It is quite natural that her Oblate be presented by her, as a victim, to him who died for us on Calvary'.<sup>196</sup>

To finish, some excerpts from notes he made during one of his last annual retreats:

I am taking the resolution to be truly *Hostia pro Hostia*. Victim through patience, humility, silence. No complaint, except before God. Perfect charity in my relationships and words with those who may be a pain to me; never speak of their defects. Victim through renunciation, dependence, mortification... To be a victim always!... Everything out of Love! To the Heart of Jesus through Mary!... I want to live under God's gaze, under the gaze of my Mother in heaven and under that of my Mother on earth whom she has united to herself... Everything today spoke to me about death. Yesterday evening we got news of the terrible accident that befell two young missionary Fathers in North America. Caught in a storm, their boat sank; nothing was seen thereafter! The first one had left in April and was en route for his mission... I consulted the list of the dead for this year in the Congregation's necrology: nearly all are young! In the community cemetery there are seven: four are younger than I.. My turn will come soon. *Quid prodest?*... It will be too late to merit a crown. To work, from today onward!" To Jesus through Mary!<sup>197</sup>

## Conclusion

It is therefore not enough to say that our vocation consists in imitating Jesus Christ, for every Christian is called to that. Our imitation of Christ as Oblates is well defined. We are to imitate him in the practice of his virtues, especially charity which impelled him to become one of us in order to redeem us. The Oblate is called to make his own this "redemptive mission" of the Saviour, to perpetuate this work in time and space by a mission that becomes possible in the measure that a "configuration" between Christ and his Oblate is achieved.

The three ends of which an Oblate works -- God's glory, the good of the Church and the salvation of souls --- translate his vocation of co-worker with Christ the Saviour. This co-working is eminently accomplished through the ministry of evangelization.

To imitate Jesus as an Oblate means to push this imitation to the highest degree, and this consists in offering one's life, as Jesus did for the salvation of souls. The idea of oblation is at the heart of Oblate spirituality and meets its full accomplishment in the configuration we have

just mentioned. An oblation expressed in many ways: that of Jesus who handed his life into the hands of his Father in order to accomplish his will to the end, and into the hands of men for their salvation. Through this double oblation, the Oblate becomes another Jesus Christ and the latter can continue his redemption of men in every latitude and epoch.

This oblation, consummated on the altar of the cross, is repeated on every altar on which the Eucharist sacrifice is celebrated, in which and through which the Oblate becomes, with Jesus, a victim for the world's salvation. Just like the Saviour's blood, that of the Oblate -- which is expressed in the fatigue and sufferings of his life and apostolate - has value only if it translates love.

Of this love are eloquent witnesses the lives of a great number of Oblates who have lived this ideal in different situations and times, from those who with the Founder shared the beginning of our "spiritual adventure" in the Church and the world to those who, in our day, continue this same tradition and make their life, in a great variety of ways, an "oblation" for God and the world.

### III. The Sacred Heart

A current that has marked our spirituality in regard to our relationship to Jesus Christ is certainly that of devotion to the Sacred Heart.

One of the questions in the 1950 inquiry into Oblate spirituality was formulated thus: "In the course of the Congregation's history, are there certain currents which would have influenced our spirituality, by stressing certain elements, by eclipsing others by introducing new ones?" The three replies which dealt with this question mention, among other things, devotion to the Sacred Heart, linked especially to the shrine of Montmartre.

A work like Montmartre has certainly influenced our Oblate Life. Apostles of the Sacred Heart like Fathers Yenneux and Rey were instinctively inclined to insist on this devotion, both in the commentary on the *Saintes Règles* and in the *Histoire de Mgr de Mazenod*.<sup>198</sup>

In his study on the "fundamental themes of our spirituality", Father Lesage sees in devotion to the Heart of Jesus an aspect of our cult for Jesus Christ.<sup>199</sup> This devotion, well rooted in the life and piety of our Founder, has been transmitted to the entire family. After having quote some texts of the Founder, Father Lesage writes:

The Heart of Jesus, therefore, ought to be our model as it was to the Founder; also, though he does not say this in explicit terms, it seems to us the language used by Mgr de Mazenod is clear enough to allow us to see in the devotion to the Sacred Heart a truly fundamental theme of the Oblate spirit.<sup>200</sup>

### Acts of Consecration to the Sacred Heart

A study by Father Cosentino on "our acts of consecration and reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus" presents the history and texts of three documents related to devotion to the Sacred Heart: *Acte de consécration au Sacré-Coeur de Jésus*, *Acte de consécration de notre Congrégation au Sacré-Coeur de Jésus*, and *Acte d'amende honorable au Sacré-Coeur de Jésus*.<sup>201</sup>

1. Composed by a nun of the Visitation of Marseilles in 1718<sup>202</sup>, the act of consecration to the Sacred Heart was adopted by the "Association for Perpetual Adoration" established at Marseilles in 1718 in the church of the Visitation nuns, and it appeared in a little booklet of this same period entitled *Association à l'adoration perpétuelle du Sacré-Coeur de Notre Seigneur Jésus Christ*. Still used by the Association at Marseilles, this act of consecration came to be used by our Congregation. We read its text in a little work published by our Fathers of Aix under the title: *Exercice à l'honneur du Sacré-Coeur de Jésus*.<sup>203</sup>

2. Though the devotion to the Sacred Heart has always existed in our Congregation<sup>204</sup>,

only at the 1873 Chapter did we decide to consecrate the entire Congregation to the Sacred Heart. Probably proposed by Father Yenveux, the motion was unanimously approved. The first consecration of the Congregation to the Sacred Heart took place at the closing of the General Chapter, August 8, 1873, in the chapel of our Scholasticate of the Sacred Heart in Autun.<sup>205</sup> Thereafter, according to the Chapter's decision, this consecration was renewed each year in all the houses of the Congregation at the close of the annual retreat.

The *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats* of 1876 reminds us that, as a consequence of this consecration, devotion to the Sacred Heart has become a "special" devotion in our Congregation.

This devotion ought to be a special devotion for all Oblates, especially since the consecration made at the 1873 General Chapter of the entire Congregation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The Heart of Jesus is the tabernacle of his divinity, the source of his life, the heart of his love, the channel of graces, the instrument of his mercies. It therefore ought to be a cherished devotion in the heart of a missionary, all the more so because Our Lord committed himself to giving to souls devoted to his divine Heart the grace to convert the greatest sinners and to make immeasurably fruitful their apostolic work.<sup>206</sup>

3. Composed in 1693, by a nun of the Visitation of Rouen, Sister Jeanne-Marie de Banquemare de Bourdeny (1629-1712), the act of honorable reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus also entered our tradition. Father Cosentino writes:

It is possible that our Founder borrowed it from the Visitation Sisters in Marseilles; but it is more probable that he took it at Aix itself, for our formula reproduces exactly that used in 1819 at Toulon, and this latter place was part of the diocese of Aix.<sup>207</sup>

## **Montmartre**

A work that is greatly contributed to strengthen and spread devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is Montmartre. Father Levasseur writes:

The National Vow of France to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was proposed by a group who, by building a material monument dedicated to the Sacred Heart on the hill of Montmartre in Paris, wanted to create a movement of reparation across the whole of France to appease the divine wrath in the time of misfortune France was experiencing. Mgr Guibert, who had become Archbishop of Paris in 1871, made this enterprise his own and officially established by letter of June 18, 1872, addressed to its promoters. In June 1875 he solemnly blessed the cornerstone of the temple and the year after he called the Oblates to take on the direction of the Work of the National Vow.<sup>208</sup>

The work took on various forms (adoration, archconfraternities, consecration to the Sacred Heart, pilgrimages) and passed beyond the boundaries of France. Father Levasseur writes further:

Montmartre wielded a marked influence on the ministry and piety of the Oblates themselves across the Congregation. It raised up zealous apostles of the Sacred Heart. A proposal made to the 1898 General Chapter is rather significant: 'to establish a union of prayer, zeal and adoration between all the houses of the Congregation and Montmartre; to extend universal adoration to all our houses; to establish in the provinces and vicariates the archconfraternity of Montmartre; to add to the directory of missions a particular exercise in honour of the Sacred Heart; to celebrate with special solemnity the First Fridays of the month'.<sup>209</sup>

## **The Scapular of the Sacred Heart**

A study by Father Romeo Arbour presents an important event for our family: at the request of Father J.-B. Lemius, Superior of the Chaplains of Montmartre, and of Superior General Father Cassien Augier, Pope Leo XIII entrusted to the Oblates the mission of propagating a "symbol of redemptive Love", the scapular of the Sacred Heart.<sup>210</sup>

When he announced this event to the Oblates, Father Augier saw therein a "special mission entrusted to our religious family"<sup>211</sup>, a mission which

officially constitutes us the apostles of the love and mercy of Mary... It is a mission particularly fruitful for ourselves and the Congregation and for the souls to whom we are sent, because it gives us a special right to the countless graces promised by Our Lord to those who work to make the Sacred Heart known and loved... Finally, it is a mission admirably in conformity to the spirit of our Congregation; it explains and crowns a whole series of facts which we do not hesitate to call providential. Indeed, it is not today that the blessed tree of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was planted in our religious family. It was there from the very outset; it would be more exact to say that the Congregation was founded and as though planted in the divine Heart.<sup>212</sup>

After quoting texts and testimonies about the Founder's devotion to the Sacred Heart, Father Augier added:

The spirit of the Father has passed on to the sons as a precious heritage, and we can state that, along with the cult of Mary whose name we bear and of whom we are in charge of a large number of the sons of Mgr de Mazenod than love for the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This love has been steadily growing from the day that the confidence of the venerable Cardinal Archbishop of Paris, Mgr Guibert, called us to be the guardians of this beautiful shrine that gratitude, repentance and love have raised to the adorable Heart of Jesus. With Montmartre, our mission as apostles of the Sacred Heart became far more clear; it became a public reality. With the scapular of the Sacred Heart, it has been consecrated by the Church herself; it has become official. In entrusting the new scapular to us, Leo XIII has officially installed us in the special post of preaching devotion to the Sacred Heart of which this scapular is the symbol.<sup>213</sup>

The father of the family ended his letter with an urgent invitation:

...you shall be the apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Not content with studying and loving it yourselves, you will make it known and loved by those around you. You will speak of it to the faithful, you will speak of it especially to priests who, in their turn, will pass on to their people the light and flame they shall have received from you. You will show them the exceptional place that, in God's plan, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus ought now to occupy in the Church.<sup>214</sup>

According to Father Arbour, this "special mission" is in perfect continuity with what which Leo XII had entrusted to the Oblates when he approved their Constitutions and Rules:

After three quarters of a century of apostolate under the most varied forms, (our Congregation) can still, through its head, furnish a commentary authentically faithful to the will of Leo XII who assigned to it as a principal aim that of leading to the bosom of the Mother of Mercy men whom Jesus Christ, from the height of the Cross, wanted to give Mary as sons. The scapular of the Sacred Heart is therefore fully part of our family treasury...<sup>215</sup>

### **A strong example: Father Ovide Charlebois**

Two studies by Mgr Martin Lajeunesse, Apostolic Vicar of Keewatin, on Mgr Charlebois' devotion to the Sacred Heart, inform us about the widespread quality of this devotion.<sup>216</sup>

Already in the novitiate young Ovide was open to devotion of the Sacred Heart. From Montmatre Father Yenville gives support to the Master of Novices and invites him to transmit this devotion to his novices:

Commit your dear Brother Novices to celebrate with ever greater fervour the month of the Sacred Heart, and to devote themselves more and more not only to love but to the apostolate of Sacred Heart. May they always be flaming torches *lucerna ardens et lucens* to bring the fire of love for the Sacred Heart to the four corners of the New World.<sup>217</sup>

At the Scholasticate a small association was formed to which Father Charlebois remained linked even after his departure for the mission in the Canadian North-West. His friends kept him regularly to make him grow in this devotion.<sup>218</sup> A letter addressed to his brother Guillaume reveals his soul to us:

I see the following as a good practice: to live always hidden in the sacred wound of the Heart of Jesus, sheltered by the virginal mantle of Mary and by the wings of our good Guardian Angel, taking care to hide therein our Holy Father the Pope, our Superior General, all the members of the Congregation, then papa and all our parents, all sinners who will die during the day or night that is beginning, as well as the pagans and heretics who have some desire to be converted.<sup>219</sup>

During his monthly retreat of June 1888, he confides to his "cahier of retreat resolutions" the highest ideal of his life: martyrdom. He writes:

I desire nothing as much as the moment when I shall leave this earth. However, I do not ask you, O my God, to shorten my days; all I ask of you is that you accept each instant of my life as so many martyrdoms so that, if I am not worthy to shed my blood for you, my whole life will at least be a continuous martyrdom. Yes, my God, from today forward I want to begin living as a martyr. O Jesus, I therefore offer you the martyrdom of my life, and I sign this with my blood, so that you do not refuse it. I want not only my physical miseries to contribute to my martyrdom, but also and above all my moral miseries: temptations, dryness, distractions in prayer, pride, etc. So, I want this to be the main act of this day, that I begin living a martyrdom. O Sacred Heart, teach me to live like that for your whole life was a continual martyrdom.<sup>220</sup>

In this same cahier Father Ovide wrote in his hand and an act of consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which he recited daily before or after his Mass.<sup>221</sup>

Before starting his retreat in September 1888, he expressed his desire for holiness: "I want to try and put forth new effort to become a little more holy; for I am not holy enough to be a missionary... I would like to do what the saints did so that I can do the good they did".<sup>222</sup> And in his cahier of resolutions he wrote:

O good Heart of my Jesus, deign to give your grace on these few resolutions! They are not many, but they take in a great deal. I feel that I am not capable of accomplishing a millionth part of them without your help. But with your help, I am able to keep all of them and thus become a saint.<sup>223</sup>

All his writings, all his prayers, life and bring are permeated with this reality: make an offering to the Heart of Jesus, carry his cross out of love for him, accept little or great sacrifices for him, love him and make him loved, take refuge in him, seek and find happiness in him, joy and peace, attach his heart only to his Heart, console him by a greater love and an irreproachable conduct, smile at him when accepting the Lord's will, meet with his brothers and friends in his Heart, let himself be comforted and strengthened by him, offer him, like flowers of love, his sacrifice and sufferings for the salvation of souls, put his apostolate under his protection, accept for love of him solitude, fatigue of traveling, loneliness, ask him for the conversion of his people and give him thanks for conversions.



Everything converges to increase this devotion in him: "All that relates to the Sacred Heart pleases me and is precious in my eyes. I want so much to love him and to make him loved".<sup>224</sup>

As we already seen, his love for the Sacred Heart is often mingled with his desire for holiness and martyrdom:

Since Easter, I am absolutely alone. It goes without saying that this is painful. Often I have to make acts of sacrifice to the Sacred Heart to be able to keep up my courage. I had the ambition of being a living martyr: now I think it is through solitude that the good Lord wants to martyr me. That will not be the most cruel martyrdom in the physical order; but, in the moral order, that will be the most painful.<sup>225</sup>

Bishop Lajeunesse writes:

The heart of Jesus is at the origin of all his deeds and seals them with its mark. When leaving a mission, it is to Him that the Vicar Apostolic entrusts the "courageous and devoted missionaries" he is leaving there in solitude. In the beginning of a year, he makes "a complete offering" of his whole being to Him and to Mary Immaculate at the same time; his New Year wishes are laid under his divine protection; his letters end with an affectionate which to a blessing drawn from the Heart of the Master. The entire career of the first Vicar Apostolic of Keewatin has then been invariably marked with a tender and painful devotion to Christ Jesus who is 'meek and humble heart'. That was the secret of his fervour and his apostolate, the revealing standard of his piety. When, as people were waiting for a pastoral visit and all eyes were impatiently searching the horizon to see the episcopal canoe appear, if the flag of the Sacred Heart was flying proudly on the distant boat, there was no more any doubt: it was certainly Bishop Charlebois who was coming visible in the twilight...<sup>226</sup>

### **Oblation and the Sacred Heart**

The above mentioned biography of Father Gabriel Bosse gives us on a given page the intense experience of the intimate relationship of this Oblate and the Sacred Heart during the ten months that he was an assistant priest at Revigny:

For him this was the time of a choice grace. In his distress, he turned to the side of Jesus where his Heart was. What a sublime vision! He was the Christ, the lion of Juda, in the marvelous energy of his young thirty-three years of age, in the fullness of his strength, and yet he says he is sad, sad, sad unto death: *Tristis est anima mea usque as mortem* (Mt 26:38). And this martyrdom of the Victim of Gethsemane was on account of the world's sins. In every direction that this divine Patient turned his gaze, into the past, the present, the future, there was sin, the survival of sin, the accumulation of sin was killing his heart. In regard to this spectacle, what a shame for himself, the Oblate thought, if he lets himself be defeated by boredom, hurts, disappointments, lassitude to which his ministry condemned him! One evil, only one evil in the world ought to sadden him, namely, sin that is committed... 'No, no, it is not a matter of regretting certain satisfactions when the Sacred Heart is asking me to associate myself to his agony!' He therefore accepted with resignation this rude time he received from a friend the *Vie d'un Apôtre du Sacré-Coeur*... He read every chapter with deep emotion and took the resolution to imitate, as much as possible, the magnificent examples that the chaplain of Montmartre, his brother in religion, had left to all priest-apostles. A holy card was joined to this shipment. On the back of it was urgent appeal of Jesus: "I am cold! I thirst! I am hungry! Tell my good priests to warm me with their love, to give me souls, souls, souls!... Did I not die for love of them!... All the treasures of my Heart are open... Oh! carry the call of my Heart to my priest whom I love so much! My priest! my other self, my *alter ego*!..." I don't

know what spark suddenly rose from this hearth that grace was pleased to look after under the gaze of the young amazed assistant priest; great ardour resulted and the cult of the Heart of Jesus furnished his piety with new food and his zeal with a new elan. He was ready now for every fruitful enterprise for God's glory and the salvation of soul.<sup>227</sup>

In exercising his ministry, Father Gabriel showed remarkable tact and a supernatural outlook on reality. His biographer comments:

It seemed evident that a supernatural power held the abbe Bosse at the height of his grave obligations. This was commonly attributed -- and on this he agreed with his confreres -- to his devotion to the Sacred Heart. He drew energy there from and this energy in his life was his *primum mobile*. The motor energy of metal or textile factors comes from a hidden centre reservoir which transmits it to all the equipment, makes it function and puts it in motion and makes it produce an admirable diversity of things. So too the divine flame that sprang from the Heart of Jesus communicated to him elan of will for virtue, for the apostolate.<sup>228</sup>

Just like the spirit of oblation that characterizes the Oblate, this devotion to the Sacred Heart is the source of apostolic fruitfulness. The following anecdote, found in the papers of Gabriel, is witness to this:

A poor priest, dying of boredom and disgust, wanted to leave an impious parish wherein he had uselessly spent the ten best years of his life. His director advised him to knock on the doors of the Tabernacle and await the divine Prisoner's reply. He thought he heard something like groaning and word of tender reproach: 'You are going away and I am condemned to remain!' His heart broke, he burst into tears, and promised to share his Master's lot. A happy promise which was soon rewarded with un hoped for conversions! It is at the foot of the altar, in the Heart of Jesus, that the assistant priest of Commercy went frequently to renew his provision of devotedness to the salvation of souls. He had the joy of erecting inside the parish church, above the high altar, a monumental statue of the Sacred Heart. He loved to contemplate it and it seemed to him heard an urgent appeal to holiness. 'How can claim to sanctify others, he cried, if I myself am not a holy priest...'<sup>229</sup>

The last months of Father Gabriel Bosse are described by his biographer in a manner that united the spirit of oblation and the devotion to the Sacred Heart. Here are some passages: "His zeal carried him to make the cult of the Sacred Heart radiate in the whole parish"... And again:

To make up for my misery, I want to zealously promote your glory and preach reparation to all souls of good will. I will show them your heart wounded by men's iniquities and I will say to them with a holy passion: 'Let us love Jesus to console him for his love that is not recognized and betrayed. Let us love Jesus to make him forget the ingratitude of those who do not recognize him...' Yes, I want to give witness of my gratitude for our ineffable goodness by immolating myself daily in your service and for the salvation of my brothers, the poor sinners...<sup>230</sup>

The author then quotes from Father Gabriel's correspondence:

Each day brings us near to the beatifying opening of the Heart of Jesus! May we draw ever more the quantity of faith and trust that will enable us to do miracles! Let us suppress everything that we may have as personal. I was thinking of this the other day when I was writing a child's signature in the register. Everything went well when the child would allow himself to be guided by his hand, but the least effort he made by himself to contribute to the signature hindered me and made it unreadable. Isn't that our defect? Do we not at times think we are capable of directing God's hand as the canvass of our

soul in the image of his Jesus?<sup>231</sup>

And again:

On the last day of your retreat I come to tell you: be the angel of Gethsemane! Today, as at the time of his passion, Jesus is abandoned; his blood flows in vain on the altar; his friends too seem to be sleeping some distance away, they do not dare to do violence to his love and stay at his side and share his anguish. It is easy to obey when the Master says: *Sedite hic*, take a rest! But if the victim takes up the terrible reprisals of Justice and suffering becomes intolerable. The cup of mankind's iniquity is flowing over, Judas is drawing near, that is too much! Does it not seem that Jesus alone could not have held out? The guilty creature would not have rights enough on this agony if it did not associate itself there to, and the Heart of Jesus wants the creature to have full merit... My poor imagination represents to me Jesus in the sacrament of the altar, abandoned by his own, sustained and fortified by the little victim prostrate humbly at his feet, pleading with him to support himself on its weakness. Can the Heart of Jesus refuse his victims and not compensate them with love and accept their reparation? He who later accepted the help of Simon of Cyrene and of St. Veronia never refuses the cooperation of a repentant creature who, encouraged by Mary, would like to show him its love...<sup>232</sup>

## Conclusion

One of the aspects of the imitation of Jesus Christ that has entered the Oblate family since the Founder therefore is "imitating the love of his heart". Devotion to this Heart has become for us a special and characteristic devotion.

Our Congregation lived this relationship not simply as a devotion, but also as a special mission that consists in making this Heart known and loved. Not only did our missionaries spread this devotion and love to the four corners of the earth, but they themselves lived their whole life in the shelter of this Heart, drawing from it the strength to make it a gift of love from their brothers.

In this regard, we have found again an ideal of holiness and lived martyrdom as an imitation of the love of the Sacred Heart; an ideal which consists of making one's whole life, even in its smallest details, an offering to this heart which is burning with love.

This love for the Sacred Heart is a means of continuing the work of redemption. Through the intimate relationship that is established between the Oblate and the Sacred Heart, Jesus continues, in his Oblate, his work of redemption; through this love the Oblate can become "another redeemer", a true presence of Christ who saves the world in every age.

This love is also the source of an extraordinary apostolic fruitfulness, as the life of many Oblates testifies.

## IV. Jesus Christ in the Meditations of Father Boisramé

The already mentioned work of Father Prosper Boisramé, *Méditations pour tous les jours de l'année à l'usage des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée* (Tours, 1887), merits special attention in study of our spiritual tradition. It consists of three volumes of meditations that have served in the formation of generations of Oblates. In representing this work to Superior General Father Fabre, Father Soullier says it is "a family book which corresponds to a real need and fills an important lack"<sup>233</sup> and he adds:

Today we possess a complete course of meditations filled with doctrine and piety, especially made for us, and yet bearing the deep imprint of that which in the Church makes up the particular physiognomy of our Institute.<sup>234</sup>

So as not be too long, I shall limit myself to the first volume which treats of the

first part of the liturgical year and includes the meditations for the months of December and January to March. I shall go through these meditations and single out that which pertains to our topic; I shall seek to uncover the face of Christ that the Oblate is called to discover and the relationship he is called to his Oblate vocation.<sup>235</sup>

In the preliminary meditation -- November 29<sup>th</sup> -- which presents the method of oraison that will serve as a model for the others, one item ought to be underlined:

*Unite oneself to Our Lord, in order to appear in his Name before his Father... O Eternal Father, look at me only in the Person of the Saviour, the only one in whom you delight. Respice in faciem Christi tui (Ps 83:10). It is through him, with him and in him that I dare to present my prayer to you. An you, O Jesus, hide me in your wounds, so that the heavenly Father, seeing me only through these glorious scars and in consideration of your infinite merits, may have compassion on my deep misery; for, alas! I am quite miserable, and I fear I would arouse his anger rather than excite his commiseration if I were to present myself all alone before him.*<sup>236</sup>

## December

The meditations for the month of December treat mainly of three subjects: Mary, the Oblate identity, and the mystery of the Nativity.

Meditation XIII explains our name of Oblates. After giving the etymology of this word, Father Boisramé links it to the Person of the Saviour:

Oh! what respect we ought to have for this name Oblate! It is your name, but the Saviour of the world bore it before you did, and, seven centuries before his coming, Isaiah already gave it to him: *Oblatus est quia ipse voluit*: 'He was offered up, he was Oblate, because he himself wanted that' (Is 53:7). St. Paul is no less explicit: *Sic et Christus semel oblatus est ad multorum exhaurienda peccata*: 'Thus Christ was offered, became Oblate, victim, to erase the sins of the world' (Heb 9:28). Jesus, then, was humiliated, immolated, sacrificed, died, he was Oblate and he is still Oblate in the sacrament of his love, as the Apostles says, to expiate the sins of the human race. Are you Oblate like the first of all Oblates, like Jesus? Are you, as he, a voluntary victim, knowing how to sacrifice parents, home country, ease, health, life to continue the work of works, the work of the redemption of the human race?<sup>237</sup>

The meditations that follow (XIV-XXII) continue the same subject. We will cover them briefly.

The Oblate's oblation must be voluntary like that of Christ. In quoting a passage from the *Imitation of Christ*, the author defines Christ's oblation in a manner that is reminiscent of the words found in the Preface of our Rules:

'I offered myself voluntarily to God in such a way that nothing remained in me that was not included in my sacrifice' (Imit. IV, 8). Here, the divine Oblate tells you himself what his oblation was: a complete, entire, oblation without any reservations. Joys of heaven, wealth of the earth, rest and ease in life, honour, reputation, life itself: he offered everything, gave all, sacrificed all without counting for a return. Will your oblation be entire? And, if it was, is it still so?<sup>238</sup>

Christ's oblation is perpetual: it reached its peak at the death on the cross and is perpetuated until the end of time in the Eucharistic Jesus "who offers himself unceasingly to God his Father on every point of the globe".<sup>239</sup>

After having shown that we owe our whole vocation as religious Oblates to Jesus Christ himself<sup>240</sup>, Father Boisramé considered more closely certain elements of our tradition:

- *the Oblate greeting (Laudetur Jesus Christus et Maria Immaculata! Amen!)* Among

other things, Father Boisramé underlines here the intimate relationship that ought to exist between the Oblate and Jesus, his Saviour.<sup>241</sup>

- *the Oblate motto (Evangelizare pauperibus)* shows Jesus Christ as "the prototype of the Oblate missionary": "Like he, you must be prepared for the great work of the apostolate among the poor".<sup>242</sup> The soul and motto of the Oblate are the same as those of Jesus himself: "He has sent me to evangelize the poor". After explaining who the poor are to whom Christ is sent to preach the good news, and why Jesus preferred to preach the Gospel to the poor, the author asks Oblates: "Do you have the spirit of Jesus Christ? Is your preference, as it was his and as your Oblate vocation obliges you to, the little and poor people to the great and rich of this world?"<sup>243</sup>

- *The symbolic figures that accompany the Oblate motto* underline the intimate union between the Oblate and Jesus crucified. The most important of these figures is certainly the cross. The author writes:

As an Oblate, you carry the cross on your chest, you see it on the coat of arms of your family. Never separate yourself from the cross; it will be your book. A sword, an ongoing preaching, a consolation, a book in which you will find the science of sciences, the science of holiness, and which will enable you to stay with the Apostle of the Gentiles: 'I professed to know nothing else among you except Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ crucified' (1 Cor 2:2).<sup>244</sup>

In regard to the *staff and sponge*, Father Boisramé notes that Jesus' cry "I thirst" also means "his ardent desire for the glory of his divine Father, for the conversion of sinners, the sanctification of the just, the establishment and kingdom of his Church" and he reminds Oblates that the aim of their vocation is to conquer souls for Jesus Christ.<sup>245</sup> The figure of the *lance* gives the author the opportunity to speak of the Heart of Jesus, pierced by "the lance of sin, infidelity, ingratitude, resistance to grace." He asks Oblates to look with confidence and love at the wounded Heart of Jesus and to find there their dwelling and rest.<sup>246</sup> The *aureola* reminds the Oblate that Jesus is "the true light who illumines every man come into this world" (Jn 1:9), and that the Oblate is called to walk in the footsteps of this Master who wants him to be a light to the world (cf. Mt 5:14) in order to "dissipate the dense darkness that covers the world".<sup>247</sup> In the *rock* he sees "the image of firmness or solidity with which the cross ought to be planted in our heart"<sup>248</sup>, and in the *braces of the cross* the means by which we ought to consolidate the cross in our hearts and in the hearts of others.<sup>249</sup> Father Boisramé asks:

Is the cross unshakably implanted in our heart? Do we belong to the number of those who belong to Jesus Christ because they have crucified their flesh with its vices and concupiscences (cf. Gal 5:24)? Are we crucified to the world and its perverse maxims? Do we remove the neighbor from sin and the occasions of sin? Do we lead him to virtue? Can we say that we make Jesus Christ reign from the wood of the cross both over ourselves and over those whom he has given us as brothers in religion or whom he has charged us to evangelize: *Regnavit a ligno Deus*.<sup>250</sup>

These emblems "all tell us that they are the memorial of the sufferings Jesus Christ endured for us, not only during his passion, but throughout his whole life..."<sup>251</sup>; they invite us to imitate our divine Master by suffering patiently and joyfully with him in order to reign gloriously and eternally with him.<sup>252</sup>

Meditations XXIV-XXX deepen the mystery of Christmas. Meditation XXVI contemplates "Jesus in the crib". God and Man, our mediator and model.<sup>253</sup> Meditation XXVII contemplates his as "adored by the Angels at birth".<sup>254</sup>

When speaking of the shepherds of Bethlehem, Father Boisramé compares their amazed adoration before the Child in the crib to that of an Oblate before the Blessed Sacrament and then comes back to the idea of oblation: in their poverty, the shepherds offered Jesus their hearts and the humble presents their poverty allowed them to make.

You have made your oblation. Do you not take back from Jesus what you gave to him unconditionally? How many gifts you can still give them each day! Are there not the poor to comfort, at least in regard to the spiritual domain? Are there not humiliations and frustrations to support with patience and longanimity? Have you no faults to correct? How many presents you could offer that you have not offered to Jesus! From what merit and blessings you have deprived yourselves! From now on, belong totally to Jesus. Yes, my beloved Jesus, you belong to me and from now on I belong totally to you: *Dilectus meus mihi, et ego illi* (Cant 2:16).<sup>255</sup>

Let us underline here the reciprocity of the oblation: usually we have a different presentation - we are called to offer ourselves to Jesus as he offers himself to his Father.

In Meditation XXX, the shepherds are the models of the Oblates in regard to the preaching of the good news.

Their heart was afire. They cannot contain the divine fire that is enflaming them: they must take known and loved the One whom they know and love. That is why they speak of him with such joy to those they meet: they commit them to go also, find and adore him; they want to make them sharers of their joy. Missionary Oblate, by vocation you are an apostle of the good news.<sup>256</sup>

In the meditation for the New Year the idea of oblation returns. On this day Jesus begins "the oblation of his precious blood which flows under the circumcision knife to wash your sins and those of all men".<sup>257</sup> Here is the response: "I also, O Jesus, want to be an Oblate. I am ready to shed by sweat, and, if necessary, my blood in order to win and form true adorers for you".<sup>258</sup>

Reflecting on the meaning and value of time, Father Boisramé states that "time is worth as much as the blood of Jesus Christ":

What were we on account of our personal sins? Still the objects of God's wrath, the children of perdition worthy of eternal punishment. What did Jesus Christ do? He shed his blood, and this blood is the price by which we have been purchased in every moment of our existence. The blood of Jesus is the money that equals the value of time.<sup>259</sup>

## January

The meditations for the month of January start with considerations on time, a deepening of the mystery of the Epiphany, the characteristic virtues of an Oblate, certain Oblate prayers, and, after reflecting on the anniversary of the Congregation's founding, they focus on the hidden life of Jesus at Nazareth.

In one of the meditations on the Epiphany (V-VIII), Father Boisramé speaks of the oblation of the magi kings and links it to our oblation, seeing in the gifts of the three kings the three religious vows of the Oblate:

No doubt the remembrance of the beautiful day your oblation will already come to mind. You have not forgotten what you were told in the past, namely, that the offering of gold represents, according to the holy Fathers, the vow of poverty; the offering of myrrh, the vow of chastity; and the offering of incense, the vow of obedience. As an Oblate religious, by making your vows you have enriched what the magi kings did. What happiness in having sacrificed and immolated yourself unconditionally on the altar of divine love, in having offered yourself thus to the Lord, as the magi offered their gifts, through the immaculate hands of Mary!<sup>260</sup>

Since the Heart of Jesus does not let itself be outdone in generosity, he granted the magi the gift of wisdom (in return for their gold), of prayer (in return for their incense) and of

love for mortification and suffering (in return for their myrrh). He will likewise render to the Oblate everything that the latter will have given him and done for him out of love. Father Boisramé asks:

Do you offer yourself to him constantly the gold of a charity that is ardent for him and effective for your neighbour? Do you offer him the incense of attentive and fervent prayer? Do you offer him the myrrh of Christian and religious mortification? Plead with him to give you, as to the magi, a practical love for these virtues?<sup>261</sup>

Meditation IX presents the perfect imitation of the Master. Even though every Christian is called to be, like Jesus Christ

dead to the world, to its wealth, pleasures, honours; dead to his relatives and even more to oneself, he is more perfect who walks for fully in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. Who has this honour and happiness? You yourself. Jesus Christ was born poor; he lived, he died poor, even though he was Lord and Master of heaven and earth. You are poor as he...<sup>262</sup>

Meditation XV (p. 185-191) offers reflections on the Name of Jesus, its meaning, greatness and effects. If in the old law God took names of majesty, terror and omnipotence, "in the new law, having taken on our mortality, he assumes a name full of kindness and love, the name of Saviour".<sup>263</sup> While the great of this world have borne pompous names which to obtain cost tears, blood and death,

if, in the adorable name of Jesus, you find tears and blood, they are the tears and blood that he himself shed for the redemption and salvation of the human race. 'With his own blood Christ acquired for us eternal redemption' (Heb 9:12). He alone worked this spiritual redemption, he alone sustained its burden, he alone filled up the entire measure and extent.<sup>264</sup>

After he has proven that Jesus merits the name he bears<sup>265</sup>, Father Boisramé concludes: "You bear the glorious names of Christian, religious Oblate of Mary Immaculate, perhaps also of levite or of priest: do you deserve to bear them as the Son of God merited to bear the name of Jesus".<sup>266</sup> The meditation ends with the effect of the name Jesus: light, nourishment, remedy.<sup>267</sup>

Meditations XVI-XVII relate fraternal charity, the characteristic virtue of the Oblate, to the will of Jesus Christ, because this is his *commandment*. It is to be supernatural, universal, active, foreseeing, compassionate and patient, constant and generous,

Like the charity of Jesus Christ who loved his own to the end, who, from the height of the cross, prayed for those who were making him die, and who, after that, had the right to say to us: 'Love each other as I myself have loved you'.<sup>268</sup>

Meditation XVIII explains the prayer that has used in our tradition from the beginning *O Jesus vivens in Maria*. Though written by M. Olier, this prayer expresses well the traits of our spirituality. In it the Oblate is called:

- to reproduce in his conduct "the spirit of holiness" of Jesus, "the spirit of recollection, prayer, humility, obedience, kindness, zeal for the salvation of souls".<sup>269</sup>

- to imitate the "real and true virtues" that Our Lord Jesus Christ personally practised: "virtues that are real, interior, true, unshakable as the rock on which the Church is built".<sup>270</sup>

- to learn from the perfection of Jesus' life from his examples and doctrine the ways of salvation, to taste and follow what is the most perfect in the Lord's ways, namely, the evangelical counsels.<sup>271</sup>

- to be in communion with the mysteries of Jesus' life (Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection and Ascension) and with the graces these mysteries merited him.<sup>272</sup>

- for the glory of the Father, to triumph over all powers that could turn him away from his innocence and salvation: the goods of this earth, pleasures, pride..., powers which the Oblate renounced by means of the evangelical counsels.<sup>273</sup>

The flight of the Holy Family into Egypt, a feast proper to the Congregation, reminds us of a profound mystery: that of obedience, from where the Oblate ought to draw his strength:

You have received one or several obediences. Being a religious, a missionary, you can at any time receive others. How have you up to now accepted the changes of domicile, climate, language, habits and customs, in a word, this life at times so painful and quite capable of provoking natural repulsion? Did you, like the Holy Family and a great number of other Oblates, generously, immediately and joyfully leave everything and go to where God was calling you and wanted to be? Offer yourself again to the Lord in regard to all kinds of life and all the changes that your vocation as a religious and missionary comprises.<sup>274</sup>

Meditations XXII-XXV are dedicated to the memory of the founding of our Congregation. Christ is presented as exemplar and model. He is the model of the regularity that should animate the Oblate's life<sup>275</sup>, of his holiness<sup>276</sup>, of the detachment he ought to practice in regard to his human family<sup>277</sup>, of his modesty.<sup>278</sup>

Then come meditations on particular aspects of Jesus' life. Ignatian spirituality, with which generations of Oblates came into contact through the practice of the spiritual exercises, insists on imitation of Jesus' life. Our text here considers some traits concerning Jesus' life as a Child and Adolescent, his "hidden life"<sup>279</sup>, his being found in the Temple<sup>280</sup>, his submission to Joseph and Mary<sup>281</sup>, his work as a carpenter<sup>282</sup>, his growth in wisdom, age and grace.<sup>283</sup>

## February

The meditations for the month of February begin with the mystery of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple; then focus in depth on the topic of the vows and the Rule in the Oblate life, introduce the reader into the time of the Lent and underline the spiritual meaning of the most important anniversaries for an Oblate.

In presenting the oblation of Jesus in the Temple, Meditation II invites us to read this event as related to Jesus' passion: "The Oblation of Jesus in the Temple and on Calvary, such is the most perfect model, the most striking prototype of the oblation of a Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate".<sup>284</sup> This oblation has three characteristics which ought to be found in that of the Oblate also: it is prompt, entire, irrevocable.

The prophecy of old Simeon in regard to Jesus is also verified in the life of the Oblate:

Jesus is set up for the ruin and misfortune of the incredulous, the hardened, the impenitent, who reject and despise his doctrine; but he is set up for the resurrection and eternal happiness of those who follow him and profit from his instruction and example. He, goodness and holiness itself, is contradicted in all kinds of way in regard to his teaching, moral behaviour, in his Church, in his apostles and disciples. Who knows this better than the Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate?<sup>285</sup>

What emerges from these meditations is that every detail of Jesus' life, and especially his passion, is presented to the Oblate for imitation.

Jesus who prays in the garden of Olives is the model for our prayer: its characteristics are humility, surrender to the will of the Father by an act of self-renunciation, perseverance and charity.<sup>286</sup>



The perfect model presented for our meditation is Jesus in his passion.

It is to him that every morning you say, when you say the prayer we use: 'Eternal Word, I adore you as my Redeemer, who, being equal to the Father, became by your Mother like unto us. You became the servant of all, living in poverty and obedience unto a shameful death.' How does it happen that you think so little of the infinite majesty and holiness of this divine Saviour? that you understand so little what you say to him when you begin each of your days? that you are inattentive when you make the sign of the cross? in assisting at the holy sacrifice of the Mass? in looking at and kissing your Oblate crucifix? How come you love the crucified Jesus so little.<sup>287</sup>

In Jesus who withdraws into the desert for forty days we see "the divine model who teaches us to withdraw, we too, into solitude in order to busy ourselves there more freely in the exercises of the interior life".<sup>288</sup> "Our Founder wants us to love this solitude passionately: *Solitudinem etiam vehementer diligent* (Constitutions). Jesus in the desert preaches this solitude to us".<sup>289</sup>

Certain meditations treat of the celebration of anniversaries that are of greater significance for Oblates: baptism, novitiate, oblation, and for Oblate priestly ordination and first Mass.<sup>290</sup> The remembrance of his oblation expresses a particular relationship between the Oblate and Christ:

Since a long time you had heard it said to you: 'The Spouse is coming, go forth to meet him' (Mt 25:6). Since a long time too you have been going forth to the Spouse with all the thoughts of your mind, all the aspirations of your heart and all the actions of your generous will. Finally the meeting took place on the day countless times of your oblation. You gave yourself irrevocably to Jesus Christ and to the Congregation, and Jesus Christ and the Congregation gave themselves irrevocably to you.<sup>291</sup>

Likewise for the first Mass:

Jesus happy to obey you, desirous to attach you irrevocably to his service and to seal your priestly consecration with an indissoluble alliance, lavished choicest favours and ineffable consolations on you, so that you said: 'That is enough, Lord! I have found the one my soul loves; I possess him and I will not allow him to go away (Cant 3:4); My beloved to me and I to him (Cant. 2:16); Everything that I have, of Jesus, is yours and all that you have is mine (cf. Jn 17:10). To die thousands of times rather than ever cease loving you: *Tu in me et ego in te: sic nos pariter in unum permanere concede...*' Perhaps, since you were more free in the days that followed your first Mass, it was given to you to taste at length the infinite delights and unspeakable happiness that the Heart of Jesus is pleased, even in this valley of tears, to shower upon those who like the Apostles have left everything for love of him.<sup>292</sup>

## March

A long series of meditations during the month of March treats of sin under a number of aspects and of its many effects.<sup>293</sup> Two of these meditations deal more closely of the relationship between sin and the religious, especially the Oblate, to whom these texts are addressed.<sup>294</sup> The author cautions against every danger of being removed by sin from Jesus Christ and his grace. If there is so much insistence on this point, it is because sin is seen as the exact opposite of imitating Christ and his virtues.

A meditation on St. Joseph brings together the happiness of the Oblate and that of this saint:

Does not your happiness as an Oblate resemble the happiness of St.

Joseph? Is not Mary your patroness and Mother? No matter how poor your house or mission may be, do you not possess Jesus close to you, day and night? Is it not under his eyes that you pray, work, suffer?<sup>295</sup>

Linked to the meditations on sin, other meditations treat the topic of hell (under two titles: "hell of the body" and "hell of the soul")<sup>296</sup>, the return of the prodigal son<sup>297</sup>, and particular judgment.<sup>298</sup> The language used is that of the period.

A meditation on the Incarnation of the Word<sup>299</sup> underlines the main points of this mystery: it is defined as a "mystery of emptying" and a "mystery of love" in which Christ gives us an example of humility and humiliation. Father Boisramé writes:

In giving it to us, he gave us a saviour to save that which was perishing; a mediator to reconcile heaven and earth; a victim who all alone could repair the insults hurled against the divine majesty; a lawgiver, a master of whom he says: "This is my beloved Son: listen to him"; a model, for only they will be the predestined who will conform to this divine exemplar.<sup>300</sup>

Among the devotions related to the passion is that linked to the feast of the holy lance and the holy nails of our Lord Jesus Christ. To this Father Boisramé dedicates one meditation:

What does the wound made to Jesus' sacred Heart by the soldier's lance teach us? It makes us discover the sovereign love of this divine Heart for us; it makes us understand the kind of love we ought to have for him.<sup>301</sup>

But it is especially in regard to the nails by which Jesus was attached to the cross that this meditation invites Oblates to imitate Christ:

The religious, consequently the Oblate, ought to be the living image of Jesus Christ, a voluntary victim immolating himself for the glory of his divine Father. Do you immolate yourself with Jesus on the wood of the cross, on the altar of sacrifice? You attached yourself generously thereto by the vows of religion of which the nails by which Jesus was attached to the cross are an emblem: are you always a faithful observer of these solemn oaths? Jesus suffered on the cross. What are your sufferings compared to his? Do you bear them with patience, meekness, joy and perseverance? Do not forget that, if salvation came from the Saviour's wounds, your physical and moral sufferings, if you bear them as a true disciple of Jesus Christ, will be greatly rewarded in another life: 'for the short and light moment of affliction we suffer in this life produces in us an eternal quantity of sovereign and incomparable glory' (2 Cor 4:17).<sup>302</sup>

The same comparison is made in the next meditation on the Holy Shroud:

Are you dead and buried with Jesus Christ? Are you dead to sin, wealth, sense pleasures, self-will? Have you fully renounced your former worldly and sensual life in order to love only the life of Jesus Christ? Do you love leading a humble and hidden life, a life of solitude, recollection and prayer? Only on these conditions will the fire of divine love be kindled and spread in your heart.<sup>303</sup>

The meditation on the five wounds like wise underlines aspects which reveal a deep particular relationship to Jesus crucified: Jesus was wounded on account of our sins and his wounds tell us his love:

Let us contemplate the pierced side of Jesus. What does it tell us? In the infinite tenderness of the Heart of Jesus for us, its indefectible generosity: through this wound this adorable heart shed the last drops of his blood for us. While he could have redeemed us with a single drop of his blood, he shed all of it. *Cum gutta posset, unda redemit*, St. Bernard says. What do the wounds of

the hands, the feet, the side of Jesus tell us? They say that he loves us, that he loves us with an indescribable love, that he cannot, in spite of his omnipotence, love us more. How can we be insensitive to so much love? O Jesus, in the future we want to love you in the fullest measure of our heart. We want to love our brothers like that too, especially those who have offended us, as you have loved us, we who were in the past your declared enemies.<sup>304</sup>

The wounds of Jesus are mouths that plead for us, a refuge in our troubles, an asylum in our tribulations, a remedy for the weakness of our soul. They also are "inexhaustible sources where we can seek out the graces of salvation".<sup>305</sup>

In regard to the Oblate habit, Father Boisramé recalls the prayer said at the taking of the habit, a prayer each Oblate repeats every morning when putting on his habit! every day he is invited to put on the Christian man, the spirit, the sentiments, charity especially, if Jesus Christ: "May the Lord clothe me in the new man who is created according to God in justice and genuine holiness".<sup>306</sup>

Finally, the last meditation in this first volume tells the Oblate where he can find the features and virtues of Christ whom he is called to imitate: in Holy Scripture which he must read, meditate, study in depth. He writes:

Are we tempted, overwhelmed, desolate? We find in the holy writings countless examples of patience, reasons for encouragement, joy and consolation in the lives of saints, especially the example and promises of the Holiest One of the saints, Jesus Christ Our Lord and Saviour.<sup>307</sup>

Hence the obligation for an Oblate to study each day the holy Scriptures.

## **Conclusion**

Even though our analysis is restricted to the first volume of Father Boisramé's meditations, it is sufficient to show how the Christological spirituality that the author wants to transmit to his brothers is in perfect continuity with that of the Founder and the Oblate tradition from the beginning.

The aspects that these meditations underline are: Christ the Saviour and Redeemer, "Oblate" and victim for salvation of men.

Called to imitate the oblation of Christ which is perpetuated in the Eucharist, the Oblate is called to be himself a voluntary victim, ready to sacrifice everything in order to continue the "work of works" that is the redemption of the human race. He is also called to imitate Christ, the "prototype of the Oblate missionary" in the work of evangelization, especially of the poor. He is finally called to imitate Christ in the sacrifice of the cross, with the aim of walking in his footsteps in order to win souls for him.

Called to resemble the Master perfectly, the Oblate is called to imitate his virtues: every detail in Jesus' life, from his incarnation till his passion and death on the cross, is presented to the Oblate for imitation. To each moment of Christ's life is linked a virtue that is to be imitated, from the humility that Jesus offers in the mystery of his incarnation to the perfect gift of his life that is accomplished in his passion and death.

## **Conclusion**

We have come to the end of our road. Partial conclusions were expressed at the end of each chapter. What is to be added? I shall limit myself to a few considerations.

In an attempt to make a synthesis of our Christological spirituality, I return to our old directory for noviciates and scholasticates, quoted at the end of the first chapter, in regard to "the devotions proper to the members of the Society". Here is what this text says to those who want to join our family:

Since the first end of our Society is to imitate as perfectly as possible Our Lord Jesus Christ, it is easy to understand that novices' devotion should focus above all on the sacred Person of our adorable Saviour. All they should plan for during their testing period is to establish in their heart the reign of Jesus Christ and to come to the point where they live only from his divine life so that they can say with St. Paul: 'It is no longer I who live, but Jesus Christ lives in me: *vivo ego, jam non ego. etc.*' It is important that the Divine Saviour continues, so to speak, in each one of them the life he led on earth, a life of innocence, purity, mortification and humility, in a word, a life of all the virtues.<sup>308</sup>

The person of Jesus Christ is presented as the center, the heart of our life and our spirituality. According to the text quoted, the configuration of the Oblate to Christ, which is achieved by the imitation of his virtues, is the essential condition so that Christ can continue his life and work in the world.

The directory also suggests means to achieve this ideal, to establish and further this "heavenly life":

The novices will establish and unceasingly further this heavenly life through piety, oraison, meditation of the sacred Scriptures, reading of good books, practice of ejaculatory prayers, performing good works. In this way they will run in the way of perfection and finally arrive at the maturity of Jesus Christ.<sup>309</sup>

Even though means to achieve it are required, this devotion is not a "technique to be learned; before it is the fruit of the work of the will or of exercise, it is a devotion "wholly of love":

This devotion towards our divine Saviour ought to be a devotion wholly of love and have its centre in the heart; and this love ought to be a tender love, lively and generous, that knows no limits and takes on the character of a passion for the One who is its divine object. For novices, then, Jesus Christ will be the first object of their affection, the dearest occupation of their thoughts and the most favorite topic of their conversations. They will keep him constantly in mind; his name alone will recall the fondest memories; they will have it frequently on their lips and bar it engraved on their hearts. This sacred name will be like honey in their mouths, harmony to their ear, a holy rejoicing in their soul. They will not be able to taste anything except Jesus and anything will become boredom and indifferent for them if they do not find Jesus therein. Finally, everything that reminds them of this divine Saviour will be dear and precious to them.<sup>310</sup>

I think this text gives the sense and soul of the special relationship that ought to be established between the Oblate and Jesus Christ.

The Congress on the charism of the Founder today underlined the centrality of this relationship in Oblate life. That is clearly evident in the synthesis made by Father Zago: "During the Congress, Christ was found to be the centre and force of Oblate life. A personal experience of Christ the Saviour impels the Oblate to share him with others".<sup>311</sup>

After it stressed the need of a new conversion to Christ and to the Church<sup>312</sup>, this synthesis expresses some reactions of the congress participants on this matter:

Christ is perceived and experienced as the One who lives and sets free; as the Saviour who has "captured" us, who calls us to conversion and whom we wish to make known; as the risen Saviour, the incarnation of the Father's love for all men. In this love of Christ the root of the personal apostolic dynamism of the Founder as well as the source of the Oblate charism are found. Christ the Saviour is better perceived as Liberator today... But we must surpass a temporal messianism: Christ introduces us to the Father and not only to liberation on earth. Christ is present in the world, he is inside human history... He became incarnate, even in the positive aspirations that we can

discern and encourage... Nothing is saved if it is not assumed... Christ constitutes the central point of Oblate renewal. Some, however, ask themselves whether we even believe in Christ. Because of these doubts a basic question must be posed: has the Christology of the Founder evolved so radically in our day that we have to change our attitudes towards it? This question must also be posed in regard to the Church and the priesthood. Several stressed that it is not a matter of the idea of Christ but of the Person of Christ, experienced personally and in community, and proclaimed by the Word, deeds, one's entire life.<sup>313</sup>

Among "the most elements for the evaluation and renewal of the life and works of the Congregation today", the final declaration of the Congress assigned the first place to the Person of Jesus Christ:

a) CHRIST: The primary place of Christ may appear so evident to some that it seems useless to make mention of it. And yet we felt - during the course of the discussions and in prayer - the need to be re-converted to Christ (this is not something that is acquired once and for all!), that is to say the need for a personal, vital experience of Christ so as to live from him and to be able to say "who Christ is", the Saviour and Liberator from sin and from the effects of sin in the world. This is true on the personal and community levels. Every renewal of the Congregation requires first a re-conversion to Christ that is as true and total as possible.<sup>314</sup>

Not only "to live from him" but "to become other Jesus Christ", as we have seen. Constitution 2 well expresses this typical trait of our spirituality:

The desire to cooperate with him draws us to know him more deeply, to identify with him live in us. We strive to produce in ourselves the pattern of his life. Thus, we give ourselves to God's people in unselfish love.

This Constitution 2 is perfectly in line with what our old *Directoire des noviciats et scolasticats* states:

This attraction for the Person of the divine Saviour, this vivid desire to know and love him more and more, is a clear sign of vocation in the young men who come to us: for this is an essential part of the spirit proper to our Society.<sup>315</sup>

And again:

Who more than a son of the Society ought to be more united to Jesus Christ because of the sublime vocation to which he is called and which requires from him that he be another Jesus Christ himself?<sup>316</sup>

This study has merely opened a door through which we can see a panorama that deserves to be admired in all its beauty. There is therefore more still to remain to be done.

Paolo Archiati, o.m.i.

#### NOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> M. GILBERT, "La tradition oblate comme source de notre spiritualité", *Études Oblates*, 19(1960), p. 97-107.

<sup>2</sup> "La tradition...", p. 97.

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3 Father Gilbert writes (p. 103):

This influence can come from strong and holy personalities, such as a Cardinal Guibert whose role in the life of our Institute was formerly compared to that of St. Bonaventure in the Franciscan Order: 'By setting up the missionary school of Laus, Father Guibert gave the Congregation a strong impulse to the beginning of higher culture and studies. Later, he contributed to a large part of the vocation for foreign missions... He, too, it was who served as intermediary when it was a matter of a union between our Congregation and that of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Bordeaux. Finally, Guibert gave Montmartre to the Oblates. By that fact he made us apostles of the Sacred Heart of France and in the Church, and thus gave a notable orientation to our Oblate spirituality'.

4 "While it consists of a Christological summa, this study is also a complete theological treatise of the distinctive traits of Oblate spirituality" (G. LESAGE, "Notre littérature spirituelle", *Études Oblates*, 3(1944), p. 117.

5 Among these studies: J. PÉTRIN, "qui est le Christ pour l'Oblat de Marie Immaculée", *Études Oblates*, 18(1959), p. 127-162.

6 P.-H. BARABÉ, *Jésus Notre Sauveur*, Ottawa, 1949.

7 *CC & RR 1819*, I partie, chap. I, par. 1, art. 1.

8 The 1976 congress on the Oblate charism placed first among the nine elements that make up our charism the Person of Jesus Christ. This topic was thereafter taken up by several studies: see, e.g., Father Zago's letter to the Oblates in first formation: *Jesus Christ, source of our Being. Witnessing as Apostolic Community*, Rome, January 6, 1993.

9 G. LESAGE, "Une spiritualité caractéristique", *Études Oblates*, 5(1946), p. 68-69. The author compares the Christological spirit of our spirituality to that of the French school, with its typical marks: place at the center the Incarnate Word who died for love of men; penetrate through contemplating the marvels of this divine life, the interior of the mystery of the Word; study the manifestations of this interior life (the mysteries of the infancy, the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, the Eucharist, the priesthood); make the sacraments the concrete means of adhering to Christ; gain access to the Trinity by passing through Jesus.

10 Father M. BOBICHON used this expression in his contribution to the *Congress on the Founder's Charism Today*: "Passioné d'amour pour Jésus-Christ", *Études Oblates*, 36(1977), p. 93-102.

11 Among the main sources for such a deepening we list, among other things, works of Oblates on Jesus Christ, (books, articles and studies), more personal writings of Oblates on Christ (diary, memoir, correspondence...) the biographies of Oblates (books, necrological sketches...).

12 Ovilla-A. MEUNIER, "Aux sources de notre spiritualité", *Études Oblates*, 1(1942), p. 28-41.

13 "Aux sources...", p. 29.

14 This study was taken up again by F. CIARDI, "Charisme oblat. Comment les oblats ont perçu leur charisme: Exposé historique", *Vie Oblate Life*, 50(1991), p. 287-330.

15 Ovilla-A. MEUNIER, "Aux sources...", p. 37.

16 "Notre littérature spirituelle", *Études Oblates*, 3(1944), p. 50-61; 116-132; "Thèmes fondamentaux de notre spiritualité", *Études Oblates*, 4(1945), p. 7-28; and "Une spiritualité caractéristique", *Études Oblates*, 5(1946), p. 65-86.

17 Cf. "Thèmes fondamentaux...", p. 8-9, 12-13.

18 The bond that links together of the characteristic marks of our spirituality according to the doctrine of De Mazenod can be expressed in the following proposition: *Our devotion to the Sacred Heart and to Mary Immaculate, our cult of God's glory, of the Church, the Papacy and the Episcopacy, as well as our practice of fraternal charity, are ordained to the salvation of souls, especially the most neglected, in conformity to the example given by Christ in his work of Redemption. We see that through the intermediary of the salvation of souls, all the basic traits of our family life directly or indirectly refer to the Redeemer, thus unifying into a crown that is eminently Salvatorian the elements that at first sight seem separate from one another, Études Oblates*, 4(1945), p. 18.

19 "Thèmes fondamentaux...", p. 27.

20 The full title of this work is: *Manuel de prières et Cérémonial à l'usage des Missiannaires Oblates de Marie*

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*Immaculée*, Paris, 1865. Let us recall that before the publication of the first edition of this prayer manual, Oblates were using the *Recueil de cantiques et de prières à l'usage des Missions de Provence*, editions of 1818, 1819, 1826, 1845, 1851, 1858 and 1860. For the history of our prayer manuals, cf. G. COSENTINO, "Le manuel de prières de la Congrégation", *Études Oblates*, 23(1964), p. 148-157.

<sup>21</sup> M. GILBERT, "Note sur notre prière du matin", *Études Oblates*, 5(1946), p. 116.

<sup>22</sup> G. COSENTINO, *Exercices de piété de l'Oblat*, Ottawa, Éditions des Études Oblates, 1962 (Archives d'Histoire Oblate, 19), p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> G. COSENTINO, "Exercices...", p. 32-38.

<sup>24</sup> M. OLIER, *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 62.

<sup>25</sup> GAUTIER, *La spiritualité catholique*, p. 238.

<sup>26</sup> *Constitutions C.S.S.R.*, ed. 179, p. II, ch. II, par. II, Art. II St. Alphonse's preferred topics are the eternal truths and divine goodness, as manifested by the mysteries of Our Lord, especially the passion, the examples of his life, the theological virtues.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Directoire des novices de 1831-1836*, p. 34; *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats de 1876*, p. 21-22.

<sup>28</sup> These meditations will be the subject of a special chapter in this study.

<sup>29</sup> Y. GUÉGUEN, *Missionnaire Oblat de Marie Immaculée*, p. 74.

<sup>30</sup> At this time, this method was contained in piety manuals for the faithful.

<sup>31</sup> *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats*, 1867, p. 51-52.

<sup>32</sup> *Directoire...*, p. 52-53. By dividing the Mass into four parts, this text prompts a person to pass in review the different states which Our Lord experienced during his passion and to enter into his sentiments (*Directoire...*, p. 53-54)

<sup>33</sup> J. FABRE, o.m.i, "Circulaire n. 13 du 21 novembre 1863", in *Circulaires Administratives*, I, p. 98-99.

<sup>34</sup> *Directoire...*, p. 122.

<sup>35</sup> At the time communion was received only three times weekly: thus the terminology used here.

<sup>36</sup> We take this long quotation from G. COSENTINO (*Exercices...*, p. 81-82), who in turn quotes the *Directoire des novices*, the *Directoire du noviciat de Notre-Dame de l'Osier*, the *Méditations* of Father Boisramé, and the *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats*.

<sup>37</sup> *Juniorats de la Congrégation. Directoire des élèves*, p. 65.

<sup>38</sup> *Méditations...*, II, p. 318.

<sup>39</sup> *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats*, p. 126-127.

<sup>40</sup> *Directoire des novices*, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> However, the *Directoire des novices* invites us "to follow in this the inspirations of one's heart, rather than formulars found in books, unless one needs help for the heart is not always equally disposed..." (p. 10).

<sup>42</sup> *Directoire des novices*, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> BOISRAMÉ, *Méditations...*, II, p. 323.

<sup>44</sup> *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats*, 1867, p. 129; *Juniorats de la Congrégation. Directoire des élèves*, p. 64.

<sup>45</sup> *Directoire des novices*, p. 10; *Directoire du noviciat de Notre-Dame de l'Osier*, p. 61; *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats*, 1867, p. 129; *Juniorats de la Congrégation. Directoire des élèves*, p. 64.

<sup>46</sup> *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats*, 1867, p. 129. Two other methods are: liturgical thanksgiving and thanksgiving with Mary (cf. COSENTINO, *Exercices...*, p. 91).

<sup>47</sup> "It would be a great error to consider everything ended with the first half hour spent in church to thank Our Lord" (*Directoire du noviciat de Notre-Dame de l'Osier*, p. 61-62).

<sup>48</sup> COSENTINO, *Exercices de piété de l'Oblat*, p. 93. The *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats* says:

One ought to continue one's thanksgiving as much as possible during the day, keeping with jealous care the treasure one possesses, carefully avoiding dissipation, frequently addressing to Jesus who dwells in our soul as in a temple, a glance of gratitude and love (p. 129-130).

Also see the *Directoire du noviciat de Notre-Dame de l'Osier*, p. 62.

<sup>49</sup> *Directoire des novices*, p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> *Directoire des novices*, p. 22.

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51 *Directoire des novices*, p. 23.

52 *Directoire des novices*, p. 23.

53 In our tradition, the visit to the Blessed Sacrament is intimately linked to that of the Blessed Virgin; here, as much as possible, we are considering it in itself.

54 *MSI*, p. II, cap. I, par. V.

55 *Directoire du noviciat de Notre-Dame de l'Osier*, p. 79.

56 At St. Sulpice there was the daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament which was in private for a quarter of an hour. While great freedom was left to each one, it was recommended that a method analogous to the meditation method be followed: begin with an act of adoration of the Our Lord to pay him homage; then return on oneself in order to present one's needs to him; also present to Our Lord the needs of the Church, the House, of persons who are dear; finally, the resolution of the morning meditation was renewed, a spiritual communion was made, and one withdrew in deep recollection. (COSENTINO, *Exercices de piété de l'Oblat*, p. 112-113.

57 The *Directoire des novices* of 1831-1836 speaks of the visit to the Bl. Sacrament under the paragraph that treats of devotion to Our Lord:

The novices will undertake with great joy an exercise that is so consoling for a loving heart, namely visits to Our Lord in the Sacrament of his love; they will see this time passed at the foot of the holy altar as a sweet rest for their soul, a pleasant relaxation after their work. When they present themselves at the foot of the Holy of Holies, they will take care to refresh themselves by means of great sentiments of faith and fervour. They will unite themselves to the Angels that surround the divine Eucharist and to all the faithful who love him the most in the Most Holy Sacrament; and in this union they will render to the adorable Jesus their homage of devotion, gratitude, offering, etc. For this they have only to follow what is noted in the pious work of Bl. Liguori on visits to the Blessed Sacrament (p. 29).

58 *Directoire du noviciat de Notre-Dame de l'Osier*, p. 80-81.

59 *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats*, p. 73. The *Directoire des junioristes* says:

Juniorists ought to value making a visit to Our Lord, who wants to live in their midst, under the same roof, and to Mary Immaculate, their good and tender Mother, in order to offer them their marks of respect, devotedness, filial love; to ask them to help the Congregation, to ask help for themselves, their parents, teachers, fellow juniorists; to manifest to them their worries, joys, projects, even defects, their need of such and such a virtue; finally to renew their promises and resolutions to them. These two visits take about a quarter of an hour and are made one after the other. One begins with reciting the *Tantum ergo* with the verse-response and prayer; then one makes a pious reading from the book of Saint Liguori *Visites au Saint Sacrement à la sainte Vierge*. Then one remains some moments in silence, conversing with Jesus, not forgetting to make a spiritual communion (p. 45-46).

60 BOISRAMÉ, *Méditations...*, II, p. 361-262.

61 Father Baffie gives the reason for this:

Jesus is their only superior, for those who hold authority in the Congregation are only his delegates. Hence, before leaving the house and again when they return to it, they present themselves before him, to beg his blessings, to ask him to make fruitful their ministry in the world's midst, or to thank him for having kept them out of all danger (*Esprit et vertus...*, p. 131).

The different directories speak as follows:

(Before going out) we go directly to the chapel in order to adore Our Lord and



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to place the outing under the protection of the Blessed Virgin and the Guardian Angels... Upon returning to the House, the first concern is to visit Our Lord to thank him for the graces he has granted us, the dangers he has preserved us from, and to ask forgiveness for the faults we have committed: *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats*, 1867, p. 131 and 133; *Juniorats de la Congrégation. Directoire des élèves*, p. 54 and 56.

<sup>62</sup> This practice, which existed also among the Redemptorists, came to us from the Sulpicians:

After leaving the table, we ought to make our visit to Our Lord with a heart filled with love and gratitude, renewing our consecration and offerings ourselves anew to the divine Master so that we may use only for his service the strength food has given us, and to ask him to pass the recreation period well. *Directoire des noviciats et des scolastiques*, p. 86.

<sup>63</sup> It is expressly recommended that the novice and scholastic brothers dress with such diligence that they can visit as long as possible the most holy Sacrament before the morning oration. This visit, especially recommended by our Venerated Founder, ought to be one of the first needs prompted by our love and gratitude towards Our Lord, who wants to live among us, even during the long hours of the night. It ought also to be a need of our indigence to hasten speedily to the source of graces and heavenly blessings. *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats*, p. 12-13.

<sup>64</sup> In the evening, after the prayer, the novices will withdraw only reluctantly and as though forced, wishing rather that it should be permitted to them to pass the days and nights in the company of the lovable Jesus. *Directoire des novices*, p. 29.

<sup>65</sup> Fervent novices will not be content with the two visits prescribed by the Rule. Filled with the thought that in stages they are to make reparation for so much indifference, coldness, lack of reverence, profanations and sacrilege of which men are guilty, they will not miss a single opportunity to manifest to Our Lord how sensitive they are to these insults. They will sometimes take of their free time a few short moments to remain close to Our Lord. When obedience keeps them elsewhere, they will from time to time raise their thought and love to the holy Tabernacle. They will sometimes turn their eyes in that direction and when they pass near a Church or before its door, they will not fail, according to the example of the Saints, interiorly to greet Our Lord Jesus Christ. *Directoire du noviciat de Notre-Dame de l'Osier*, p. 82.

<sup>66</sup> GAUTHIER, *La spiritualité catholique*, p. 246-247.

<sup>67</sup> *Vie de M. Olier*, III, p. 136.

<sup>68</sup> *Costituzioni C. SS.R.*, ed. 1791, p. II, c. II, #II, a. II.

<sup>69</sup> A significant text of M. Olier:

Our Lord wants us to take him as Master who comes from the Father, who taught him from all eternity what he was to teach us: *Ipsium audite*. It is by his mouth that he speaks to us now... Our Lord also wants that each day, in the reading that we do of a chapter from the New Testament, we learn some word of wisdom from his mouth and that from the bottom of our soul we live that which we have learned. For it is above all this spiritual life, this hidden life, this inner disposition of the heart that he wants from us. Jesus Christ alone should be living and reigning within us, so that in us he may serve and glorify the Father. May it please his goodness and kindness to establish thus his life in our souls: *Solus regnet et vivat Jesus in nobis* (quoted by FAILLON, *Vie de M. Olier*, III, p. 136-137).

<sup>70</sup> In this sense, I mention reading during Lent only the Gospel concerning Jesus' passion. This practise came to us probably from the Jesuits. In regarding to these readings, Circular 92 says:

It would be superfluous to insist on the advantages of this reading. It nourishes the intelligence by teaching or recalling to it facts, events, teachings that illumine our personal life, strengthen and direct our apostolic activity, show us

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in a clearer manner the action of Providence in the Church. (*Circulaires administratives*, III, p. 164.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. *Directoire du noviciat de Notre-Dame de l'Osier*, p. 122.

<sup>72</sup> The meaning of this prescription can be found in the importance that the 17<sup>th</sup> century French School, of which de Berulle is the founder, attributes to the cult of the Incarnate Word.

<sup>73</sup> *Méditations...*, I, p. 532-533.

<sup>74</sup> Doing this in common was abandoned in 1831.

<sup>75</sup> *Méditations...*, III, p. 411.

<sup>76</sup> *Directoire du Noviciat de Notre-Dame de l'Osier*, p. 84. The *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats* repeats this text when it treats of the way spiritual reading is to be done (p. 75-77).

<sup>77</sup> *Acte de visite de la maison du Calvaire à Marseille*, 1827, quote by YENVEUX, *Les Saintes Règles*, IV, p. 35-36.

<sup>78</sup> J. FABRE, o.m.i., "Circulaire n.13 du 21 novembre 1863", in *Circulaires administratives*, I, p. 97. Also see *Directoire des novices de 1831-1836*, p. 34, the *Directoire du noviciat de Notre-Dame de l'Osier*, according to which "This oraison is more especially dedicated to knowing and loving Our Lord Jesus Christ"; p. 18-19; and the *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats*, p. 22. According to the Rule of St. Alphonse, oraison should have as its main objective "the theological virtues, the life and virtues of Jesus Christ, whose living image they are to reproduce within themselves: "Constitutions et Règles de la Congregation du Très-Saint Redempteur", in *Oeuvres Complètes*, Tournai, Casterman, XIII, 3<sup>ème</sup> ed., 1881, trad. Dujardin, p. 4.

<sup>79</sup> J.-H. ICARD, *Traditions de la Compagnie des Prêtres de Saint-Sulpice*, p. 259-261. To this witness Father Cosentino adds that of Father Letourneau:

We will therefore keep ourselves in the presence of Jesus Christ and will try to busy ourselves in the presence of Jesus Christ and will try to contemplate Jesus Christ both as priest and victim; 2o meditate on his immense love for men and on the enormous ingratitude of men towards him; 3o consider his inconceivable emptying of self, his obedience, poverty, flight from the world, zeal for the Father's glory; 4o converse with him about what he did and suffered for us during his mortal life. On other occasions we shall put ourselves at his feet, as the Apostles did, to listen to him; or as Magdalene did to weep her sins and to live henceforth only out of love; or as the prodigal son did, to tell him that we no longer deserve to be called his sons; or as the Chanaanite woman, to ask him insistently for help... (*Nouveau manuel du démissionnaire*, p. 222-224).

<sup>80</sup> *Règles et Directoire des frères convers*, p. 37, 42-43. Cosentino quotes his text, the following one and the one quoted above.

<sup>81</sup> He also gives an example of this:

Here, my God is your little creature before you...your little worm...to whom you really want to give the title of son...whom you love...with whom you enjoy yourself...I am coming to study this given virtue with you...How you loved this virtue!...in yourself...in your Mother...How many examples of it you gave me when you were on earth...and still now in your admirable Sacrament...How much you would like to see it loved...practised...on such an occasion. For my part, my God, I would like that too...but I have this particular difficulty...I succumb to the contrary vice on given occasions...when I am with such and such a person...So give me, Lord, that which you require of me...and after that command what you will.

<sup>82</sup> *Règles et Directoire des frères convers*, p. 37, 42-43.

<sup>83</sup> This exceptional choice (this exercise of piety is the only one of which the formula does not come from St. Sulpice) is due to the fact that our first Fathers said evening prayer with the Faithful.

<sup>84</sup> This "second" examination of conscience was later suppressed, when this prayer was no longer said with the people. Let us recall that the original text of our night prayer is found in the *Recueil de cantiques à l'usage des*

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*Missions de Provence*, published by the Oblates in 1818 and republished several times thereafter.

<sup>85</sup> The Oblates' devotion to the Sacred Heart is a separate study in the paper.

<sup>86</sup> As we shall see, the historical origin of this tradition is linked to the religious persecutions in France beginning in 1880.

<sup>87</sup> A. DONTENWILL, o.m.i., "Circulaire n. 136, du 3 mai 1926", in *Circulaires administratives*, IV, p. 50.

<sup>88</sup> *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats*, p. 115.

<sup>89</sup> *Directoire des novices*, p. 5-6. According to the *Directoire du noviciat de Notre-Dame de l'Osier*, "the surest way of obtaining contrition is to go and draw it from the open side of Jesus Christ" (p. 140-141).

<sup>90</sup> *Directoire des novices*, p. 6-7.

<sup>91</sup> As early as 1816 an Association of the Sacred Heart was established.

Two public meetings gather the Associates together on the first Friday of each month: in the morning for Mass, which is preceded by a meditation made aloud by a missionary and which is followed by benediction of the Blessed Sacrament; in the evening for an instruction on the Sacred Heart, also to make an act of reparation, and to receive again the blessing of Jesus in the Eucharist.

E. BAFFIE, *Esprit et vertus du missionnaire des pauvres C.J. Eugene de Mazenod, évêque de Marseille, Fondateur de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, p. 176-177. This exercise took place in our community chapels.

<sup>92</sup> "Every first Friday of the month the novices will be faithful to the exercise that is practiced on that day in all the groups that are established under this title (of the Sacred Heart)", p. 29.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. *Acta Capituli Generalis 1873*, decr. IX.

<sup>94</sup> This pious practice comes to us from the 17<sup>th</sup> century French School or from the School of St. Sulpice. Cf. ICARD, *Traditions...*, p. 261-262.

<sup>95</sup> *Juniorats de la Congrégation. Directoire des élèves*, p. 74. Also see *Directoire des novices*, p. 27, and the *Directoire des noviciats et des scolasticats*, p. 151-152.

<sup>96</sup> Some points of this relationship will be mentioned in the chapter on oblation. A serious study on this item is not yet made.

<sup>97</sup> "To the Sacred Heart consecrate in a special way the month of June, in union with a multitude of pious souls who have adopted this practice..." *Manuel de piété à l'usage des junioristes*, p. 232.

<sup>98</sup> *Vademecum des missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, Rome, 1958, p. 169. This practice is linked to the Preface of our CC&RR.

Tradition...requires that we put the whole month of June under the auspices of the Sacred Heart, thereby striving to achieve our Founder's desire: to sacrifice goods, talents, ease, our very life out of love for Jesus Christ: (p. 160-170)

<sup>99</sup> Y. BEAUDOIN, "Les retraites annuelles en communauté au temps du Fondateur, *Vie Oblate Life*, 52(1993), P. 299-316.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. G. COSENTINO, *Exercices...*, p. 307. In 1814 the Founder has allowed the book of F. NEPVEU, S.J., *Retraite selon l'esprit et la méthode de saint Ignace pour les Ecclésiastiques*, Paris, 1749. It would seem that for the Oblates he had obtained the work of Father BOURDALOU, S.J., *Retraite spirituelle à l'usage des communautés religieuses*, Paris, 1749, (cf. BEAUDOIN, "Les retraites...", p. 303-304).

<sup>101</sup> According to Father Bourdaloue's retreat, the topics for the eighth day were the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles. These topics were scarcely meditated, for the retreat of the Oblates ended on the morning of the eighth day: cf. BEAUDOIN, "Les retraites...", p. 307.

<sup>102</sup> BEAUDOIN, "Les retraites...", p. 308.

<sup>103</sup> BEAUDOIN, "Les retraites...", p. 311.

<sup>104</sup> *Règle de 1818*, art. 1.

<sup>105</sup> BEAUDOIN, "Les retraites...", p. 312.

<sup>106</sup> See *La Retraite De Mazenod de Rome (3 octobre 1964 - 10 avril 1955). Notes et Documents*, Ottawa, éditions des Études Oblates, 1956. Father Deschâtelets presented it to the Congregation in these terms:

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This Retreat was an event of the first importance in the Congregation's history. These pages can serve as nourishment to inspire other Retreats which, by God's grace, will take place everywhere in our beloved Institute... ("La Retraite...", p. I).

107 "La Retraite...", p. 57.

108 "La Retraite...", p. 115-171 and 178-180e.

109 P.-E. CHARLAND, o.m.i., *Une retraite oblate selon la mode des «Exercices Spirituels» de S. Ignace*, Ottawa, éditions des Études Oblates, 1959 (Bibliothèque Oblate, XII).

110 "Une retraite...", p. 5.

111 "Une retraite...", p. 7-8. The text continues:

Saint Ignatius attaches great importance to the contemplation of the mysteries of Christ's life with the aim of conforming the disciples' life to that of their Master, of strengthening their will in his service and giving them the assurance of victory. Not only during the course of retreats, but daily our venerated Founder leads us to the feet of Jesus in loving contemplation of his life: "The regular topic of this oraison will be the theological virtues, the virtues of Our Lord Jesus Christ, whom the members of our Society will vividly reproduce in their conduct..." (art. 254): "Une retraite...", p. 8.

112 *expérience de Mazenod, 3 septembre - 8 décembre 1980*, polycopied text, p. 132.

113 "«Des dévotions propres aux membres de la Société» d'après l'ancien directory des noviciats et scolasticats", *Études Oblates*, 16(1957), p. 263-279. This old directory was the base for that of 1876 that Father Fabre wanted and entrusted to Father Rambert to compose.

114 "Des dévotions...", p. 267-274.

115 "Des dévotions...", p. 268. The directory recommends that novices honor this mystery in a special manner when doing manual work and "during the time of the year when the Church herself wants us to honor it".

116 "Des dévotions...", p. 269. The text indicates the time during which the novices are called to cultivate this devotion and it also suggests the method they are invited to follow; a method whose aim is to incline the soul to imitate Jesus Christ in the heroic virtues we see him practice in this mystery: cf. "Des dévotions...", p. 269-270.

117 "Des dévotions...", p. 270-271. Afterwards the text indicates practices and methods to express this devotion "towards Our Lord in the sacrament of his love": "Des dévotions...", p. 270-274.

118 "Des dévotions...", p. 271, nota 8.

119 "Des dévotions...", p. 274.

120 G. BLANCHARD, "Au coeur de notre spiritualité. Les articles 287-298 de nos Saintes Règles", *Études Oblates*, 17(1958), p. 195. The author develops this aspect starting from the Founder's first Rule.

121 J. PÉTRIN, "Qui est le Christ pour l'Oblat de Marie Immaculée", *Études Oblates*, 18(1959), p. 140.

122 "Qui est le Christ...", p. 154-161.

123 "Qui est le Christ...", p. 162.

124 See, among others, the following: H. GRATTON, "La dévotion salvatorienne du Fondateur aux premières années de son sacerdoce. Essai psychologique d'après ses écrits", *Études Oblates*, 1(1942), p. 158-171; G. LESAGE, "Thèmes fondamentaux de notre spiritualité", *Études Oblates*, 4(1945), p. 7-28; G. LESAGE, "Une spiritualité caractéristique", *Études Oblates*, 5(1946), p. 65-86; Y. GUEGUEN, *Missionnaire Oblat de Marie Immaculée*, 140 p.; E. LAMIRANDE, "Le sang du Sauveur. Un Thème central de la doctrine spirituelle de Mgr de Mazenod", *Études Oblates*, 18(1959), p. 363-381.

125 M. BÉLANGER, "Vocation Oblate", *Études Oblates*, 3(1944), p. 94.

126 M. BÉLANGER, "Vocation Oblate", p. 95. The text continues:

The friend of the poor, the abandoned, the apostle of the masses, well prior to the Oblate and with an infinitely superior title, the Redeemer achieved this with all the fibres of his being. The missionary of the poor has only to place his steps in his and thus achieve it in his turn.

127 M. BÉLANGER, "Vocation oblate", p. 101.

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- 128 "Missionnaire Oblat de Marie Immaculée", p. 91-92.
- 129 "Une spiritualité...", p. 79.
- 130 According to Lesage they are: devotion to the Sacred Heart and to Mary Immaculate, obedience to the Pope and the bishops, charity within the Congregation and in regard to the neighbour in general: "Une spiritualité...", p. 82. The author shows how each of these practices, which make concrete the idea of cooperating with Christ, assures us of being fruitful and of achieving the three special goals of the Oblate (glory of God, service of the Church, salvation of souls): cf. p. 82-83.
- 131 L. DESCHÂTELETS, "Oblate spirituality", *Études Oblates*, 8(1949), p. 156. For Father Deschâtelets, our spirituality is summed up in charity, an extraordinary charity, perfect, in the fullest sense of devotedness and consecration (cf. p. 157 and 159-160).
- 132 L. DESCHÂTELETS, "Oblate spirituality", p. 158.
- 133 The expression is read and understood in different ways, according to the perspective and sensitivities: "offered to Mary", "belonging to Mary Immaculate", "offered (to God, to Jesus Christ) through Mary Immaculate", and others still.
- 134 Cf. M. DUGAL, "Our Oblate life of recollection", *Études Oblates*, 9(1950), p. 109-114.
- 135 DUGAL, "Our Oblate life...", p. 112.
- 136 DUGAL, "Our Oblate life...", p. 112.
- 137 DUGAL, "Our Oblate life...", p. 113.
- 138 "Enquête sur la spiritualité oblate", *Études Oblates*, 9(1950), p. 137-144.
- 139 "Pour une spiritualité oblate. Compte rendu des réponses à l'enquête sur la spiritualité oblate", *Études Oblates*, 10(1951), p. 73-126. It is a matter of "eleven replies the length of which varies from some forty pages to only a few pages... This rather limited number of replies to the inquiry suffices, it would seem, to state the problem and to give an idea of the Congregation's viewpoint... "Two thirds of those who replied are members of the personnel of our formation houses; the others are missionaries" ("Pour une spiritualité oblate...", p. 73-74).
- 140 "Pour une spiritualité oblate...", p. 90.
- 141 "Pour une spiritualité oblate...", p. 91.
- 142 "Pour une spiritualité oblate...", p. 93. This reply says: "Priests in general, but especially missionaries, are by vocation above all cooperators with Jesus the Saviour".
- 143 "Pour une spiritualité oblate...", p. 94. Devotion to Mary is also seen in a Christological perspective: Mary is "the finished model of a total gift of self to Christ and of cooperation with his redemptive work."
- 144 "Pour une spiritualité oblate...", p. 95.
- 145 "Pour une spiritualité oblate...", p. 96.
- 146 "Missionnaire de Marie Immaculée", p. 93.
- 147 "Missionnaire Oblat de Marie Immaculée", p. 129-130.
- 148 "Missionnaire Oblat de Marie Immaculée", p. 134.
- 149 R. BECKER, "L'idéal de l'Oblat et la spiritualité oblate", *Étude Oblates*, 8(1949), p. 193. The author explains:
- It is a love that burns for God like a devouring fire so as to spread his glory...  
This glory appears to the Oblate's eyes as the only true good desirable on earth. The eyes of an Oblate ought to be fixed thereon. For it alone he immolates himself.
- 150 "Pour une spiritualité oblate...", p. 99-100.
- 151 Cf. "Pour une spiritualité oblate...", p. 106-111.
- 152 "Pour une spiritualité oblate...", p. 112.
- 153 "Pour une spiritualité oblate...", p. 115.
- 154 Cf. M. GILBERT, "Our Oblation and the Oblation of Christ the Priest". *Études Oblates*, 14(1955), p. 148.
- 155 Here Father Gilbert quotes the work of Father BOISRAMÉ, "Méditations...", I, p. 266.
- 156 M. GILBERT, "Our Oblation...", p. 150.
- 157 Our configuration to the passion of Jesus is not done in the manner of a Passionist or a contemplative because, precisely as an Oblate study already quoted says,

The Salvatorian devotion of the Founder is not an exclusive adherence to the Saviour's crucifixion, a fixation on this passion, but rather a union to the

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Saviour in the redemptive charity of all his mysteries. To be sure, like the redeeming love of Christ himself, this Salvatorian piety will be fully realized on Calvary; but it also find its life in the "towns and cities", preaching everywhere Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ crucified. In this it again imitates Christ who remained Saviour even when he was a missionary, a preacher, a formator of the Apostles: (H. GRATTON, "La dévotion salvatorienne du Fondateur aux premières années de son sacerdoce. Essai psychologique d'après ses écrits", *Études Oblates*, I(1942), p. 164, n. 17.

158 That is why the Eucharist must become and remain the centre of attraction in the life of every Oblate. There is where he will rejuvenate and renew, with Christ, the total gift of himself, a love that also an important aspect of our spirituality.

159 J.-M. SIMON, "Essai d'une spiritualité oblate", *Études Oblates*, 15(1956), p. 221-259.

160 E. LAMIRANDE, "Esprit d'oblation. Approche historique", *Études Oblates*, 15(1956), p. 323-355.

161 J.-M. SIMON, "Essai...", p. 234.

162 "Pour une spiritualité oblate...", p. 100-101.

163 J.-M. SIMON, "Essai...", p. 245.

164 J.-M. SIMON, "Essai...", p. 245.

165 ...through the separated species is reproduced not only the visible aspect of the sacrifice of the cross, that is to say, the bloody phase of the mortal life of Christ when his body was in one part and his blood in another, but also by these same species are represented the spiritual and invisible realities that the sacrifice of the cross supposes, namely, Jesus' interior sentiments of soul as he offered himself for the world's salvation (p. 246).

166 SIMON, "Essai...", p. 247. The author continues:

Jesus' whole life was an uninterrupted oblation that finished with the sacrifice of the Cross. Calvary, the visible external sacrifice is the sign, symbol, exact translation, real incarnation of every interior life, of the Saviour's personal activity, entirely dedicated and offered to God's love and the redemption of souls.

167 "Missionnaire Oblat de Marie Immaculée", p. 92.

168 SIMON, "Essai...", p. 252.

For a missionary strongly convinced of the spirituality of oblation, every activity of the ministry -- preaching, confession, study... -- all that is a precious present to be laid on the altar the next day. To reserve something for oneself would be a detour, a larceny, a rapine in the holocaust (p. 253).

In this part, the author treats at length the topic of oblation in relation to the sacrifice of the Mass: cf. especially p. 254-256.

169 SIMON, "Essai...", p. 257. And further on: "the elating and never spent joy of a life of oblation consists in this: one possess more in the measure that one loses" (p. 258).

170 E. LAMIRANDE, "Esprit d'oblation. Approche historique", *Études Oblates*, 15(1956), p. 323-355.

171 M. GIORGIANNI, *Il martirio "carisma" della missione in Eugenio de Mazenod e nella sua famiglia religiosa*, Frascati, 1994, 138 p. ("Quaderni di Vermicino", 28bis). This thesis has been translated nearly integrally in French by Father M. CHÉNIER and published by *Vie Oblate Life*, 53(1994), p. 3-18, 121-144 and 324-356.

172 "Lettres au p. Guigues, à N.-D. de l'Osier, 1<sup>er</sup> août 1835", *Écrits Oblats*, I, 8, p. 157-158.

173 "Pour le cher père Maisonneuve, prêtre Missionnaire Oblat de Marie Immaculée, 13 mars 1857". *Écrits Oblats*, I, 2, p. 149.

174 Father Lamirande's research provides us with the witness of Father Joseph Gérard (p. 326-330), Scholastic Brother François-Marie Camper (p. 328-330), Father Prosper Boisramé (p. 331-333), Father François Simon (p. 333-336), Scholastic Brother Wilbrod Perrault (p. 336-337); and "of less explicit witnesses", that of Bishop Jacques Jeancard (p. 338-339), Father Baret (p. 339-340), Bishop Vital Grandin (p. 340), Father Gabriel Salaun (p. 340-341), Father Toussaint Rambert (p. 341), Brother Gabriel Bosse (p. 341-342), Father Alexandre Guillaume (p. 342) and of

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Father Jean-Baptiste Lemius (p. 343).

<sup>175</sup> Besides the witnesses already quoted in the study of Father Lamirande, let us mention Father Casimir Aubert (p. 90-93), Father Mario Borzaga (p. 99-104 and 115-119), Father Alexandre Taché (p. 105-106), the martyrs of the diocese of St. Albert (p. 108-111). Father Ovide Charlebois (p. 111-113), Fathers Jean-Baptiste Rouvière and Guillaume Leroux (p. 113-114), Father Maurice Lefebvre (p. 119-122) and Father Michael Paul Rodrigo (p. 123-125).

<sup>176</sup> "Au p. de Mazenod, à Paris", *Écrits Oblats*, II, 2, p. 18.

<sup>177</sup> "À Mgr de Mazenod, à N.-D. du Laus, 24 août 1835", *Écrits Oblats*, II, 2, p. 101-102.

<sup>178</sup> "À Mgr Ignace Bourget, évêque de Montréal, à Lyon", *Écrits Oblats*, II, 2, p. 105. This testimony concerns, to be sure, the missionary and oblation spirit of all Oblates. These same sentiments recur in another letter to the same Bishop Bourget, after the departure of the first missionaries:

Those of our Fathers wh are leaving...will tell you how much we all envy them their happiness. They consider themselves so fortunate at being chosen for this fine mission! May the Lord be with them and keep them from every mishap" *Écrits Oblats*, II, 2, p. 107.

<sup>179</sup> *Écrits Oblats*, II, 2, p. 163.

<sup>180</sup> *Écrits Oblats*, II, 2, p. 165.

<sup>181</sup> See E. LAMIRANDE, *Esprit d'Oblation...*, p. 326-328; M. GIORGIANNI, *Il martirio...*, p. 93-95 and 114-115.

<sup>182</sup> *Écrits Oblats*, II, 4, p. 166.

<sup>183</sup> *Écrits Oblats*, II, 4, p. 167-169.

<sup>184</sup> *Écrits Oblats*, II, 4, p. 202.

<sup>185</sup> See E. LAMIRANDE, *Esprits d'oblation...*, p. 344-345.

<sup>186</sup> L. DESCHÂTELETS, "Notre vocation et notre vie d'union intime avec Marie Immaculée", *Circulaires Administratives*, 5(1847-1952), p. 322.

<sup>187</sup> E. THIRIET, *Oblation*, Paris, 1911.

<sup>188</sup> J.-M.R. VILLENEUVE, *L'un des des vôtres... Le Scholastique Paul-Émile Lavallée des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée, 1899-1923*, Ottawa, 1927.

<sup>189</sup> E. THIRIET, *Oblation*, p. 86-87.

<sup>190</sup> E. THIRIET, *Oblation*, p. 117.

<sup>191</sup> E. THIRIET, *Oblation*, p. 126.

<sup>192</sup> E. THIRIET, *Oblation*, p. 126-127.

<sup>193</sup> E. THIRIET, *Oblation*, p. 127.

<sup>194</sup> E. THIRIET, *Oblation*, p. 129. A little further on our biographer adds:

This is the way God is pleased to prepare the instrument he wishes to use for the accomplishment of his plans. He forges the soul of an apostle through trials, we hav said; he allows it to pass through the fires of tribulation until it has acquired to strength of endurance necessary to the workers for the redemption. The good one does for one's brother is purchased only at the price of difficult sacrifices (p. 135).

<sup>195</sup> Here is the text of the oath: "I consecrate myself to Our Lord through Mary, as a victim in the little Association; and, to this end, I commit myself to accept all the sufferings that he wishes to send me" (p. 173).

<sup>196</sup> E. THIRIET, *Oblation*, p. 173-174.

<sup>197</sup> E. THIRIET, *Oblation*, p. 178-179.

<sup>198</sup> "Pour une spiritualité oblate...", p. 85.

<sup>199</sup> "Thèmes fondamentaux de notre spiritualité", *Études Oblates*, 4(1945), p. 13.

<sup>200</sup> "Thèmes fondamentaux...", p.13. Further on the author explains:

In the divine heart we must see 'the adorable symbol of God's love for men'. Devotion to the Sacred heart, therefore, consists in honouring Jesus Christ in his love for souls, a love that manifests itself, in regard to Oblates, by the desire of his Heart to see us carry out with zeal the mission confided to us in the Church, for our society. In the Sacred Heart one can draw abundantly zeal

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for the salvation of souls, something that is proper to our family, and at the same time love for God and attachment to the Church. (p. 19)

<sup>201</sup> "Nos actes de consécration et de réparation au Sacré-Coeur de Jésus", *Études Oblates*, 21(1962), p. 57-73. On this topic also see J. ALLMANG, "Mgr de Belsunce est-il l'auteur du texte de notre amende honorable au Sacré-Coeur et de notre acte de consécration au Sacré-Coeur?", *Études Oblates*, 14(1955), p. 245-251.

<sup>202</sup> Sister Anne-Madeleine Remuzat, born in Marseilles in 1696. It was at her request that the bishop of Marseilles established the feast of the Sacred Heart in his diocese in 1721 and consecrated the city and the diocese to the Sacred Heart.

<sup>203</sup> Father Cosentino points out that on the occasion of the revision of our *Manuel de prières* in 1929 there was a proposal to suppress this act because there was already that for the consecration of the human race and that for the consecration of the Congregation; it was kept, however, because of its more pious and personal character. The text of this act is found on p. 61 of Father Cosentino's study.

<sup>204</sup> The Founder and our first Fathers had a great devotion to the Sacred Heart; this is evident from the exercise of the First Friday of the Month (which we kept from the very beginning) and from the "Association of the Sacred Heart" that was established in our church at Aix in 1816. The *Directoire des novices* insists a great deal on this devotion: cf. *Études Oblates*, 16(1957), p. 274.

<sup>205</sup> The formula of this act was composed by Father Rambert, Superior of the Scholasticate and member of the Chapter.

<sup>206</sup> p. 153. Father Cosentino provides us with a synopsis of the two texts of this act, that of August 8, 1873 and the definitive text: *Études Oblates*, 21(1962), p. 64-66.

<sup>207</sup> "Nos actes...", p. 69. The author notes that this "amende honorable" was suppressed in the 1958 prayer manual "because of its too tragic style". The text of this "amende" as it was used by us can be found in Father Cosentino's study with two other texts: the original of 1693 (in the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of 1700) and an abridged version of 1762: "Nos actes...", p. 70-73.

<sup>208</sup> D. LEVASSEUR, *Histoire des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée. Essai de synthèse, I, (1815-1898)*, p. 183. Also see E THIRIET, *Un apôtre du Sacré-Coeur. Le père Yenveux, Olat de Marie Immaculée*, Paris, 1904, p. 75-82.

<sup>209</sup> *Histoire...*, I, p. 185.

<sup>210</sup> R. ARBOUR, "Notre scapulaire du Sacré-Coeur", *Études Oblates*, 6(1947), p. 117-127. The text of the decree *Ab Apostolica Sede* reads:

On the instant request of Most Reverend Father Cassien Augier, the Holy Father Pope Leo XIII grants, in perpetuity, to the Superior General of the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the faculty to bless and impose the scapular of the Sacred Heart properly so-called and also to delegate this faculty to the priests of his Congregation, as well as any other priest of the secular or regular clergy.

(quoted by R. ARBOUR, "Notre scapulaire...", p. 120). Also see circular no. 73 of Father Cassien Augier on the Sacred Heart, of August 27, 1900: *Circulaires Administratives*, II, p. 435-442.

<sup>211</sup> *Circulaires Administratives*, II, p. 436.

<sup>212</sup> *Circulaires Administratives*, II, p. 437-438. Father Augier writes:

In fact, it is in the church that they were going to dedicate to the Sacred Heart that Father de Mazenod and Father Tempier made their first vows. In order to show, even in an external way, the ardent desire he had to establish his Society in the Heart of Jesus, our venerated Founder, chose Holy Thursday to make this important act. We can call this the day par excellence of the Sacred Heart's love. And he went and placed himself with his first companion under the repository of the holy Eucharist kept in reserve. There, hidden in a way in the adorable Heart of Jesus-Victim, the two first Oblates united themselves forever in the bonds of the vow of obedience (p. 438).

<sup>213</sup> *Circulaires Administratives*, II, p. 440.



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- 214 *Circulaires Administratives*, II, p. 441-442.
- 215 "Notre scapulaire...", p. 125.
- 216 M. LAJEUNESSE, "Mgr Charlebois, dévot du Sacré-Coeur", *Études Oblates*, 2(1943), p. 145-167; "Mgr Charlebois, apôtre du Sacré-Coeur". *Études Oblates*, 3(1944), p. 299-322.
- 217 "Lettre au p. Prosper Boisramé, o.m.i., Autun, 15 avril 1880" quoted by M. LAJEUNESSE, "Mgr Charlebois, dévot du Sacré-Coeur", *Études Oblates*, 2(1943), p. 147. Father Yenveux also sent him a little "Traité sur le Sacré-Coeur" to help him make the novices know and love the Sacred Heart better and to become zealous missionaries.
- 218 Cf. "Mgr Charlebois...", p. 149-151.
- 219 "Mgr Charlebois...", p. 151. As a Scholastic of their time testifies, the two brothers Charlebois - Ovide and Guillaume - were "very fervent in their devotion to the Sacred Heart" (p. 149). After he had received the reply of his brother, Ovide wrote to him:

It is not possible to describe to you the sentiments that shook my soul for an hour or two. It is easier for you to imagine them than it is for me to put them down on paper. Besides, you will find them all in the Sacred Heart of Jesus where I took care to deposit them. This divine Heart is my refuge in these moments. It is also this Heart that makes my tears so sweet and delightful. In fact, weeping in union with Jesus is the greatest happiness here below (p. 151).

- 220 "Mgr Charlebois...", p. 153. He communicates the same resolution to his correspondent at the Scholasticate:

Since my last retreat, a pious thought fills my spirit and is good for me. Perhaps it will also do as much for you: I shall communicate it to you. I want to become a martyr. That is certainly not a small ambition, don't you agree? You will ask me immediately who my executioners are to be. That is simple: the mosquitoes, my Pierriche, my school children, my faults, my temptations, my sufferings, my privations, etc, etc. Do you understand now? It is not a small martyrdom of a few hours that I want, but a martyrdom of a whole lifetime. Since one is not without a single instant in which one does not have much to suffer, I said to myself: why would I not accept all that in view of martyrdom? Would that not be more pleasing to God than the momentary sufferings of true martyrs? And so I consider myself as at the stake where I am being burned with a small fire to keep me alive a long time. So, what do you say!... I assure you that this thought is very helpful for suffering everything with patience. Besides, is this thought not conform to the spirit of the Sacred Heart and you will see that one immediately receives therefrom a strength which makes us endure everything with joy: ("Mgr Charlebois...", p. 153-154).

- 221 "Mgr Charlebois...", p. 154-155. The main content of this act of consecration is: adoration and love towards the Sacred Heart of Jesus: love for this Heart which has shed "unto the last drop of blood" for the salvation of men; this Heart immolates itself at all hours on the altar and is hidden in the holy Host; men's sins afflict this Heart and pierce it "with a sword more cruel than that which pierced it on the cross": oblation of the whole of oneself (intelligence, will, memory, imagination, heart, eyes, ears, feet and hands) as a sign of repentance and gratitude; desire to know and to love radically and totally; desire to immolate oneself for this Heart, to adhere to him in order to be purified and enkindled; Mary as the intermediary of this offering.

- 222 "Mgr Charlebois...", p. 156.
- 223 "Mgr Charlebois...", p. 157.
- 224 "Lettre à sa soeur", 15 novembre 1890.
- 225 "Mgr Charlebois...", p. 159.
- 226 "Mgr Charlebois...", p. 166. Under this same heading (*Galerie oblate*) Bishop Lajeunesse several months later presents us with Mgr Charlebois "apostle of the Sacred Heart": as a simple missionary, as bishop and as director of souls, for, he says, "the Oblate, friend of the Sacred Heart, is essentially also the apostle of the Heart of God": see M. LAJEUNESSE, "Mgr Charlebois, apôtre du Sacré-Coeur", *Études Oblates*, 3(1944), p. 299-322.
- 227 E. THIRIET, *Oblation*, p. 137-139. In this parish Father Gabriel had to work with the *Oeuvre du Sacré-Coeur*.

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In a letter he writes:

This work is my delight. Is there in the world a nobler and more consoling task than that which has for its aim to extend the reign of this Heart ineffable proofs of his love?... Isn't it true that eternity will not be enough to thank the Heart of Jesus and the august Virgin Mary for the extraordinary graces I have received to the full?... Oh! if one knew how to understand and taste the divine charm that the cult of the Sacred Heart communicates to a devoted soul! What an inexhaustible treasure of goodness, mercy, love and happiness!...(Oblation, p. 140-141).

228 *Oblation*, p. 144-145.

229 *Oblation*, p. 163.

230 *Oblation*, p. 184-185

231 *Oblation*, p. 185.

232 *Oblation*, p. 186-187.

233 "Lettre au Très Révérend Père Supérieur Général", in *Méditations...*, I, p. V.

234 *Méditations...*, I, p. VI.

235 It should be pointed out however, that this work, written by an Oblate and for the Oblates, everything that concerns the Person of Christ expresses this relationship.

236 *Méditations...*, I, p. 2-3. This text recalls the spirituality of Oblation.

237 *Méditations...*, I, p. 61. This last paragraph closely resembles a passage in the Preface of the CC&RR.

238 *Méditations...*, I, p. 63.

239 *Méditations...*, I, p. 64.

240 *Méditations...*, I, p. 76-78.

241 *Méditations...*, I, p. 79-81.

242 *Méditations...*, I, p. 82. The author underlines this identification between the Oblate and Christ with this question:

Is there in you, as in the divine Oblate, not two natures, but besides the human spirit which makes you act externally like other men, the divine spirit which makes you live in the thought and love of God?: p. 83.

243 *Méditations...*, I, p. 84. Farther on, after a description of the fruits of the apostolate to the poor:

Such are the fruits of the mission given by Jesus Christ to the poor. Such are the fruits that you are called to preach to them. Are you healing them? Are you freeing them? Are you enlightening them? Are you reconciling them with God? In a word, are you, not only in name but in fact and reality, the apostle to the poor? (p. 85).

244 *Méditations...*, p. 87. He continues:

A sword with which you are called to conquer the world for Jesus Christ: the word of God which you preach is alive and effective and it cuts more than a two-edged sword (Heb 4:2). Like St. Paul, and as our first Father wishes, you will not cease to preach 'Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ crucified' (1 Cor 2:2). Constant preaching: the missionary himself needs to be preached. 'The cross, as the venerated Father de Mazenod says, preaches unceasingly to us humility, patience, charity, all the virtues' (Const.). Finally a source of consolation and strength in trials and struggles of life, especially in your last hour (p. 87-88).

245 *Méditations...*, I, p. 89.

246 *Méditations...*, I, p. 90.

247 *Méditations...*, I, p. 90.

248 *Méditations...*, I, p. 90-91.

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249 *Méditations...*, p. 91. According to the author these means are the exact observance of our vows and Rules, as well as good example and doctrine.

250 *Méditations...*, I, p. 91.

251 *Méditations...*, I, p. 91.

252 *Méditations...*, I, p. 91-92.

253 *Méditations...*, I, p. 110-114. Father Boisramé writes: "The perfect Oblate offers himself to him (to the Father) as a victim of expiation for our sins" (p. 112-113).

254 *Méditations...*, I, p. 114-118.

255 *Méditations...*, I, p. 125.

256 *Méditations...*, I, p. 127-128. Here the author underlines the relationship between love for Jesus Christ and zeal that urges the apostle to proclaim him.

257 *Méditations...*, I, p. 136.

258 *Méditations...*, I, p. 137.

259 *Méditations...*, I, p. 141.

260 *Méditations...*, I, p. 163. Further on, this deed is transformed into prayer:

O Jesus, I come with the magi to prostrate myself at your feet and to offer you, with the renewal of my vows, the humble tribute of my adoration and love. As you see, the gift I give you of all that I am is quite poor; nevertheless, deign to accept it; I offer it to you with all my heart through the hands of your Immaculate Mother who has deigned to adopt me as her Oblate (p. 164).

261 *Méditations...*, I, p. 165.

262 *Méditations...*, I, p. 167-168. From this text it is evident that profession of the evangelical counsels is the best way of walking in the footsteps of the Lord.

263 *Méditations...*, I, p. 186.

264 *Méditations...*, I, p. 187.

265 Cf. *Méditations...*, p. 187-188. Quoting St. Bernard, Father Boisramé writes:

Under this sole name I enter into the councils of eternal wisdom, I penetrate into the bosom of the divinity; I see coming out from there an adorable victim, ineffable sacraments, incalculable graces; I see the universe repaired, changed, reformed; I see man redeemed, purified, sanctified.

That is how Jesus has merited and justified the name he bears. He has merited it especially by his sufferings. He was sold like Joseph, abandoned by his own like Judas Maccabeus, calumniated like Nabaoth, rejected like Moses, covered with sores like Job; finally, he carried the wood of his sacrifice like Isaac and was immolated to the justice of his Father in order to repara the insults that sin had heaped on him. For whom did he have suffer? For each one of us. "The Son of God loved me and gave himself up for me" (Gal 2:20) (p. 188).

266 *Méditations...*, I, p. 188-189.

267 Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 189-190.

268 *Méditations...*, I, p. 198.

269 *Méditations...*, I, p. 200.

270 *Méditations...*, I, p. 201.

271 Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 201-202.

272 Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 202.

273 Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 202-203.

274 *Méditations...*, I, p. 213. After speaking about the Holy Family's stay in Egypt and of its return, Father Boisramé asks:

Are you living in quiet peace in the post obedience has assigned to you? Are you nevertheless ready to leave when it assigns a different one to you? In the meantime, are you doing all the good you can, following the Holy Family's example: it brought down blessings on the unfaithful land of Egypt, made idols

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fall, and prepared the way to flourishing Christian communities and to religious communities that soon shed the perfume of all virtues over it? (p. 235).

<sup>275</sup> How everything is arranged in the life of Jesus Christ! The place, time, manner, everything is subordinate to the Father's will. 'I have been only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Mt 15:24). 'My hour has not yet come' (Jn 2:4). 'Amen I say to you: heaven and earth will pass away, but not an iota, not the smallest dot will be removed from the law: everything must be fulfilled' (Mt 5:18). After these examples, does Jesus not have the right to say to us: 'If you love me, keep my commandments' (Jn 14:15) : *Méditations...*, I, p. 122.

<sup>276</sup> Jesus is holiness itself. He said to the Jews: 'Who among you can convict me of sin?' (Jn 8:46). Father de Mazenod wanted that those who were to evangelize Provence with him were to walk in the footsteps of this divine model and imitate his holiness: *Méditations...*, I, p. 223.

<sup>277</sup> *Méditations...*, I, p. 225-226.

<sup>278</sup> *Méditations...*, I, p. 235-236.

<sup>279</sup> Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 238-242. "...By doing what he was doing, in doing the will of Mary and Joseph, he was doing the will of his heavenly Father" (p. 241). And further on:

Perhaps you are constantly living the hidden life, the life of a lay Brother, a student, professor, sick person, one who is infirm. Perhaps you consider yourself useless and in the grave before your death. Get rid of this mistaken view: you are serving God in the manner that he wishes you to serve him. You are not burying your talents when you conform to his adorable will, as Jesus did at Nazareth (p. 241-242).

<sup>280</sup> Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 242-247. Here too the author develops a parallel between the events described in this narrative and the life of a Christian, a religious, a missionary:

By staying in Jerusalem without his parents knowing it, he teaches everybody, especially religious and missionaries, to put the interest of God's glory and the salvation of souls above affection for family, even the most legitimate, and to change the attachment they feel naturally for those dear to them into a spiritual love. Several, not wishing to grasp this teaching of the Master, have fallen into disastrous illusion and have lost their vocation (p. 245).

<sup>281</sup> Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 248-251. Here Jesus is presented as a model of joyful, prompt and generous obedience, obedience of the mind and heart, the qualities of obedience that the Founder wanted (cf. p. 251).

<sup>282</sup> Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 253-256.

<sup>283</sup> Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 256-260. Father Boisramé writes:

What good would it do you to pass as a saint in the opinion of people, if you are not really holy in the eyes of God? Of what use to you is a disguise and putting on the externals of a true Oblate of Mary Immaculate, if you are less than that inside? (p. 259).

<sup>284</sup> *Méditations...*, I, p. 266.

<sup>285</sup> *Méditations...*, I, p. 272.

<sup>286</sup> Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 320-323.

<sup>287</sup> *Méditations...*, I, p. 324-325.

<sup>288</sup> *Méditations...*, I, p. 332-333.

In fact, solitude is more favorable than the agitated world milieu for recollection and contemplation. There is where the Lord calls every soul that he wants to recruit for his service: "I shall draw it gently to myself, will lead it into solitude and there speak to its heart" (Os 2:14). Silence, isolation, freedom, oh! how every in solitude favours recollection and raises the soul to God! (p. 333).

<sup>289</sup> *Méditations...*, I, p. 333. The text invites us to live always in this solitude:

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But the means of living in solitude, especially during the holy time of Lent when nearly all our apostolic workewrs are on the front lines, is this: 'carry solitude with oneself everywhere,' as St. Bernard says; that is to say, lose nothing of our humility, recollection, union with God; live with God as though one were alone with him in this world. How much more this union with God is necessary in the world than in our religious houses! (p. 333).

- 290 Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 342-366.  
291 *Méditations...*, I, p. 352.  
292 *Méditations...*, I, p. 363-364.  
293 Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 372-403 and 409-461.  
294 Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 419-430.  
295 *Méditations...*, I, p. 468.  
296 Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 470-487.  
297 Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 488-493.  
298 Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 494-499.  
299 Cf. *Méditations...*, I, p. 504-508.  
300 *Méditations...*, I p. 507. The author asks:

Do you love the Incarnate Word? Where are the works by which you prove the reality of this love for him? It is true that you gave yourself to him unconditionally by your perpetual oblation; but, alas! do you take nothing back from that which you solemnly consecrated to him? Do you not take yourself back, a least partially? (p. 508).

- 301 *Méditations...*, I, p. 511.  
302 *Méditations...*, I, p. 513.  
303 *Méditations...*, I, p. 517. Further on Father Boisramé gives us the description written by the Founder after he taken part, in May 1842, at the solemn exposition of the Holy Shroud at Turin.  
304 *Méditations...*, I, p. 522-523.  
305 *Méditations...*, I, p. 522-523.  
306 *Méditations...*, I, p. 529.  
307 *Méditations...*, I, p. 532-533.  
308 *Des dévotions...*, p. 267.  
309 *Des dévotions...*, p. 267.  
310 *Des dévotions...*, p. 268.  
311 M. ZAGO, "Éclairages sur les valeurs fondamentales de la Congrégation des Missinnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée", *Vie Oblate Life*, 36(1977), p. 271.  
312 Because for the Oblates the charism is a living reality, one cannot enter fully into it without a profound conversion to Jesus Christ and the community... This is all the more urgent because we are marked by the phenomenon of secularization which for us has been a form of conversion to the world... Without abandoning the world, we must return to Jesus Christ, to the Church who reveals him to us, not as an ideology but as the incarnation of God's love for men. In fact, it is through contemplation of the Church, redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, that the charism of Eugene de Mazenod was born: "Éclairages...", p. 272.  
313 "Éclairages...", p. 273-274.  
314 "Déclaration finale du congrès sur le charisme du Fondateur aujourd'hui", *Vie Oblate Life*, 37(1977), p. 303.  
315 *Des dévotions...*, p. 271.  
316 *Des dévotions...*, p. 271.