

ACTS OF THE CONVENTION

Oblate Mission through Apostolic community

Ottawa, 7-11 August, 1989 (English edition)

Table of contents

<i>The convention s origins and description</i>	<i>E</i>
---	----------

The Association for Oblate Studies and Research

The Association for Oblate Studies and Research	E
The 1989 AOSR Convention	E
The Convention Participants	E
The Opening of the Convention	E

<i>The Superior General's Message</i>	<i>E</i>
---	----------

THE CONVENTIONS'S STUDY TOPIC

Part One	Mission and Community - The Ecclesial Dimension	E
-----------------	---	---

<i>The Biblical Aspect (Marcel Dumais, o.m.i.)</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>The Early Church (Robrecht Boudens, o.m.i.)</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>Community and Religious Life Today (Fabio Ciardi, o.m.i.)</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>Panel Session (August 7, 1989).....</i>	<i>E</i>

Part Two:	Mission and Community - The Oblate Perspective	E
------------------	--	---

<i>The Founder and the First Oblates (Yvon Beaudoin, o.m.i.)</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>The Constitutions and Rules (Giovanni Santolini, o.m.i.)</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>Panel Session (August 8,1989).....</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>The General Chapters (Wladyslaw Walkosz, o.m.i.)</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>The Superiors General (Laurent Roy, o.m.i.)</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>Panel Session (August 10,1989).....</i>	<i>E</i>

Part Three:	Mission and Community - Some Oblate Examples	E
--------------------	--	---

<i>America (Romuald Boucher, o.m.i.).....</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>Pakistan (Clement Waidyasekara, o.m.i.)</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>Bl. Joseph Gerard (Jerome Skhakhane, o.m.i.)</i>	<i>E</i>

*The Association for Oblate Studies and Research -
Present status, internal matters, and practical resolutions*

The Amended AOSR Charter E

The AOSR Membership E

The AOSR Finances E

The AOSR Work Projects E

The AOSR and *Vie Oblate Life* E

The AOSR and Archives in the Congregation..... E

The AOSR and Promotion of Oblate Research E

Election of the AOSR Executive Committee..... E

Closing of the convention E

Evaluation of the convention E

Table des matieres - Annual index..... E

THE CONVENTION'S ORIGINS AND DESCRIPTION

The Association for Oblate Studies and Research (AOSR)

According to its Charter, the Association for Oblate Studies and Research (AOSR) is “a free association of Oblates interested in undertaking, promoting and coordinating research, study and exchange on the history, spirituality, mission and present life of the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.” Hence, the AOSR promotes “projects of study and research, the publication/translation of relevant materials, the organization and upkeep of Oblate archives, and meetings furthering its aims.”

The initial idea that inspired the eventual founding of the AOSR came from Superior General Father Fernand Jette's April 6, 1978 address to the Inter-Chapter Meeting, wherein he urged the Congregation “to invest more in reflection”.

An “ad hoc” committee consisting of Fathers Gilles Cazabon, Marcello Zago, Angelo Mitri and Edward Carolan was formed to explore the feasibility of establishing a network of Oblates interested in promoting the study of Oblate history, values and spirituality. This committee conducted a series of Congregation-wide consultations on possible concrete ways of responding to the Superior General's call for more reflection. This in turn prompted the holding in 1982 of a Congress in Rome on “Evangelization and the Oblates” (cf. *VIE OBLATE LIFE*, September-December 1983).

This Congress was the occasion for the formal founding and launching of the AOSR. The Congress participants drew up and approved the AOSR's Charter, elected its Executive Committee and gave the latter some indication about work projects that the AOSR could undertake. Recruiting members from across the Congregation was also seen as a first duty of the Executive Committee.

The General Council in plenary session in Cotabato (November 21 -December 10, 1982) formally approved the AOSR, its Charter and Executive Committee.

At the present time, seventy-six Oblates are AOSR members. It should also be noted that, from 1983 to 1989, ten AOSR members have died and one other has resigned.

The 1989 AOSR Membership Convention

The AOSR Charter adopted in 1982 did not specify how often a general convention of the AOSR membership was to be held. It did specify, however, that the normal term of office of the AOSR Executive Committee was three years and that the Executive

Committee was elected either by mail ballot or by ballots cast during an AOSR membership convention.

Because of the untimely death of the first AOSR President, Father Paul Sion (March 19, 1983), the time needed to recruit the AOSR membership and to determine and organize the AOSR work projects, the Superior General in Council several times assisted the AOSR Executive Committee by appointing qualified Oblates to its ranks and by prolonging its term of office until the next general convention of the AOSR membership.

In its January 18, 1988 meeting, the Executive Committee resolved to hold a convention of the AOSR membership in Ottawa, Canada, at Saint Paul University, on August 7-11, 1989. The convention would consider matters internal to the AOSR, elect a new AOSR Executive Committee, and also study a special theme that was linked to the 1986 General Chapter's *Missionaries in Today's World*, namely, "Oblate Mission through Apostolic Community". This Executive Committee resolution was subsequently approved by the Superior General in Council and then communicated to the AOSR membership.

Two teams prepared this Convention: a "Rome team" consisting of the Executive Committee members was responsible for the Convention's essential organization, content, program, resource persons, preparation of documents; a special "Ottawa team" was responsible for preparing the Convention's locale and facilities. On this latter team, AOSR members Fathers Alexandre Taché, William Woestman and Romuald Boucher deserve special mention and thanks for their excellent services.

All of the Convention's sessions were held on the premises of Saint Paul University; here, too, the Convention participants ate their meals. Those participants not already resident in Ottawa were housed at the nearby Saint Paul University Seminary. The AOSR owes a real debt of gratitude to these two Oblate institutions for their fine quality of hospitality and service, offered in a true Oblate fraternal spirit.

The Convention Participants

Forty-one AOSR members participated full-time or part-time in the Convention. They are:

BEAUDOIN, Yvon	(General House)
BOUCHER, Romuald	(St. Joseph)
BOUDENS, Robrecht	(Belgium North)
CASSIDY, Thomas	(St. Peter's)
CAZABON, Gilles	(General House)
CHAMPAGNE, Claude	(St. Joseph)
CHARBONNEAU, Herménégilde	(St. Joseph)
CHOQUE, Charles	(Manitoba)
CIARDI, Fabio	(Italy)

CONCARDI, Mauro	(Italy)
COTE, Richard G.	(St. John Baptist)
DROUART, Jean	(General House)
FAUTRAY, Leon	(Belgium South)
FERRAGNE, Rene	(Chile)
FERRARA, Nicola	(General House)
FITZPATRICK, James	(General House)
GEORGE, Francis	(US Central)
HALL, Anthony	(St. Peter's)
HUGHES, Donald	(Australia)
JETTE, Fernand	(St. Joseph)
KEDL, Aloysius	(General House)
LALONDE, Albert	(General House)
LASCELLES, Thomas	(St. Paul's)
LEVASSEUR, Donat	(St. Joseph)
MAIROT, Francois	(Lesotho)
MENARD, Clarence	(St. John Baptist)
MOTTE, Rene	(General House)
NEMECK, Francis Kelly	(US Southern)
PHILIPPE, Victor	(Grandin)
PIELORZ, Jozef	(Polish Vice-Province)
SANTOLINI, Giovanni	(Zaire)
SKHAKHANE, Jerome	(Lesotho)
STEFFANUS, Adolphe	(France East)
SULLIVAN, Jaime	(Sao Paulo)
TACHE, Alexandre	(St. Joseph)
TARDIF, Luc	(St. Joseph)
TLHAGALE, Buti	(Transvaal)
WAIDYASEKARA, Clement	(Pakistan)
WALKOSZ, Wladyslaw	(General House)
WOESTMAN, William	(St. Joseph)
ZIMMER, Ronald	(St. Mary's)

Six other AOSR Oblates had intended to come to the Convention but were unable to do so, either because of ill health (Fathers John BRADY [Transvaal], Vincent DENNY [Anglo-Irish], Claude LAWRENCE [Sri Lanka]), or because of Canadian entry-visa problems (Father Antoni KUREK [Poland]), or because of death prior to the Convention (Fathers Maurice GILBERT [St. Joseph] and Howard SAINT-GEORGE [Natal]).

Three Oblates (Fathers Marcel DUMAIS [St. Rosaire], Maurice LESAGE [St. Joseph] and Laurent ROY [General House]), though not then AOSR members, participated as experts who contributed greatly to the Convention's preparation and work.

Thus, a total of 44 Oblates participated in the Convention. They came from twelve different countries and from twenty-three different Oblate jurisdictions. Several other Oblates resident in Ottawa also assisted as interested listeners at some of the Convention's sessions.

The Opening of the Convention, August 7, 1989.

At 9.00 a.m., AOSR President Father Robrecht BOUDENS opened the Convention by leading the assembly in prayer (cf. *Oblate Prayer*, "Prayer when Meeting" pp. 151-152). He then briefly welcomed all who

were present, outlined the Convention's agenda, and expressed his pleasure that this Convention was being held in Ottawa, Canada.

Father Gilles COMEAU, Provincial of St. Joseph Province, then extended a most warm and heartfelt welcome to the Convention. He was especially happy that this Convention, the AOSR's first, was being held in Ottawa, because Canada and Ottawa in particular had special titles that were thus being underlined: Canada is like the second cradle of the Congregation; and, in terms of Oblate studies, very significant things have been achieved and are being continued in Ottawa: the Archives Decathletes and the publication VIE OBLATE LIFE are the most prominent. He was happy because of the study theme that the Convention would study, a theme that is all the more important in view of the not too distant past: during the upheaval we have all lived, we encountered certain theories that were not always well-rooted in Oblate history, spirituality and tradition. He wished the Convention every success and the AOSR a good future.

Father Pierre HURTUBISE, Rector of Saint Paul University, also extended a warm welcome to the Convention. He did so in a double capacity: as Rector of the University (which was celebrating the 100th anniversary of its pontifical Charter) and also as a professional historian. Saint Paul University is always happy to receive Oblates and it is especially happy to welcome the AOSR and this Convention: it will be a powerful reminder of the Oblate Congregation, its history and values, and how each unit within it has its role to play in terms of furthering its mission and the oneness of its community.

The Superior General's special message to the AOSR Convention was then distributed to all present (French and English texts) and read out by Father Robrecht Boudens. A warm applause expressed the Convention's satisfaction: Superior General Father Marcello Zago is one of the "founding Fathers" of the AOSR and his message was

received as a fitting compensation for the fact that he could himself not be personally present.

Father Alexandre TACHE gave some practical information that the Convention participants might need during their stay in Ottawa. The Convention then proceeded to its study theme: "Oblate Mission through Apostolic Community".

The Superior General Message

Dear Brother Oblates,

I send my best wishes and thanks to you, members of the Association for Oblate Studies and Research, as you come together in Ottawa for the first Congress of the Association. As you hold your meeting I am visiting the Oblates of Sri Lanka who, together with their people, are living a time of tragedy. Be assured that I think of you in prayer; I ask that you too pray for the Oblates throughout the world, especially for those whose suffering is greatest.

Founded in 1982, on the occasion of the Congress on evangelization, the Association is now well and truly launched. It already has quite a number of members in various Provinces and Delegations. It has also undertaken some ambitious research projects such as the "Oblate Lexicon" and the "Dictionary of Oblate spirituality and values". I feel that we have every reason to rejoice. These activities are important for the Congregation, and especially for the formation of the upcoming generation; they will benefit from your work.

I encourage you to continue and intensify this study and research with a truly Oblate outlook and to determine ever more clearly its aims. In a world which is being deeply transformed, in a Church which is seeking renewal, we must continue to establish our identity with greater depth, to outline the missionary problems as a result of our commitment to the evangelization of the poor. If we are to be missionaries in today's world and face up to its missionary challenges, we must reflect as well as act, we must integrate the different historical and theological outlooks so that the Oblate charism may be lived, preserved, seen more in depth and developed in harmony with the Body of Christ in a process of continual growth (cf. *Mutuae Relationes*, No. 11).

May you accomplish this community task of study and research in response to a need of the Congregation. It is a service in its life and mission and is part of a wider field of activity being promoted by the

General Administration and the Provinces. The Congress you are holding is an example of your collaboration on the level of coordinated research which has many dimensions. I encourage you, therefore, to go ahead. I hope that your work will continue in the Association as a whole, in personal initiative and in groups formed at Province and Delegation level.

The theme of your Congress is “The Apostolic Community and Mission”. Its method and content, therefore, is in line with the preceding Congresses on the Oblate charism and on evangelization. There is considerable interest in community in the Congregation at the present time. Community is at the very heart of our vocation and of our future.

The last General Chapter pointed it out as one of the dimensions of our mission (cf. *Missionaries in today's world*. Nos. 109-137). “Oblate community is an essential dimension of our vocation... Community life (for us as Oblates) 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” (ibid. No. 109).

It is for this reason that the General Council has chosen community as one of the aims for animation in the Congregation and has, on various occasions, discussed and reflected upon this invitation to community, based on what is being lived and sought in the Congregation itself. Your contribution, therefore, is being awaited and will certainly be beneficial.

In sending you my best wishes for a fruitful outcome to the Congress, I wish to thank all those who have collaborated in its preparation and realization: the executive committee, the speakers, the hosts. You would certainly have wished that Father Maurice Gilbert be with you in this Congress. He played such an important part in the development of our Oblate studies. His work and his presence will be felt in your midst as will that of so many other Oblates who have gone before.

May God, who is communion in the life of the Trinity and who engenders communion among us, keep you in his peace and in his love and may he make you his instruments so that our communities may become “communion of mind and heart” and that thus “the Oblates may 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” (C37).

Faternally in Christ and Mary Immaculate,

Marcello ZAGO, o.m.i. Superior
General

OBLATE MISSION THROUGH APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY

Profiting from the occasion of its Membership Convention, the AOSR chose to study a topic that is particularly timely to the Oblate life and apostolate. The topic chosen was *Oblate Mission through Apostolic Community*. This topic was inspired by the 1986 General Chapter document *Missionaries in Today's World*.

Ten Oblate speakers treated this topic at the Convention in as many conferences, and the participants dedicated three 2-hour panel sessions to sharing on the content of these conferences.

The study of this topic is divided into three major parts as follows:

- Part ONE: Community and Mission - The Ecclesial Dimension.
- Part TWO: Mission and Community - The Oblate Perspective.
- Part THREE: Mission and Community - Some Oblate Examples.

The pages that follow contain the full text of these ten conferences as well as a substantial summary of the exchange that occurred during the panel sessions.

Part One

Mission and Community

The Ecclesial Dimension

Mission and Community

The Ecclesial Dimension

So that the adopted study topic may be considered in its proper setting - the Oblate Congregation is an integral part of the Lord's Church - the Convention on August 7, 1989, began by hearing three conferences which presented:

- The reality of Christian community and mission as it appears in the New Testament. This was presented by Father Marcel DUMAIS, member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and professor of Sacred Scripture at Saint Paul University, Ottawa, Canada.

- how this same reality was lived in the first centuries of Christianity. This was presented by Father Robrecht BOUDENS, professor emeritus of Church History at the University of Leuven, Belgium.

- the relevance of the religious community in the contemporary world and Church. This was presented by Father Fabio CIARDI, superior of the Oblate Scholasticate of Italy, at Frascati.

The Missionary Community in the Early Church

The first articles of the Constitutions and Rules stress that it is the call of Jesus Christ that brings the Oblates together and “invites them ... to share in his mission” (C.1) and “to create anew in their own lives the Apostles’ unity with him and their common mission in his Spirit” (C.3). Thus, for the basis and ultimate source of meaning of our community life and mission, we are referred to the experience of Jesus and his Apostles. If our Constitutions and Rules give us more precise and particular modalities for living the gospels and the apostolic writings, they in their turn need to be constantly enlightened by the latter, so that, through us, the work of Jesus and of the Apostles may be carried on in the fullness of truth. Our Blessed Founder was careful to assure this constant return to the apostolic sources: as Father Gilbert has shown in an article which remains valid today, he never ceased to invite his Oblate brothers to “walk in the Apostles’ footsteps”, in the footsteps of those whom he called “our first fathers”.¹

What I have been asked to do here does not strike me as all that easy. How is one to avoid getting dispersed in the quantity of New Testament writings and how is one to present a succinct, coherent and honest picture of the early community in its link to the mission? Since it is impossible to treat of everything, I have decided to centre my presentation on the Acts of the Apostles which is both the book of the mission and the book of the formation of the first Christian community, that is, of the Church. For our topic, this Book is an excellent reference. In the Acts, Luke shows us how the Apostles, after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, took up the relay from their Master in order to continue his mission. The Spirit of Pentecost which they received impelled them, on the one hand, to go far afield, to give witness to the Gospel before all men, to go out on the mission; on the other hand, the same Spirit at the same time impelled them to be together, to live out some powerful reality amongst themselves, to be community, to be Church.

¹ Maurice GILBERT, O.M.I., *Sur les traces des Apôtres*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 16 (1957), 293-301.

In the beginning of the Acts, we find three brief summaries which give a picture of the first Christian community (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16). The first verse enunciates what these three passages will elaborate, namely, the four essential values - let us say the four fidelities - of this community, elements that made it a living and influential community: “They devoted themselves to the Apostles’ instruction and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). “They devoted themselves...”: the verb indicates that this was their usual, regular way of together nourishing their faith commitment. In stating these four fidelities, Luke’s purpose is not merely to describe the community in its first beginnings: his concern is also to present to the Christians of his own milieu at the end of the first century a model of community missionary life.² The

Church today invites us to find in these texts an inspiration for building dynamic communities which can give witness through the very quality of their community living.

My presentation has three parts, of which the third is very brief.

1. Some observations on the three values whose meaning is quite apparent at first reading: the instruction of the Apostles, the prayers and the breaking of the bread.

2. A special consideration of the fourth value, which needs a more ample explanation and development: the “fraternal communion” which translates the Greek word KOINONIA.

3. The witnessing power and influence of a community life that is nourished by these fidelities.

Before beginning my topic, one piece of information. In the framework of this presentation that is centered on the Acts, I shall integrate elements from St. Paul’s letters and from the gospels, so that we will better perceive the constant and harmonious factors that were obtained in the way these basic values were lived in the Christian communities of the first century.

² In the prologue of the two volumes of his work, the gospel and the Acts, Luke clearly states his aim and objective: to present to the Christians of his time, through the intermediary of Theophilus, a “reliable instruction” (Lc 1:4). It does seem that Luke is addressing a Christian community that is somewhat shaken, most likely because of its minority situation in a pagan diaspora, because of the loss of privileges which had until then been attached to Judaism and to the Christian “Jewish sect”, and, finally, because of the outbreak of persecutions. This community needed to be enlightened and strengthened by rediscovering the basic elements that constituted it a believing and missionary community.

1. The teaching of the Apostles, the prayers and the breaking of the bread

The first Christians had received their basic instruction - referred to as KERYGMA - which prepared them for conversion and brought them to baptism. Once they had become Christians, however, they were constantly nourished by the Apostles’ teaching - the Greek text of the Acts calls it DIDACHE, a word which we could translate as “catechesis”. In Acts 5:42, we read that “day after day, both in the temple and at home, (the Apostles) never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news of Jesus the Messiah.” The Apostles were, therefore, working on two fronts at one and the same time: to the non-Christians they were proclaiming the KERYGMA, the essential content of the Good News of Jesus Christ; and to the Christian community which they never ceased to form and to instruct by giving it a teaching that was more profound. We find the same in the case of St. Paul, this great missionary who is the central figure of the second half of the Acts. In Acts 19:9 we read: “He took his disciples with him and after that held his discussions from day to day in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.” We are all familiar with the charming episode that took place at Troas and is reported in chapter 20: Paul spoke until midnight to the Christian community gathered for the breaking of the bread. We read in verse 9: “Paul talked on and on, and a certain young lad named Eutychus who was sitting

on the window sill became drowsier and drowsier. He finally went sound asleep..." We know what happened after that: the young man fell from the third storey to the ground, people rushed to him, Paul brought him back to life and then, not at all put off by this incident, "Paul went upstairs again, broke bread... Then he talked for a long while - until his departure at dawn" (v. II).³

Such catecheses given by the Apostles are at the origin of our present gospels. When in his resume of the early Church's life he says that the Christians "devoted themselves to the instruction of the Apostles", Luke is reminding us that a community of believers - and an apostolic community all the more so - must nourish itself constantly with the reading and meditation of the gospels; otherwise, it will stop growing, atrophy and die, both as community and as a missionary unit.⁴

³ When he takes stock of his life, Paul will say to the Elders who had come from the church at Ephesus which he had founded: "Never did I shrink from telling you what was for your own good, or from teaching you in public or in private... I have never shrunk from announcing to you God's design in its entirety." (Acts 20:20, 27)

We easily understand this first requisite of the Christian missionary life. A person cannot be witness of Jesus Christ unless he deepens his relationship with him, and this in turn supposes that a person is motivated by the ardent desire to know Jesus better, as he really is, and to know ever better how one is to live as his disciple and witness. Now, it is listening to the Gospel which will first of all teach us who Jesus is and what he expects of those who have committed their lives to following him. This desire of the missionary disciple is like St. Paul's passion which we find him express to his dear Philippians: "I wish to know Christ and the power flowing from his resurrection; likewise to know how to share in his sufferings... I am racing to grasp the prize if possible, since I have been grasped by Christ" (Phil 3:10-12).

With equal ease we recognize the importance of the two other fidelities mentioned as being at the basis of a missionary community. Indeed, no one can affirm that he believes Jesus to be alive today as a living Person who creates life if one does not approach him in a personal relationship of prayer and if one does not celebrate his life-giving presence in the Eucharist. It is a good thing that the Acts of the Apostles remind us of these requisites for community and mission because, in our practical living, we can land up either neglecting them or failing to engage in them with the needed quality and intensity.

In regard to the quality and content of community prayer, the witness of the first missionary communities is enlightening and challenging on several points. I shall note three of these more particularly, all of them based on a reading of the Acts.

⁴ This way of doing things started at Damascus itself. Before his conversion, Paul had been authorized to make the rounds of the synagogues in this city and arrest those "living according to the new way" (= the Christians) who might be found there (Acts 9:2). After his conversion, he returned to them, but now "to proclaim that Jesus was the Son of God" (9:20). Regarding Paul and his companions taking part in the synagogue liturgies, cf. 13:5, 14, and 44; 17:1,3, 10, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8.

1. The first Christians, who were of Jewish origin, continued, at least for a certain time, to frequent the prayer places of the Jews, namely, the temple and the synagogues. The first summary of the community's life tells us that "they went to the temple area together every day" (2:46). A few verses farther on we read that "Peter and John were going up to the temple for prayer at the three o'clock hour" (3:1); this coming to the temple will provide Peter with the occasion to effect a healing and then give an evangelizing speech. We know that Paul and Barnabas, the first missionaries sent into the diaspora, never failed in each city they came into to take part in the liturgies celebrated in the synagogues; it is during these assemblies of prayer and listening to Scripture that they began to evangelize their Jewish compatriots.⁴ However, if they did retain this link with Jewish prayer - which is valid also for us today, namely, praying the psalms as they did and Jesus had done - it did not take very long, so it would seem, before the first Christians developed their own ways of praying during the course of their own gatherings in private houses. Chapter 4 gives us one of these community prayers. There we see that their prayer had a double root, took its content from a twofold reference: on the one hand, the events that had happened, and Scripture, on the other hand. The gathered community was celebrating the courageous witness of Peter and John who had just come from being arraigned before the Sanhedrin, and was giving thanks for their liberation. After it had heard the story told by the two Apostles, then - and I read the text - "all raised their voices in prayer to God" (4:24). The content of their prayer to God is taken from passages of psalms that were chosen in line with what the community has just been living. The early community, therefore, teaches us to base our prayer on life, especially on the difficulties and joys of our missionary life, by drawing from the Scriptures the inspiration which sheds light on our experience, sustains it and celebrates it in God's presence.

2. Another characteristic of the first Church: it prays as a community very especially in the important moments of its life and mission. Thus, we see it regularly in prayer during the anxious period of waiting between Jesus' departure and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (1:14; 2:1). It also gathers to pray in times of persecution and trial: for example, when Peter was in prison, right after the killing of the Apostle James (12:5, 12), or again when Paul says farewell to the church at Ephesus after he had mentioned the "chains and hardships" that were awaiting him (20:23, 36-38). It is also noteworthy that the community does not entrust any new responsibilities or open a new missionary field without taking the time to pray beforehand. We see it pray before proceeding to the choice of Matthias as a replacement for Judas (1:24-25), again when it gives certain responsibilities of the Jerusalem church to the Seven (6:6), and again when the church at Antioch sends two of its leaders, Paul and Barnabas, on a mission (13:3). The latter, in their turn, pray for the Elders whom they constitute as responsible for the communities in Asia Minor (14:23).⁵ Thus there is no mission that does not begin with prior prayer.

In associating prayer to the great moments of its mission, the first community was patterning itself on Jesus, its Master. This is clearly evident from the gospel of Luke, the first volume of his parallel work. There we see Jesus pray in the moments when great decisions are to be made concerning his mission. It is during his prayer, after the being baptized by John, that he receives the Holy Spirit and begins his messianic activity (Loc 3:21). Later, before taking the important decision of associating some disciples more

closely to himself, namely, the Twelve, “he spent the night in communion with God” (Loc 6:12). At the great turning point that occurred after the multiplication of the loaves, after the shock occasioned by the crowds’ and the disciples’ lack of understanding, when he was immersed in prayer - “when he was praying”, the gospel says - he put the decisive question to his disciples: “But you - who do you say that I am?” (Loc 9:18-20). In Gethsemane, finally, it is in prayer that he finds the courage to accept the inescapable way of suffering which is required of him if he is to remain faithful to his mission (Loc 22:40-46). For Jesus, for his Apostles, and therefore also for us, the mission necessarily requires strong moments of personal and community prayer.

Prayer was considered to be so important for the community’s life that the Apostles, when they began to share their responsibilities in the church at Jerusalem, kept this responsibility along with that for the Word: “This will permit us to concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

3. A third trait of the first Christians’ community prayer: it is both praise of God and petition addressed to God. When he comments his statement on the steadfastness of the community’s prayer, Luke in his first summary uses the simple expression: “they were praising God” (2:47). Somewhat later we see the community of Jerusalem give glory to God because, with the conversion of Cornelius and his household, the mission was now open to the pagans (11:18). This reminds us of Jesus’ thanksgiving, of Jesus’ *Magnificat* uttered upon the return of his disciples from their mission among the ordinary people: “At that moment Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said: ‘I offer you praise, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth...’” (Loc 10:21).

⁵ Cf. also Paul’s prayer for the Elders of Ephesus at the moment of his farewell (Acts 20:32).

Prayer of praise, but also prayer of petition. The latter has its own special content. At the end of its prayer after Peter and John’s arraignment before the Sanhedrin, the Christian community made but one request of the Lord: “But now, Lord, look at the threats they are levelling against us. Grant to your servants, even as they speak your words, complete assurance” (4:29). After having prayed, the community lived a small Pentecost: “The place in which they had gathered rocked to and fro, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to preach the word of God with confidence” (4:31). The community did not ask to be freed from the difficulty and trials of the mission; what it asked is courage and inner assurance to proclaim the Word. The Greek word *PARRESIA* which we translate as courage means two things: inner certitude and boldness of speech. This expression occurs throughout the Acts as one of the signs that the Spirit of Pentecost really resides within a person: this Spirit enables the disciples to speak of Jesus and the Gospel “with boldness”.⁶ Paul also, in his letters, will see in the *PARRESIA* a sign of missionary authenticity.⁷ The Apostles give witness to Jesus with the tranquil assurance of persons in whom the Spirit dwells and they entertain this internal Presence through prayer. And, for its part, the content of their prayer is closely linked to the mission that had been entrusted to them.

The community prayer found its peak in the eucharistic celebration which, as we know, was originally referred to as the “breaking of the bread”. Community meals taken in private houses (2:46; 20, 7ff) became eucharistic meals, just as in the case of Jesus at the Last Supper. The Acts mention how assiduously the first community gathered for the eucharistic meal (2:42).⁸ The usage of celebrating the Lord’s meal was introduced very early in the Church, as we can see from St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.⁹ To designate the Eucharist, Paul uses the Greek word KOINONIA (communion) (1 Co 10:16-17). He shows his community at Corinth, which had become divided, that the Eucharist loses its meaning if there is no true fraternal sharing in the community (1 Co 11:17-22). The Eucharist both expresses and nourishes KOINONIA, that is to say, the fraternal communion of which we are now going to treat.

⁶ The following passages are relevant here: Acts 2:29; 4:13, 20, 29, 31; 9:27, 28; 13: 46; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; 26:26; 28:31.

⁷ Cf. 1 Th 2:2; 2 Co 3:12; Ep3:12; 6:19.

⁸ In the consequent narrative of the Acts, however, there is only one incident besides the summaries that relates the gathering for the breaking of the bread, namely, the episode at Troas which was referred to above (Acts 20:7-12).

⁹ He uses, in fact, the language of “tradition” when he speaks of the way in which the Eucharist was celebrated in his Christian communities: “I received from the Lord what I handed on to you, namely...” (1 Co 11:23-26).

II. The fraternal communion

The first Christians “devoted themselves to the KOINONIA”, that is to say, to the fraternal communion. Just what is this “fraternal communion” of which Acts 2:24 speaks? As an answer, let us read what follows in the text and also the other brief summaries of the community’s life. In 2:44 we read: “Those who believed (=union with Christ) were all one (= union with each other and amongst themselves) and shared all things in common (= sharing everything, even goods, as will be described later).” Likewise, we read in the second summary, in 4:32: “The community of believers (= union with Christ) were of one heart and one mind (=union with each other and amongst themselves). None of them ever claimed anything as his own; rather, everything was held in common (= sharing of everything).” We can therefore define the KOINONIA of the “fraternal communion” as follows: a very strong union among the Christians, which has its source in each one’s union with and in Christ, and leads to a sharing in all things, spiritual and material. It should be noted that putting goods in common supposes the oneness of heart, and the latter finds its deep bond in Jesus Christ. The Christian community is therefore not merely a good human fraternity. It is first of all a reality of the spiritual order. After having said that, however, we must hasten to add that the KOINONIA is real only if it translates itself into all the dimensions of human life, that is to say, if there exists in the community a true sharing of all the realities of life.

This is also how Paul describes the KOINONIA in his letters. He considers KOINONIA essential for each community. In replying to his dear Corinthians, who had brought him the details of several kinds of division in their community, Paul right from the beginning of his letter introduces the principle which will shed light on all the problems he will be dealing with: “God is faithful, and it was he who called you to fellowship (KOINONIA in the Greek) with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Co 1:9). The KOINONIA, the “common union” is thus the union of the whole in the Lord.

Afterwards, for example, Paul will apply this word to the sharing of apostolic joys and difficulties. I quote 2 Co 1:7:

“...we know that just as you share in the sufferings, so you will share in the consolation.” Another text on KOINONIA in St. Paul is Phil 2:1-2: “In the name of the encouragement you owe me in Christ, in the name of the solace that love can give, of fellowship in spirit, compassion and pity, I beg you: make my joy complete by your unanimity, possessing the one love, united in spirit and ideals.”¹⁰

Another way in which the need for solidarity and sharing within the community is expressed is through the frequent use of the pronoun “each other” (ALLELON in Greek). St. Paul uses it very often. “Remain at peace with one another... Cheer the faint hearted, support the weak... always seek one another’s good” (1 Th 5:13-15). “Accept one another... give advice to one another” (Rm 15:7,14). “...Be kind to one another, compassionate...” (Ep 4:32). “Forgive whatever grievances you have against one another” (Col 3:13). And there are others.¹¹ These are so many concretizations of Jesus’ last commandment that he gave to the community of disciples: “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34; 15:12). Fraternal communion is therefore a support and a sharing among ourselves from every point of view: a sharing of faith and hope, mutual challenge, but also mutual strengthening and pardon; a sharing, that is, an exchange of what we are living as Christians and missionaries, of the difficulties and the joys of our commitment.

Opting for Jesus Christ and his mission thus lead to the determination of more and more mutual sharing. In the early Church, the KOINONIA took on the special concrete form of sharing material goods.¹² Why this sharing of goods? To live an ideal of poverty? Rather the contrary. The second summary tells us: “Nor was there anyone needy among them” (4:34). The aim of putting goods in common was to live an ideal of fraternal love and justice, that is to say, to make sure that each one had what he needed to live and to grow. What, in fact, is the criterion for using goods in the early Church? This criterion is stated twice in the brief summaries: the money obtained from the selling of goods was shared among all “on the basis of each one’s need” (2:45); “...distributed to everyone according to his need” (4:35). If you allow me to make a personal observation: “to each according to his need” is a principle that should rule, even today, the use of goods in our communities. The problems, however, will not be solved *ipso facto*, for we still need to discern, personally and in community, what is superfluous and to distinguish false from real needs.

¹⁰ Also cf. Ga 2:9; 2 Co 13:13; Philemon 6. In Ph 1:5, Paul gives thanks for the KOINONIA of the Philippians in helping to proclaim the Gospel from the very first day to the present. The author of the letter to the Hebrews invites his readers not to forget “good deeds and the KOINONIA” in their community (He 13:16).

¹¹ Also cf. 1 Co 11:33; 12:25; Ga5:13; 6:2; Rm 12:10, 16; 16:16; Ep 4:2; 5:21; Jn 5:15, 16; 1 Pe 1:22; 4:9; 5:5; 1 Jn 1:7.

¹² Paul uses the word KOINONIA to designate the collection that he was taking up during all his missionary journeys for the benefit of the poor church in Jerusalem. This collection was a concrete expression of the communion between the Churches. Cf. 2 Co 8:4; 9:13; Rm 15:26.

Material sharing was practiced not only within the communities but also between communities, as the event narrated in Acts 11:17-30 shows. The community of Antioch was sending aid to the communities of Judea who were victims of a famine. The text states that each one contributed to this “according to his means” (11:29). The principle established for the use of goods invites the communities to share what is superfluous with those who are deprived anywhere on this earth, no matter what their beliefs.¹³

¹³ While still Superior General of the Jesuits, Father Pedro Arrupe wrote: “The Church teaches that everything that we possess but do not truly need does not really belong to us. That belongs to the person who lacks what is necessary; he is its true owner (cf. *Populorum progressio*, 23, where St. Ambrose is quoted)” (*Promouvoir la justice*, Supplement to *Vie Chretienne*, no. 200, juin 1977, 55).

¹⁴ Thereafter we see in the Acts that Christians receive missionaries in their houses (cf. 21:8-9); this means that they retained them!

¹⁵ Would not certain ways of living the religious life be a kind of “perversion” of the meaning of sharing goods? For example, when we keep certain items for our *exclusive* use and calm our conscience by saying that we do not personally own them...?

When we read these brief summaries, we may get the impression that everyone sold his goods in order then to live from a community fund. In fact, the sale of goods remained a free initiative and was no doubt practiced only by a minority. Indeed, at the end of the second summary, Barnabas is presented as an example of someone who did sell off his goods, and this suggests that his action was not the common rule (4:36-37). To Ananias, who had concealed a part of the price of property he had sold, Peter says: “Was (your field) not yours so long as it remained unsold? Even when you sold it, was not the money still yours?” (5:14).¹⁴ The important thing was the open usage of goods, openness to all who were in need, always in the perspective stated elsewhere in the second summary: “None of them ever claimed anything as his own” (4:32). Non-possession of goods is a free option that was more rare, and which is today lived in the religious life, for example, as part of the vow of poverty.¹⁵ To each one of us, religious or not, the model of the Acts is a constant reminder that sharing of one’s goods has meaning only if there is oneness of heart and sharing at a deeper level, that of life and existence.

Once we have read these brief summaries on the life of the first Christians, we have the impression of being in the presence of a perfect community. We have to say that Luke was putting before his Christian communities of the end of the first century an ideal of community life, an ideal that even the first Christians did not fully live. We have only to read all that follows in the Acts to become aware that the first communities were torn by conflicts. These conflicts, which we will now consider briefly, make us aware that the KOINONIA is not something that is given at the outset but is rather something that has to be built up; that real unity cannot be established without respect for diversities which of necessity are the source of tensions and conflicts that every community is called to recognize and to overcome.

Let us first of all admire the daring of Luke who in his *codex historicus*, namely, the book of the Acts, did describe, realistically and frankly, certain major conflicts within the first communities. I will now dwell on three of these conflicts, focusing especially on the means that were taken to resolve them.

1. It would seem that a conflict arose rather quickly in the very first community in Jerusalem. The Jewish Christians of the Greek language began to complain against the Jewish Christians of the Aramaic tongue “that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food” (6:1). What did those who were in charge of the community, that is, the Apostles - who were themselves of the Aramaic tongue - do? They “assembled the (whole) community of the disciples” (6:2). Thus, the whole community was brought together in order to look for a solution. Such a conflict was normal in a situation where two linguistic and cultural groups made up the same community. In the end, it had a productive result. The Twelve, recognizing that they cannot do everything, began to share their responsibilities. The conflict had led to the creation of a new ministry that confided to the Seven.

2. Later, a great conflict arose that shook the whole Church for quite some time. Its origins are consequent to the new missions that Paul and Barnabas had opened among the pagans. Some Christians of the first days insisted that the converted pagans had to accept the laws and customs, even circumcision that they themselves had carried over from Judaism. We read in chapter 15:2: “This created dissension and much controversy between them and Paul and Barnabas.” This occasioned the calling at Jerusalem of a great assembly of all who were involved or interested in this issue. When we read the narrative of this meeting, it is interesting to note how time is first taken to welcome each other (v.4) and then, in various meetings (vv.4,6) to inform each other by narrating the facts (vv.3,4,7-15), to exchange different points of view (vv.5, 10-11, 19), even to debate vigorously (v.7), before reaching a decision that the Apostles and Elders took “in agreement with the whole Jerusalem church” (vv.22, 23, 28), one that was seen as the decision of both the community and the Holy Spirit (v.28). The decision taken was not to impose on converted pagans the Jewish laws and customs. This time, too, the conflict had a positive result: it contributed to free Christianity from the Jewish framework and to make it a religion that was open to all cultures and customs.¹⁶

3. A minor conflict broke out within the first missionary team made up of Paul and Barnabas. The two worked marvelously well together during their first mission to Asia Minor. But, when they were on the point of leaving for a second mission tour, they argued with each other about John Mark: Barnabas wanted to take him with them, but Paul did not agree, for John Mark had left them at the beginning of the preceding mission tour. Let us read what chapter 15 says: “The disagreement which ensued was so sharp that the two separated. Barnabas took Mark along with him... Paul, for his part, chose Silas to accompany him” (vv. 39-40). The apostles had discerned that, for the good of the mission, it was best that they separate from each other. Here, too, the result is positive: rather than one single missionary team, there were now two.¹⁷

¹⁵ According to the letter to the Galatians, the conflict flared up again in Antioch. In Paul's view (we do not have Peter's!), Peter had adopted a practical attitude which was not in conformity to the decision taken in Jerusalem. Paul then “directly withstood him” because he was “not being straightforward about the truth of the Gospel” (Ga 2:11, 14).

¹⁷ The hypothesis can be made that the argument over John Mark was only the occasion of a conflict whose roots went deeper. As we read the Acts we see that Paul and Barnabas were, each in his own way, two strong personalities. At the outset, it is Barnabas who is highlighted and always mentioned first (cf. 4:36; 9:27; 11:22-25; 13:1, 2, 4). In the middle of their first mission, Paul seems to take on the *leadership* (14:12; 15:2ff, 36).

There are, to be sure, two kinds of conflict: those which divide the community, when dialogue and communications are cut; and those which are part of a process of growth and enrichment for the community, when the conflicts are faced in openness and frankness and there is a search together for the Lord's will. The conflicts within the early Church show us that the unity that is to be built up is not a uniformity but one that must leave some room for a certain pluralism in our way of being, thinking and living. Did not St. Paul write: "There are different gifts but the same Spirit; there are different ministries but the same Lord; there are different works but the same God who accomplishes all of them in everyone" (1 Co 12:4-6)?¹⁸

There is another aspect of KOINONIA in the early Church which I want to mention briefly but will not develop, due to the lack of time. It is the community taking charge of the mission. Throughout the Acts we see, in fact, that all were responsible for the mission, even if some held special responsibilities within the group. The first ones in charge acted collegially - we can speak of the "college of the Twelve", the "college of the Seven", "the college of the presbyters", and so forth - and tried to achieve a consensus in regard to missionary options by bringing the whole community together and favoring that each one express himself in the common search for the ways of the Spirit.¹⁹ In the Acts, all ministries, all special functions are defined not in terms of powers but of services: service to the mission and service to the communion within the communities and between communities.²⁰

III. The community's influence and attraction

Nourished by the four fidelities we have just examined, the life of the first communities exercised a strong power of influence, attraction and witness. There was a real desire to join such communities. Such is the conclusion that we find at the end of the description of community life in the first and third summaries: They won "the approval of all the people. Day by day the Lord added to their number (literally = to their being together) those who were being saved" (2:47); "...the people held them in great esteem. Nevertheless more and more believers, men and women in great numbers, were continually added to the Lord" (5:13-14). The description in the first summary adds a detail on the manner in which listening to the Gospel, sharing, common prayer and the eucharistic meal were lived. All these things were lived "with exultant and sincere hearts"

¹⁸ Twice Paul uses the image of the body and its various members to describe the ecclesial community: 1 Co 12:12-27; Rm 12:4-10.

¹⁹ Cf. Acts 1:23-26; 6:2, 5-6; 11:18; 15:4-5, 22-28. There was a real concern to assure KOINONIA between the communities and this by sending delegates (cf. 8:14; 11:22-24; 11:30; 15:2, 22-33) and through a generous circulation of information (cf. 11:4; 14:27; 15:3-4, 12; 21:19). On these questions about coresponsibility and solidarity between communities, cf. Marcel DUMAIS, O.M.I., « Le rôle des Douze, de Pierre et de Jérusalem dans la fondation de la vie des communautés chrétiennes des Actes », In COMMISSION BIBLIQUE PONTIFICALE, *Unité et diversité dans l'Eglise*, Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1989, 265-292 (especially 288-291).

²⁰ Powers are naturally inherent in functions, but this aspect is never explicitly put forward in the Acts. On the basic notion of "service" (DIAKONIA) as a definition of all the ministries, cf. Acts 1:17, 25; 6:1, 2, 4; 11:29; 12:25; 20:24; 21:19).

(2:46). Simplicity and joy of community living are the signs of the risen Lord's presence

and action within the community. In the midst of his description of KOINONIA in the second summary, Luke could write: “With power the Apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great respect was paid to them all” (4:33). The Apostles, therefore, were witnessing to the Lord’s resurrection not only through word but also by the quality of their community life.²¹

The mission, before being characterized by its going forth to different places, must first of all be marked by its radiating influence. By working to build true communities, the faith is communicated by “contagion” more than through “conquest”. Community life aims to give its members the needed resources and support so that they can go and give witness elsewhere: I would call this the community’s centrifugal function. At the same time however, and perhaps even prior to this, the community is evangelizing by its very reality as community, that is to say, by the quality of life as community: one could call this the community’s centripetal function. Depending on its way of life, the community is either a witness or a counter-witness. First we evangelize by what we are, personally and collectively, rather than by what we say and do.

From the Bible we could show - but this would be the topic of another paper - that the relationship between community and mission can be established also from the opposite direction. In order to form a living community, one has to be completely mobilized for the mission. The community is formed and grows through its evangelization commitment. Community and mission are two inter-related realities: they call for each other and mutually make each other fruitful in a constant interrelationship.

²¹ Missionary witness through the quality of life is often mentioned by the New Testament authors. For example: “Your light must shine before men, so that they may see goodness in your acts and give praise to your heavenly Father” (Mt 5:16); “In everything you do, act without grumbling or arguing; prove yourselves innocent and straightforward, children of God beyond reproach in the midst of a twisted and depraved generation, among whom you shine like the stars in the sky” (Ph 2:14-15); “Though the pagans may slander you as trouble-makers, conduct yourselves blameless among them. By observing your good works, they may give glory to God on the day of visitation” (1 Pe 2:12). Cf also Paul VI in *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 1975, nos. 41-42.

The most profound expression of the bond that exists between community and mission is found in the gospel of St. John. In his priestly prayer — a prayer which we could also qualify as missionary - Jesus entrusts to his disciples the mission of being the sign and reflection of the communion that exists between the Father and the Son by means of their communion amongst themselves, and to be the sign and reflection of God’s love for all through their love for one another: “...that all may be one as you, Father, are in me and I in you; ...that they may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me... that they may be one as we are one, I living in them, you living in me, that their unity may be complete. So shall the world know that you sent me and that you loved them as you loved me” (Jn 17:21-23; cf. v.11). After he had given to his disciples his new commandment, Jesus adds: “This is how all will know you for my disciples: your love for one another” (Jn 13:35). To live and witness to God’s KOINONIA through the KOINONIA amongst ourselves: such is the ultimate goal both of the mission and of the community.²²

IV. Conclusion

No doubt, throughout this presentation, you have been spontaneously relating the life of the early Church to the Oblate life. In my own case, after I had concluded this study, I reread the letters of our Founder, the text of the Constitutions and Rules, as well as the document of the last General Chapter, and I was struck by the many similarities of these writings with the Bible, especially in regard to the different aspects of the KOINONIA that we have described. I leave it to others who are more competent in Oblate sources to bring out and comment the parallel elements.

I will, however, undertake to make one reference to the writings of our Founder, Blessed Eugene de Mazenod. In the first years of the community's founding, he often wrote that the members of the Society are to have but "one heart and one soul" (for example, in letters to Fathers Tempier, Courtes and Brother Guibert).²³ This explicit reference to the brief summaries of the life of the first Christians found in the Acts leads one to believe that he looked upon those first communities as the model for the community of the Oblates.

²² In the beginning of John's first epistle, the word KOINONIA is used to indicate the final goal of the missionary proclamation: "communion with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1:3); "communion with one another" (7:7).

²³ Letter to Tempier, October 9, 1815; to Courtes, November 8, 1821; to Brother Guibert, January 20, 1823.

The ideal of these first communities has always inspired the founders of communities throughout history: this is true for the first monastic orders as it is for the new communities that are appearing today under so many forms. Every community today that wants to fill its need of drinking again from the first sources by going back to the charism of its founding, will also go back to the ideal of the first Christian communities and derive there from a new élan.

The New Testament writings place before us an ideal of missionary community towards which we ought constantly to be striving, an ideal which constantly urges us to go forward, an ideal which we ceaselessly try to incarnate concretely in our own communities, even though we know that we will not fully achieve this here below. This ideal of community life is, when all is said and done, the great dream of the Kingdom, this Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated here below from the moment that he gathered the Twelve around himself, and of which religious communities are called to be special signs and achievements within our world. As long as our Oblate communities continue to nourish Jesus' great dream and, by allowing themselves to be inhabited by his Spirit, are striving to give it substance in the reality of their existence, they will give witness to a radiant vitality and the mission entrusted to the Congregation will be pursued in living fidelity to Jesus, to the Apostles and to our Blessed Founder.

Marcel DUMAIS, o.m.i.

Community, *Communio* and Apostolate in Early Christianity

There are words which have several different meanings. They have such a high degree of flexibility that their original meaning can undergo changes. Through an evolution or due to a different usage, they can acquire new meanings. Sometimes the evolution is due to historical circumstances; at other times, it is the result of a renewed theological approach. One such word is the Greek word *koinōnia* (and its Latin equivalent *communio*).*

Since we have to deal with the idea and the impact of *communio* in the first centuries of Christianity, it is self-evident that we have to describe as precisely as possible what we understand by it. In our context, *communio* means the bond that existed among all followers of Christ, between faithful and bishops, among the bishops themselves and among the faithful themselves. The Eucharistic communion was its source and expression. This seems to be a key notion. Without a clear understanding of this idea, much of what happened in the early Church cannot be understood.

We shall deal briefly with five main topics. After saying something on *communio* as a bond of unity in the Church as a whole, and the place of the Eucharistic communion within this bond, we shall speak of *communio* in the local churches and its implication for apostolic involvement. Finally, we shall see how the early monastic *koinōnia* reflected the biblical of *koinōnia*.

¹ On the Church as *Koinōnia*, cf. L. HERTLING, *Communio und Primal*, in *Misc. Hist. Pont.*, 9 (Rome 1943); ID. (transl.), *Communio, Church and Papacy in Early Christianity*, Chicago 1972; J.R. DIONNE, *The Papacy and the Church*, New York 1987, with philological and other considerations on pp. 293-297; W. AYMANS, *Communio. Theologische Reflexionen Über die Grundgestalt der Kirchenverfassung*, in *Miscellanea en honor de Juan Becunil y Anron-Misselles*, Madrid 1974; P. FRANSEN, *Die kirchliche Communio. Ein Lebensprinzip*, in *Kirche im Wandel*, Dusseldorf 1982, pp. 775-94.

1. *Communio* as bond of unity

One of the typical aspects of Church life in the first centuries was the use of written statements referred to as *litterae communionis*. They were a kind of passport which the bishops gave to Christians going on a journey. One could also call them certificates of recommendation given by one bishop to his fellow bishops and to the Christians of the places where the travelling Christians were passing through. Several other names were used for these certificates: *litterae communicatoriae*, *litterae canonicae*, *litterae formatae*, *litterae pacificae* or *litterae pads*.

It is known that the word *pax* often had the same meaning as *communio*. For example, Tertullian (+ca. 225) stated: “nec recipiuntur haeretici in pacem et communionem ab ecclesiis.”² On some Christian graves one can read that the deceased died *in pace*, that means: “in communion with the Church.”³ The expression, “Qui vixit in pace,”⁴ was found several times in a cemetery of the sixth/seventh century near Lyons.

The travelers who possessed such *litterae communionis* enjoyed certain privileges. Through the power of these *litterae*, they were received as true brothers and sisters in the

regions where there were Christians. Since we already find an allusion to this system in the *Didache*, we know that it dated already from the first decades of Christianity. Later, it will receive the name *contesseratio hospitalitatis*.⁵

In 362, when Julian the Apostate tried to reorganize the pagan society according to the model of the Church, he also wanted to introduce this *contesseratio hospitalitatis*. And the Church historian Sozomenos notes concretely that “he admitted primarily the letters by which the bishops recommended the travelers among themselves, so that everyone could go where he wanted and there be received hospitably as a friend.”⁶

² *De praescr. haeret.*, 32 (PL 2, 45).

³ For example, “secessit in pace” or “depositus est in pace”. In the Greek inscriptions: “*en eirene*”.

⁴ H. BECK, *The Formula ‘qui vixit in pace’ of the newly found Inscriptions at Chalons* in *Studi sulla Chiesa antica e sull’umanesimo* (Anal. Greg. LXX), Rome 1954, pp. 59-71. In his conclusion, the author says: “It is certain that *pax* held a technical meaning all its own for early Christians. It was employed as a designation of the bond which held the Church together, of that juridical and sacramental reality which provided the foundation whereupon Catholic unity was reared” (pp. 62-63).

⁵ *De praescr. haeret.* 20 (PL 2, 32).

⁶ SOZOMENOS, *Hist. Eccl.*, V, 16.

Saint Augustine once referred to this practice to refute a Donatist bishop who had argued that he was in *communio* with the Church “ubique terrarum esse communionem suam.” “That is not difficult to prove,” said Augustine, “Can you write *communio*-letters for the Churches that I shall name?” And he went on to name the oldest Churches that had been established by the Apostles (such as Jerusalem, Corinth, Ephesus) and that were certainly not Donatist.⁷

The Christian Church constituted a community, a *communio*, a *koindnia*. Bishops and faithful felt closely bound together. And each Church constituted a *communio* of its own. A person who had committed a specific crime or adhered to a heresy, was expelled from the *communio*. Such was the original meaning of an excommunication. The excommunication was not the *poena vindicativa et medicinalis*, a penalty for very specific crimes, as it appeared later in Canon Law. It was first of all the withdrawal of the *communio-bond* because of a serious fault, the expulsion from the community, from the *koindnia*.

Sometimes the excommunication was pronounced by name; at other times, it was applied automatically (e.g. against the *lapsi* who had defected during the persecution of Decius). Bishops could excommunicate other bishops. There are even examples of lay people who withdrew from communion with their bishop when he no longer seemed to be orthodox. Cyprian was even of the opinion that this was the duty of the lay people in such cases.⁸

So the *communio* was the conscientious living of the fraternal bond by which Christians, anywhere in the world, were naturally bound to each other by the bonds of true doctrine and in love, together with the bishops, who themselves formed one great community and strove to live an evangelical life.

2. The Eucharistic Communion as source and expression of the Consciousness of Unity

Hertling has shown⁹ how extremely important it is not to lose sight of the centrality of the Eucharistic communion for a better understanding of the Christian communities. Let us just have a look at some examples.

⁷ *Epist.* 44, 6 (PL 33, 176).

⁸ *Epist.* 67, 3 (CSEL III, 2, 737).

⁹ L. HERTLING, *Communio und Primat*, pp. 6-10.

Around the middle of the second century, Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, went to Rome to discuss with Pope Anicetus the date when Easter should be celebrated. These negotiations yielded no results; that is, no agreement was reached between East and West. Nevertheless, according to Irenaeus who relates the event, they remained in communion with each other. He affirms this by relating the following incident: Notwithstanding the difference of opinions, the pope invited the bishop to celebrate Mass in his presence and to distribute the Eucharist to his clergy.¹⁰ This incident shows that Eucharistic communion was a proof of the *communio* as a bond of unity.

A text from the third century taken from the *Didascalía* points in the same direction. Here is the advice given to the bishops:

When a foreign bishop arrives, he shall sit beside the resident bishop and have the right to the same homage. And you the resident bishop shall invite him to speak to your people. At the Eucharistic celebration, ask him to speak the words of the consecration and if he declines, leaving the honour to you, ask him to at least pronounce the words over the chalice.¹¹

Here again we see that the *koinonia* was expressed by the common offering of the Eucharist.

In the beginning of the fifth century, we see Pope Innocent I (400-417) sending *afermentum*, a piece of consecrated bread, to the clergy on feast days. The reason he gives is remarkable: So that they do not feel separated from our *communio* on feast days.¹²

Since the ecclesiastical *communio* was expressed by the Eucharistic *communio*, in times of schisms it was accepted as a principle that each person belonged to the Church where he received the Eucharistic communion. Here, too, there are many examples available that illustrate the bond between the Eucharist and *Communio*. I mention only

¹⁰ *EVS., Hist. Eccl.*, V, 24.

¹¹ « ... si autem, cum sit prudens et honorem tibi reservans, non velit, super calicem dicat ». *Didascalía* (ed. Funk), II, 58, 2.

¹² « ... ut se a nostra communione, maxime illa die, non judicent separatos ». *Innoc. ad Decentium*, 5 (PL 20, 556-557).

Macedonius, the heretical patriarch of Constantinople, wanted to force the Christians to receive his communion. He forced their mouths open in order to give it to them. No doubt, such an action seems incomprehensible and devoid of sense from our perspective. However, it is comprehensible if one keeps in mind the importance given by the people of that day to the bond of *communio* in the sense of Eucharist with *communio* in the sense of *koindnia*.¹³ This concept remained for a long time in the Church.

In the beginning of the 7th century, Sophronius tells us the story of a monophysite from Alexandria who wanted to become a Catholic, but feared the revenge of the heretics. In order to avoid difficulties, he went to the Catholic basilica and there received communion in secret. The matter became public and so, Sophronius says, he was recognized as a member of the Catholic Church.¹⁴

The strangeness of stories of this kind is not what is significant; what we are trying to point out is the connection which existed between the Eucharist and belonging to the true *communio*. This can also help us to understand the reason behind the custom of Christians taking the Eucharist with them when they travelled in heretical areas.¹⁵

Cyprian had a typical expression to indicate a heretic. He called him a *rebellus adversus Christi sacrificium*.¹⁶ We would tend to say *adversus fidem* or *adversus doctrinam*; but for Cyprian, a heretic is someone who is in revolt against the Eucharist. The Eucharist was considered as a manifestation of the ecclesiastical *communio*. Excommunication was analogically seen as a separation from the Eucharist. I shall limit myself to some examples of expressions that Augustine used for excommunication: separation *a Christi corpore, a sacramentorum participatione, a sacramento caelestis panis, a pane quotidiano, ab altari, ab illo pane, a societate altaris*}¹⁷

Initially, very little thought and reflection was directed toward discovering the theological foundation of communion and excommunication. The question as to whether the people thus cut off still belonged to the Church and to what degree was not even asked. The precise juridical impact was not clearly defined. It was not until the time of the struggle against the Donatists that some theological distinctions were made in regard to this point. It is clear that this is an issue where theological reflection was only beginning. The starting point for their reasoning was not very complicated. It ran something like this: Whoever separates himself from me (the bishop), separates himself from the Church, since I am in communion with the Church, and my belonging to the Church is shown through the Eucharist.

¹³ SOCR., II, 38.

¹⁴ *Mirac. SS. Cyri. et Joh.* 12 (PG 87/3, 3460). For some other examples, see JOH. MOSCHUS, *Pratum spirituale*, 48 (PG 87/3, 2904) and ID. 30 (PG 87/3, 2878). Also SOZOMENOS, *Hist. Eccl.*, VIII, 5.

¹⁵ SOPHRONIUS, *Mirac. Cyri. et Joh.* 36 (PG 87/3, 3553).

¹⁶ *De cath. eccl. unitate*, 17 (CSEL III, I, 226).

¹⁷ *De symb. ad catech.* 7, 15 (PL 40, 636); *Contra ep. Par.*, 3, 9, 2 (PL 43, 83); *Serm.* 351, 7 (PL 39, 1343); *Serm.* 56, 12, 7 (PL 38, 402); *Serm.* 59, 4 (PL 38, 404); *Ep.* 153, 6 (PL 33, 655).

3. *Communio* in the local Churches

What is true of the Church as a whole, can be said to be equally true of the local Churches. The Church Fathers often focus their attention on the relationship between faith and the Eucharist, and to the evangelical way of life that was pursued as a common ideal. More than once they refer to the first Christian community of Jerusalem as it is described in the Acts of the Apostles (2,42-47 and 4,32-37). Especially since chapter 2, verse 42 is the only place in the Acts where the word *koinonia* is explicitly used.

Among the exegetes, the interpretation of the word remains a matter for discussion: Was it the spiritual sense of Christian community that Luke had in mind? As a result, did he give it the same meaning Paul gave it? Was there a real community of goods in Jerusalem or did Luke only want the verses 4,34-35 to be an image of the ideal to show that the communion of the spirit had to be realized concretely in deeds? The exegesis of these verses, verses which give us some of the most important summaries in Acts, belongs to the competence of the specialist.¹⁸ The issue we have to address is to find out what concept people who were Christian in the first centuries had of the ideal Christian community.

When one studies the Church Fathers on this point, one is struck by the fact that, on the one hand, they considered the communities of the early Christian era as an ideal to be attained, while on the other hand, they were very conscious that the reality of the early Christian communities always fell far below the ideal.

Let us look at some examples.

Origen (+ca. 254) painted the Christian communities of his day as communities that reminded one of the early community in Jerusalem. He represented the faithful as living in detachment from the things of the world.¹⁹ That idealized picture of the Christian community is found in his *Contra Celsum*. However, this is a work of apologetics, and

¹⁸ In this paper, we are not dealing with exegesis of the term *communio*. We leave the exegetical analysis of that term to commentaries and studies such as those of E. Haechen, H. Conzelmann, G. Schneider, M. Dibelius, L. Cerfaux, J. Dupont, M. Manzanera and others. Here we limit ourselves to an analysis of the way in which *communio* was lived during the first centuries.

therefore lacks a certain realism. In one curious passage, he compares the Christian community to some of the cities of his time. He says:

To take an example, at Athens, the Church of God is a tractable, dependable body but the secular assembly is riddled with intrigue And if you compare the senate of any town, you will see that in God's Church, there are senators worthy of their position ... whereas in the cities, the senators show no sign at all of being superior to other citizens...²⁰

In his other writings, especially in his homilies and biblical commentaries, we come across a completely different tone. It is plain that Origen knows quite well that the spirit of the first community is no longer being lived up to and he does not hesitate to reproach the faithful for their faults.

He reproaches them with lack of assiduity in hearing the word of God. They no longer find time to pray. Some spend the greater part of their time on mundane things, on what is going on in the world. They are wrapped up in litigation and have their hearts set on business matters or financial calculations.²¹ There are also some of the faithful who pride themselves on their wealth, or who work to occupy the highest places. Even among the priests such a spirit exists. Origen speaks with great severity towards ambition among the clergy. "Some intrigue to be made deacons then aspire to the priest's office, and some, not content with that, intrigue to obtain bishop's rank."²²

It is Origen's conviction that a community, and a fortiori those who are responsible for a community, have to bear witness. It was his great pain that his contemporaries no longer lived their Christian life in the manner of the first Christian communities where all the members of the community were united in faith and peace, "united in heart and soul," as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles.

¹⁹ *Contra Celsum* 4, 26. See DANI LOU, *Origen*, New York 1955, p. 40.

²⁰ *Contra Celsum* 3, 30.

²¹ *Horn. Gen.* 10, 1.

²² *Comm. ser. Matt.* 12 (PG 13, 1616).

Now let me dwell for a moment on the opinion of another Church Father, Cyprian (+ca. 258), in regard to the local Church as *koinonia*. As the bishop of Carthage he witnessed the fragility of his Christians: schisms, discord, individualism and egotism. During the relatively long period of the religious peace that preceded the persecution of Decius, Christianity had grown rapidly and with ease. However, quantitative growth had a negative influence.²³

Amföldi has spoken of a *Weltuntergangsstimmung*, the feeling that the times were bad and that the end of the world was probably not far away.²⁴ In his book, *De lapsis*, Cyprian had not been over-indulgent towards the faithful, nor towards some bishops and priests.²⁵ During the persecution of Decius, many (*maximus numerus*) had apostatized. As for what this has to do with our theme of *communio*, it is interesting to note that Cyprian reminded them that they had forgotten that their standard should be to maintain the example of the early Church: "obliti quid credentes aut sub apostolis ante fecissent at semper facere deberent." He concretely points out the way the group around the Apostles had lived together in love and fraternity. As the title for Chapter III of his *Ad Quirinum*,

the chapter in which he deals with Acts 4,32, he chose *Agapen et dilectionem fraternam exercendam*.²⁶

²³ P. C. BORI, *Chiesa primitiva. L'immagine della comunità delle origini nella storia della chiesa antica*, Brescia 1974. On Cyprian pp. 64-83.

²⁴ G. AMFÖLDI, *Der heilige Cyprian und die Kirche des Römischen Reiches*, in *Historia* 22 (1973) 429-501, 485. Also A. MATELLANES, *Comunicatio. El sentido de la comuni n ecclesial en San Cipriano*, in *Communio* 1 (1970) 19-64; 347-401.

²⁵ *De Lapsis* 6 (CSEL 3, 240-241).

²⁶ *Ad Quirinum* 3, 73 (CSEL 3, 103).

²⁷ P.C. BORI, *o.c.*, pp. 71-72.

The importance he gives to communion and fraternity is remarkable. Christians must form a communion that gives witness. He stresses that communion should spontaneously arise out of the lives of people who have taken the *evangelica lex* as their exclusive standard of life. He explicitly draws his readers' attention to the words of Acts of the Apostles 4, 32a, "The body of believers was united in heart and soul."

In Cyprian's writings, "to be united" is a key notion because for him it incarnates the spirit that must animate the community of Christians. He uses a number of synonyms for it: *consensus, una et simplex concordia, anima et mente una, pax, fraternitas*.²⁷ For Cyprian, it is through love that the vitality of faith has to be proven. Cyprian sees the Christian community as a group of believers unanimously united around the bishop with a total availability, witnessing to the world.

4 Witnessing to the world

Already previous to this, Harnack had stated that the witness offered by the Christians had been the single most important factor in the propagation of the faith. K.S. Latourette, in his seven volumes on the expansion of Christianity confirmed that statement. And he added that the most important workers in the movement of conversion during the first centuries were not professional missionaries, but rather the ordinary men and women who lived the evangelical values in their ordinary lives of every day.²⁸ This was the result of continually impressing on the faithful that apostolic expansion was an essential part of the Christian vocation. The letter to Diognetes, written around 200, expressed this idea through a most eloquent image: "What the soul is in relation to the body, so are the Christians to the world. Just as the soul animates all the members of the body, so the Christians radiate in all the cities of the world."²⁹

The Christian communities are continually being reminded that they have an apostolic task to accomplish. Saint Augustine (+43) told his faithful: "You, too, proclaim Christ. Which faithful can maintain silence about Christ?"³⁰ From the writings of other Church Fathers as well we can see how convinced they were that the apostolate should not be considered a superfluous luxury, but rather an integral demand of the Christian vocation itself. It was commonly accepted that it was impossible to be a Christian without at the same time being an apostle. A couple of examples taken from allocutions of St. John Chrysostom to the members of his community give eloquent expression to this idea:

When the yeast one mixes with the dough does not mingle with the whole dough, can it be called a real yeast? When a perfume does not any longer spread itself among those who come in its proximity, can it still be called a real perfume? And do not say: "I cannot radiate in my milieu." For if you are Christians, it is impossible that you are not radiating. What is written in the nature of things does not suffer opposition. Now then, this is the question here: Radiating is written in the nature of a Christian. Do not ridicule God. So also if you assert that the Christian cannot, you ridicule Him and you do not speak the truth. For it would be easier for the sun not to give warmth and light than for a Christian not to radiate Christ. It would be easier for the light to become darkness. Therefore, do not say that such is impossible; the opposite is impossible.³¹

²⁸ A.V. HARNACK, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, 2 vol., Leipzig 1906 (The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Centuries, New York, 1962); K.S. LATOURETTE, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 7 vol., 1978. See also Y. CONGAR, *Jalons pour une théologie du laïc, Paris 1964, passim*.

²⁹ *Ep. ad Diogn.* VI (PG 2, 1176).

³⁰ *Enarrat. in ps. 96(97)* (PL 37, 1243-1244).

Another of his courageous statements could be considered quite relevant for the present day situation of the Church:

It is not my purpose to tell you that you should avoid every contact with pagans. On the contrary, we remain faithful to our vocation if we mix ourselves in such a way among them that we can attract them to our religion. We must give them the doctrine through the testimony of our life.³²

For one last example we go to a sermon Augustine preached to his people in Hippo:

Let everyone exercise an influence in his house, either on his son, or on his servants, on a client or a subordinate. Influence them.... We beseech you, we stimulate you in the name of the Lord and His mercy to act with kindness, to live in peace, to allow the public power to exercise its duty about which it will have to render an account to God and to the authorities. But as far as it is in your power, let everyone convince, give advice, in his house and in his neighbourhood, to all those with whom he keeps up either friendship or business relations.³³

Numerous other examples could be given, but that would lead us too far afield.³⁴ The texts we have quoted suffice, we believe, to illustrate that the Christian community, aware of the *communio-bond* through which all the faithful recognized their mutual union, is supposed to constitute an apostolic community as well.

5. The monastic *koinonia*

In his book, *Koinonia*, an analysis of the idea of communion, Professor Bori sketches the evolution of the idea *communio* in the thinking of the Christians of the first centuries³⁵. The model of the ideal community as described in Acts soon seemed to be an unattainable Utopia - even for the local Churches. Church Fathers such as Origen,

³¹ *Horn. 20 in Acta Apost.* (PG 60, 63-164).

³² *Horn. 7 in cap. I Gen.* (PG 53, 68).

³³ *Sermo 302* (PL 38, 1392-1393).

³⁴ For example, Saint John Chrysostom: *In S. Jul. Mart.* (PG 50, 674-675) and *Horn. 46 in Mt.* (PG 58, 78-79).

³⁵ P.C. BORI, *Koinonia, L'idea della comunione nell'ecclesiologia recente e nel nuovo Testamento*, Brescia 1972.

Cyprian, and especially Augustine, came to the conclusion that alongside of the city of God, there was also the reign of the devil, the terrestrial city at its worst, and that both thoroughly permeated the visible Church on earth. This tension continued unresolved. Although christian writers were quite conscious of this *mysterium iniquitatis*, they referred regularly to the *koindnia* as described by St. Luke.

In the opinion of the ecclesiastical authors, all the faithful were held to strive to attain the apostolic example. The memory of the apostolic community of Jerusalem continued to emerge rather regularly in the preaching of the first centuries. At first, one has the impression that the possibility of attaining such an ideal was not in doubt. Over and over again *agape* is emphasized as a possible ideal and as a guarantee for the continuity of the apostolic experience of the Church in later centuries. Gradually, however, another idea began to come to the fore, namely, that the original model of christian community as it was lived in the community of Jerusalem and described in Acts is fully visible only in the monastic *koindnia*.

The first monastic communities, however, should not be looked upon so much as an attempt to reconstruct the apostolic experience, but rather as its explicit continuation. Leaving aside the early Pachomian writings, we will concentrate rather on the first monastic rule in the East, the Rule of Saint Basil. Several versions of it are extant; we limit ourselves to the version called Rule VII because that is where, more clearly than in other versions, there appears the theme that the cenobitic community wanted to imitate the primitive community of Jerusalem.³⁶

All the arguments that plead for a community life with the characteristics of *koinonia* are enumerated. They are: Charity does not seek its own comfort; the example of the apostles having formed a community is the *agape*, completed by the Pauline image of the body of Christ in which the different members are complementary. The role of the common witness is stressed. Perhaps it is because of the aspect of witness that, in this very place in another version of the rule, is quoted Matthew, chapter 5, verses 15 and 16, the passage where he speaks of the lamp which is put on the lamp stand. It is typical of Basil that he also quotes verse one of Psalm 132 (133) in which the ideas of fraternity and joy are mentioned together.³⁷

Later on, this same idea will be adopted by St. Jerome and Saint Augustine in the West.³⁸ In Saint Augustine, the idea is very clear. In his sermon 356,³⁹ he explicitly refers to the Acts of the Apostles and it is rather remarkable that he starts his reading with

³⁶ D. AMAND, *L'ascèse monastique de Saint-Basile*, Maredsous 1949. Also J. GRIBOMONT, *Saint-Basile*, in *Theologie de la vie monastique*, Paris 1961, pp. 99-113, 110.
³⁷ S. GIET, *Les idées et l'action sociale de Saint-Basile*, Paris 1941. Also P.J. FEDWICK ED., *Basil of Caesarea. Christian, Humanist, Ascetic*, 2 vol., Leiden 1981, and I. KARAYANNOPOULOS, *Saint Basils Social Activity*, pp. 375-391.

chapter 4, verse 31 (and not 32: "...all were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness." He addressed himself to monks who were clerics. One never becomes "clericus" for himself, but rather for others, that is, for apostolic reasons. Witnessing for Christ is implied in the building up of a community. A religious community should not be considered as locked in on itself; it has a function within the *koinonia*. This was the final point of the evolution of Augustine's conception concerning religious communities. The evolution went from personal asceticism to the building up of a community, and from a community of like-minded to the consciousness of being sent for the whole Church. Ascetics become each other's brothers; they constitute a community, but that community as such has an apostolic mission.⁴⁰

For the theme of this convention, it is undoubtedly important that Basil, pioneer of monastic life in the East, as well as Augustine in the West, discovered the apostolic and social function of a religious community.

The study of the Christian communities in the ancient Church brings us to the following conclusions:

1. Initially, the Christians lived in a bond of communion. Even when they were dispersed, they had the feeling of being members of the same *koinonia*.

2. The celebration of the Eucharist was both source and expression of that communion.

3. The community of Jerusalem as described in Acts 2, 42-47, and 4, 32-37, was

³⁸ P.C. BORI, *Chiesa primitiva...*, p. 164.

Sermo 356 (PL
³⁹ 1574-1581).

⁴⁰ T.J. VAN BAVEL, o.s.a., *De eerste christelijke commune en het religieuze leven*, in
Tijdschrift voor Geestelijk Leven 35 (1979/5) 498-524, 517.

considered the ideal way of life and was often referred to as such by many Church Fathers. The local Churches were expected to take this as their model.

4. Communities as well as the individuals living in the communities were bound to witness. It was assumed that they were meant to be yeast in the dough.

5. The ideal of christian community as described in the Acts of the Apostles seemed unattainable for the average christian communities, especially when the Church was faced with the reality of mass conversions. Consequently, a more realistic vision for christian community chose to see the ideal as realizable only within the confines of; monastic communities whose vocation it was to be giving group witness to the evangelical message.

Robrecht BOUDENS, o.m.i.

Religious Community: A Sign of Hope

The role of the religious community in the Church and in the world

In the history of the Church and of society, the religious community has been a dynamic source of renewal, interior energy, creativity and response to very particular needs. The birth of the monastic movement manifested an urgent, existential invitation to the whole Church to return to an evangelical radicalism which had its undeniable social influence and impact as a challenge to the Empire. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Benedictine abbeys with their numerous reforms were, without doubt, a necessary point of reference for civil and religious rebirth. The same thing occurred with the rise of the mendicant movement which enkindled the masses and inspired them to rally around the evangelical ideals. To a lesser, but no less significant degree, one can say the same for the other movements that followed such as the “Devotio Moderna,” the Orders of the Reform and the Counter-reform, the Congregations of the seventeen and eighteen hundreds...¹

Today, faced with the uncertainties and the crises that torment us, the question spontaneously arises as to whether religious life still has its role to play at the heart of the Church and the world. Does it still have the power to implant in society the seeds of the Gospel in order to leaven it according to God’s design? The intellectual and cultural world, the domain of charitable works and of social assistance - given the new historical, social and political configuration of our modern states - are no longer the kind of milieus where religious can make their contribution as they did in the past, a contribution which was then completely adequate in fulfilling contemporary needs, at times, even exclusively so. Is religious life, like a beautiful, but archaic, foreign element out of step with the times, therefore destined to be relegated to the fringes of our history-in-the-making?

I believe that religious life is being offered a new and extraordinary opportunity to present itself once again as a prophetic sign within the Church and the world. It can, in fact, offer that for which the whole of society and our contemporaries yearn, even if, at times, they are not fully conscious of their desire.

¹ Cf. J. ALVAREZ GOMEZ, *La vida religiosa ante los retos de la historia*, Madrid 1979.

It is a fact that a widely diffused anxiety is running like a tremor through the whole of humanity. There is a common yearning for a deep, authentic communion, for a cosmic reconciliation, for freedom from every form of slavery, for peace, for unity on every level, from the level of the family to that of the whole planet. This is a new sign of the times to which, by virtue of its distinctive form of community living, religious life can offer a distinctive and definite response.

An anxious yearning for unity, a sign of the times

At first glance, the destructive elements which characterize our post-Christian society are evident. Nowadays, rather than a denial of the presence of God, the reaction is to ignore the entire question. That which is becoming ever more prominent is a hopeless, apathetic, pragmatic nihilism, a far cry from the tragic nihilism of Nietzsche. In the wash of this nihilism, the fundamental values upon which Christianity is based suffer shipwreck. With the downfall of God, the whole social and human context slowly disintegrates because man without God is no longer man. Man is such as he is because God sees him as a "Thou." When man loses his relationship with God, he begins to disintegrate and the whole of society disintegrates with him.

Progressive disintegration: under certain aspects, that could very well be the definition of the present situation of such a large part of the Western world - political disintegration, cultural fragmentation and isolation, the dissolution of values. Although this phenomenon is a fact of the Western world, it has undeniable repercussions on all the other cultures.

When men no longer see themselves as sons of the one Father, they no longer recognize each other as brothers. Thus, the tensions and divisions that exist between North and South, East and West become even more pronounced. And within these blocks, fences arise between the rich and the poor; racial, cultural and religious divisions surface once again. Everywhere one can see for himself the new phenomena of violence and terrorism, the persisting use of torture and of unjust and illegitimate forms of repression...

Such a "dissolution" reveals the desire for a new complex of values, of a new composition of society which will respond more to the needs of the human spirit, needs which are always the same, but which are now perceived in a new way. In fact, in the very midst of the actual tensions and divisions, we can perceive, as John Paul II has pointed out,

an unmistakable desire on the part of men of good will and on the part of authentic Christians to repair the breaches, to heal the wounds, to restore on all levels an essential unity. In the hearts of many, such a desire involves a true yearning for reconciliation (...). Without a shadow of a doubt, this aspiration to a sincere and firm reconciliation is a basic expectation of our society, almost the result of an irrepressible desire for peace; paradoxical as it may seem, the more dangerous are the elements of division, all the more vigorous is this desire.²

The anxious yearning for communion seems to be proportioned to the reality of fragmentation which humanity is experiencing today.

This entire age of ours is striving to achieve unity and is tenaciously pursuing this goal in every possible way - in spite of the evident failures. The signs are many. Is not the diffusion of marxism and of the various forms of socialism a way of raising the cry that calls for unity? Are not international organizations an attempt to come together on a world level? Does not the dialogue of the great religions (of which the meetings of Assisi (1986) and of Kyoto (1987) are peak moments of great significance) speak of a will to oppose all tendencies toward a new religious intolerance? Does not the ecumenical dialogue among the Churches reveal a desire to break down the ancient barriers which

prevent full communion? In spite of the failures and the regressions, this uneasy yearning for unity will not call it quits. No, rather, it becomes more acute, spurred on by the new opportunities offered it by the mass media, by cultural and commercial exchanges, by travel, by sports events and so on.

Thus, this yearning for unity is undoubtedly one of the signs of the times which is most deeply felt in today's world. It is a phenomenon raised up by the Spirit, who, at the same time, has imparted to the Church new dynamisms of communion with the express purpose of making it capable of responding to the expectations of the human race.

Already from the end of the 1800's, new currents of thought which perceived the Church in its mystery began to emerge. One of the most noteworthy theological expressions was found in the school of Tübingen with Müller who put a new emphasis on the concept of the Body of Christ animated by the Holy Spirit. In this century, during the period between the two world wars, theological thought seemed to have centred almost exclusively on ecclesiology and consisted in a rediscovery of the fundamental importance of the role of Christ in his Church, of the union of each one of the faithful with Him and of the faithful's union to each other in Him.

² *De reconciliatione et poenitentia in hodierno Ecclesiae munere*, 2. XII. 1984, n. 3-4.

The rediscovery of the Church as the Body of Christ found its most complete formulation in the encyclical letter, *Mystici Corporis*. From there, the progression was to the definition of Church as Communion (How could we not mention here Hamer's book, *Is the Church a Communion?*), to the Church as Sacrament, to arrive finally at the Second Vatican Council which brought to a close this great ecclesiological renewal, availing itself of the previous contributions and studying more in depth the mystery of the unity of the Church, presently described by the term People of God, and expressing in doctrinal terms the "life-filled" journey traveled in the meantime.

This maturation of theology in terms of the Church as Body of Christ, Communion, People of God, finally seen in the light of the mystery of *Ecclesia de Trinitate*, was the fruit, not only of a deeper reflection on the biblical, patristic and liturgical data, but especially of a life of communion experienced within the People of God, as Congar already affirmed in 1939, emitting a law valid for the years that followed and which prepared the Council:

The most decisive element by far in the renewal of the current ecclesiology was an increase of vital activity in the Church, a growth on the spiritual level which was lived before it was formulated.³

As Tillard writes, making a concise summary of these years,

Our age is tormented by a desire for communication and for interpersonal communion. This characterizes to such a point the life and the research of the Churches that they are discovering a new orientation for their evangelical renewal. New forms of "Christian community" ordinarily not originating from initiatives taken by the hierarchy, but coming from the creativity "at the base," are springing up pretty well all over.⁴

³ *Autour du renouveau de l'Ecclesiologie*, in « La vie intellectuelle », 10. 1. 1939, p. 11.

⁴ *Davanti a Dio e per il mondo*, Roma 1975, p. 207.

Religious community, a response to the signs of the times

In this context of a need for relationships, of reconciliation, communion, unity on the human, social, political, ecclesial, interecclesial levels, the religious community rediscovers its specific mission. It stands forth as the privileged setting for communion, reconciliation, full development of the person and of interpersonal relationships, the archetypal paradigm of the fullness of a shared human living animated by the evangelical values where “there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Taking this perspective in speaking about religious community will not be interpreted as a sign of narcissism, turning in on oneself, an escape from the responsibilities inherent in a socio-political involvement, a search for a refuge to protect one’s vulnerability and a need for security. It will be rather, an expression of the will to rediscover the depths of the Christian plan of life, and basically, of human existence, because the human person as a being in relationship realizes this fulfillment in communion. It will be the proclamation, in fact, that unity is possible in spite of the signs to the contrary, that the yearning for universal brotherhood is not a Utopian dream, but a reality lived in the present, even if it is lived in suffering and a perpetual need of building anew. Religious community will be a sign of hope for the man of today.

A sign of hope for the Church

Inside the Church itself, religious community has its own special role as a sign and an incentive. The Church as One, as Communion, finds in religious community one of its characteristic expressions, something of a special concentration or distillation of unity. In turn, the religious community expresses the life of unity of the One Church. It expresses unity and proclaims it again as an especially effective witnessing which becomes a vital force and an incentive for unity.

Everyone knows that the Church is the community of the Risen One and that He, making himself present in each one of his members, makes each member a sharer in his own sonship and therefore makes brothers of them all, thus making *koinonia* possible. But this reality is not always made visible. The achievements of Christian brotherhood are often obscured by the fact that the many tasks of every day oblige Christians to go their separate ways to be the leaven in the dough. Only the Sunday assembly succeeds in signifying more intensely this reality. Meanwhile, religious community “as a family united in the name of the Lord” can constantly “enjoy his presence.” (PC 15). In the larger ecclesial community, it acquires the character of an icon: a place in which one meets the active presence of the Risen one and the *koinonia* bestowed by him; and a character of revelation as well: it reveals to the Church its very being and what it ought to be. In this sense, within the Church itself, religious community can become a constant source of renewal for the Church.⁵

In point of fact, every renewal in the history of the Church was able to arise because of the reimplementation of the project of community, especially through the work of the

ever new charismatic expressions of religious life. Such an undertaking used as its primary model the evangelical koinonia, more especially that model lived in the early Church of Jerusalem.

The memory of the origins of the Church, and especially, the description of their life according to the Acts of the Apostles, has always constituted, one can say, a model, an example, an ideal (sometimes a myth) in the course of the Church's history. Especially during periods of crisis, in a decisive turn of events, the possibility of a return to the ancient, to the origins, the idea of a re-formation in relationship to the form "ecclesiae primitivae" always reasserted itself with renewed vigor: from the monastic movements to the Gregorian reform, from the Protestant Reformation to the more recent, more complex post-conciliar developments in Catholic circles, the texts of the Acts are proposed as incentives, as challenges, as the beginning of a crisis in the Christian conscience, in the dilemma between perennial, absolute validity of the ideal and the continuous necessity of incarnating it in history."

Now this theme of a "return to one's origins," not in a nostalgic or archeological sense, but as a confrontation with the Christian message in its purest expression and a returning to the sources in order to realize them in one's own times, is the real task that every religious community proposes for itself at its inception.⁷

⁵ Cf. J.M. TILLARD, *Le grandi leggi del rinnovamento della vita religiosa*, in Aa Vv., // *rinnovamento della vita religiosa*, Firenze 1968, p. 128-131.

⁶ PC. BORI, *Chiesa primitiva. L'immagine della comunità delle origini...nella storia della chiesa antica*, Brescia 1975, p. 11.

⁷ Cf. What I wrote on this point in my book, *I fondatori uomini dello Spirito. Per una teologia del carisma di fondatore*, Roma 1982, p. 297-303.

Memory

Within the Church, therefore, the religious community has its own special vocation to be a reminder of the early community, a reminder of the community of the Twelve gathered around Jesus and of the community raised up by the Apostles in Jerusalem. It gives itself the task to make present again that archetypal experience, reliving, sometimes literally, the leaving of everything, the living together, the sharing of material goods, a special unity of wills and of purpose... The religious community presents itself to the Church as a setting where witness is given of the historical, evangelical koinonia. If the whole Church is called to live the koinonia of its origins, the religious community stands forth as a particular crystallization of it and as an important and ongoing setting for the actualization of this process of communion. In this place, Christian koinonia takes on visible shape in its most exacting and stable form.

Charismatic realization

The religious community's evoking of the memory of this koinonia as practiced in the beginning is not an academic evocation, but an existential proclamation before the

whole Christian community of the very real possibility of its realization along with its radical demands. The “origins”

- the religious community should be able to proclaim by its very existence
- are not far off in the distant **past**, nor are they predictions of **Utopian** societies in the future. Koinonia, made possible by the **paschal** event and launched at Pentecost is a present reality, a reality which can be experienced, a reality rendered visible in the religious community. The evoking of this memory calls upon the Church to live according to its very own nature which is that of being communion and at the same time proclaims its capacity to be realized.

The historic diversification of the religious life in the multiplicity of its expressions (there are so many kinds, so many forms of communities!) constitutes a further enrichment of the Church in its journey toward the attainment of that unity which, in Christ and in the Church as mystery, is already actual fact. The adaptation which the religious community has been able to achieve in common life in different ages and different cultures - under a special impulse of the Spirit - shows forth the legitimate plurality that the one koinonia can adopt in the life of the Church and of peoples and shows forth how every age is called to reinterpret and to adapt the Christian message which never grows old and which always can and must be an adequate response to the new cultural and social demands.

Prophecy

Finally, the religious community stands forth in the midst of the Church as a prophecy of the Church's koinonia already achieved when, gathered around the one pastor, there will be only one flock when all of the sons of God will be seated at the same table as one family, no longer united by bonds of flesh and blood, but by the bond of divine generation. In point of fact, the religious community is not ostensibly gathered together by the spontaneous mutual choice of its members, but by a free call from God, and it is not based on blood relationships with one's human family, but on theological charity alone.

Sign of hope for the world

The prophetic witness of the religious community within our Church does not exhaust its function there. It extends to the realization of unity between the Churches, and beyond that, between religions. And even beyond to the unification of all of humanity.

For years already, there has been a dialogue going on between our Catholic monastic communities and the monastic life in the Orthodox Church. In the Evangelical churches new forms of monastic communities are being born and they are characterized by a strong ecumenical tension. Then, too, there are interconfessional monastic communities asserting themselves. The religious communities - those present in the various Churches - are thus placing themselves at the vanguard in the journey toward unity, a unity of which they are the forerunners in the areas of the common choice of the evangelical life, of prayer, of brotherly communion. Also in the dialogue among the great religions, the monastic communities are constructing their own advance posts.

Gatherings, meetings, the exchange of experiences are becoming more frequent among the forms of monasticism of the different religions. The points of contact are, in fact, numerous and a great many of the expressions of religious monasticism are common to all: asceticism, silence, meditation, withdrawal from the world....

But the religious community is thrusting beyond that. It has a vocation to present itself as a sign of the realization of the human person as such and of his deepest call to "ecstasy" (to stand outside himself) in his relationship with other men and to transcend himself with them in a communion which, reaching right to the divine, flows into the trinitarian communion.

The human person, in fact, can only become a human being in communion. Modern personalism has decisively reaffirmed the fundamental communitarian dimension of the human person. As Emmanuel Mounier affirms, "The person does not exist other than in relation to the other; he only knows himself because of others; and he only finds himself in others."⁸ Similarly, Cardinal Karol Wojtyla reaffirmed the importance of relationship for the realization of the individual: "The communion of "us" is that form of the human plural in which the person realizes himself to the ultimate degree as a subject."⁹ Such an acquisition of awareness of the social dimension of every man is happily expressed throughout the teaching of the Council, according to which, "by his nature, man is a social being, and without relationships with others, he cannot live, nor give meaning to his gifts" (GS 12).

⁸ *La communication*, p. 453, quoted by M. RICHARD, *Studi sul pensiero contemporaneo. Le grandi correnti*, Roma 1979, p. 138.

⁹ *Der Streit um der Menschen*, Kevelaer 1979, p. 54

What can reveal better than the religious community this truth and this possibility to the man of today? Faced with the attraction that man experiences for communion with the other, an attraction from the achievement of which he seems to be perpetually blocked by an inability to overcome the relationship of "homo homini lupus," the religious community presents itself as the existential possibility for peaceful and brotherly living together, as a possibility of integral growth and harmony of the person in his individuality and in his serene relational capacity.

Was not the Benedictine community the meeting place among men of such different cultures as the barbarian and the latin cultures? Was it not the setting for the discovery of brotherhood between the learned and the illiterate, the rich and the poor, the nobles and the common people? And are not many of our present day communities, especially those of international Institutes, already in miniature the affirmation that unity among peoples, among ethnic groups and among the social classes is possible? The communities of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in South Africa witness the living together of black and white and those of Sri Lanka the living together of Tamils and Singhalese.

Moreover, the religious community is not a place where communion is won without struggle or effort. And in this as well is revealed the proclamation of hope for so many other kinds of human living together. The religious community is generally made up of people differing from each other in temperament, tastes, attitudes, who, although they

have not come together because of friendship or a natural mutual attraction, or a natural compatibility are able to live together in unity. Every one of our communities is a community of “the elect” (the community is constituted, not through any will of ours, but by a call coming from Christ) and not an “elective” entity (there is no choosing of each other based on mutual affinity, friendship, affection, sentiment, even if these elements can be present in a community and, in general, are present in a community as fruit of a journey of authentic Christian love).

The heterogeneity of our communities reflects the heterogeneity of so many other kinds of human living together: the workplace, the school, even the family when it is no longer held together by the bonds of affection and sentiment. Religious, basing themselves on their own experience, can then teach others how to live in unity without the support of spontaneous relationships, even when there is no mutual attraction, even when there is present a kind of antipathy. If the religious community lives according to its call, motivated by theological charity, with all that charity implies (universality, free giving, service, sacrifice, gift of self...), then it can be a witness that human relationships are possible, notwithstanding the obstacles. The timeliness of such a message of hope, launched in this manner from a community, is evident, since it addresses a world which is in desperate search of relationships and which, instead, finds itself living in separation and divorce in the family, in tension and conflict in the work situation, in an atmosphere of racism and the abuse of power in the social context...

The religious community can present itself as a reconciled group of human beings which is already showing the ways of reconciliation and the paths leading to it, the concrete dynamics of an ever freer, deeper, more authentic relationship which brings one to the full development of his humanity, flowing into the highest degree of unity and into the greatest degree of personalization, which is, in fact, that trinitarian life to which we are called and which is the basic norm of relationship. In this sense, the religious community presents itself as a prophecy of a humanity fully developed in the bonds of concord and peace, as an eschatological sign of that new people which will inhabit the new heavens and the new earth.

We can sum things up in the words of the document, *The religious and human development*, of the Congregation for Religious Secular Institutes:

As experts of communion, the religious are called, therefore, to be in the Church an ecclesial community and in the world, witnesses and builders of that project of communion which stands at the peak of human history according to God ... They, in fact, stand as witnesses in a world so often profoundly divided, and before all their brothers in the faith, to the capacity of achieving a communion of goods, of the sentiment of brotherhood, of a plan of life and of activity which comes to them from the fact of having welcomed the invitation to follow more freely and more closely Christ, the Lord, sent by the Father so that as the firstborn among many brothers, he should establish, under the inspiration of the Spirit a new fraternal communion.” (no. 24)

The community: the task and the responsibility of the religious

We can understand now how within the religious “plan”, the emergence of the element of koinonia is not merely homage paid to a passing fancy. Rather, it cuts right to

the heart of the Christian message which finds in the “new commandment” its focal point. To rediscover the community means to rediscover the human person as a being in relationship, to rediscover human society, to rediscover the Church. It is for this reason that the religious community can present itself as a response to the demands, social as well as ecclesial in regard to the meaning of the human person and the desire for authentic relationships of communion and unity, to the demands of the world today.

This demands that the religious allow themselves to be challenged by these signs of the times according to a cyclical dynamic: the anxious quest for unity impels us to give value to the communitarian dimension inherent in our religious vocation and at the same time to our community life which, refined to its authentic purity, becomes sign and hope for all those who are seeking unity.

The Church’s journey is taking a decisive turn in that direction. For example, it is significant that

the contemporary communitarian movements are all trying to realize a spirituality lived together in which fraternal communion in the Spirit is emphasized as its essential element. There is a need to live in common the Gospel values more or less following the example of the first community in Jerusalem in order to build an authentic spiritual life within the communitarian dimension, a life open to the experience of God.¹⁰

<p>¹⁰ GIOVANNA DELLA CROCE, <i>Linee di form della spiritualita contemporanea</i>, in “Rivista di Vita Spirituale” 39 (1985) 551.</p>
--

Will today’s Christian who is aware of this call of the Spirit, calling him to live in a new way the ecclesial dimension of his own particular vocation which impels him towards a spirituality of communion, be able to knock at the door of a religious community with the hope of finding there people who know how to communicate to him their own experience and to point out to him the road to travel?

Today’s Christian should be able to find in religious the true experts of ecclesial community, religious who have been formed to this by a communitarian dynamic which they practice every day in a life of mutual love.

Today’s man of good will, likewise, should be able to meet religious who, in the exercise of their mutual love have found the way to overcome the many barriers which intrude themselves between man and man and who, specifically through this communion have grown to human maturity, to the point of becoming totally fulfilled, open, serene, filled with joy, open to every individual and to the whole of humanity, people who breathe the air of every land.

It would be an absurdity if religious, who by their vocation are called to be “men of communion”, should today fail in their prophetic role. That is, it would be absurd that, today in particular, when the demand for unity is so much greater, religious would not bring to completion the plan of koinonia that they are called to achieve, thus leaving unfulfilled the hopes of so many people. We cannot give up being builders of communion, living communion and spreading it far and wide.

To realize authentic koinonia, to build a living community is, therefore, one of the most urgent tasks of religious life, a responsibility which religious life cannot escape if it

truly wants to play the role of being an eschatological sign, a role assigned to it by the Spirit.

Fabio CIARDI, o.m.i.

Panel Session (August 7, 1989, 14.00 - 16.15)

The main points made by various or several speakers during the panel session are the following:

1. We must stress that community is not something that begins as a perfect entity nor does it remain such; community is a reality that must be constantly and perseveringly built up.
2. The idea that the Christian community is a force that fascinates and attracts is already found expressed in the Fathers of the Church. The community as such is already a Christian witness.
3. We must not forget the element of “the Call from God” when we speak of community. The Christian community is the EKKLESIA, i.e. the Christian community as called, convoked by Jesus Christ and gathered together by Him in order to be gradually built up. Part of the Oblate vocation that we have received from Christ is that together we build the community that is the Church. Cf. C. 1.

4. There is a mystical value to our fidelity and response that is like that of Christ. In St. John, Christ is the One sent by the Father and the Beloved of the Father; he is the latter because of his obedience and fidelity to the Father and the mission received from the Father.

5. There is a basic dynamic to community: as soon as it is community and as such wields an influence upon its members, it is also impelled to do something outside of the community. This is basic to Oblate community: from being an authentic community it proceeds to accomplishing an authentically Oblate mission.

6. The community as such is always a proclamation, an announcing of Christ and his Gospel.

7. Today there is great emphasis and attention given to the mission mandate in St. John - not only the mission mandate in St. Matthew. Thus, a new meaning of community is being stressed.

8. The mission can be conceived as a mandate and as a witness. This often is conceived in terms of a dichotomy and a possible reason for this might be the link with the monastic experience of Christian community: the monastic community is seen as a reality that is at the edge of things. In the first ages of the Church, the Christian communities were cells of the Church, leaven in the mass; they were living something among themselves in the midst of society and this something was also a witness to the society at large. Today, besides reflecting the community of the Trinity in the world, the Christian community is a challenge to society and challenged by society: how can we be distinct and different in spite of being also immersed in the society?

9. In the first centuries, the Church did not have a planned and established missionary program: this was because the Christian community wielded a real influence on its social milieu. On the other hand, St. Paul did seem to have a missionary program. After some time, the very expression "mission", "missionary" seems to disappear and reappears again in the 6th century when Pope Gregory the Great sent the Benedictine monk Augustine to England. When we think of the early Church situation, let us remember that both baptized and non-baptized lived within the same family.

10. The religious life exists in various forms in the Church. The religious life is one form of response to Christ, and the Oblate community is a particular form of this response. The religious life is always a memorial of our Christian origins. It is also a charismatic memory, different and actual. All religious institutes recall the KOINONIA of the beginning, are the light on the mountain-top: this is a link every religious community has with the first Christian communities. Yet each religious community is also different: it takes its inspiration from the first Christian community, and then says that, today, we are going to live this ideal in this precise way, a way that is always heavily determined by the Church's concrete needs in a given milieu.

11. The KOINONIA is not solely the Eucharist: it includes the Whole Christ, and this means it includes the WORD, it is also a community of doctrine.

12. Conflicts in the early Church would seem to have been resolved through community discernment: from that we must conclude that community discernment is integral to our community living. Still, we need to know that terms such as “conflict” and “community discernment” do not occur in the early sources of the Church: we, for our part, looking backwards from today’s perspective, try to see how a similar situation was handled then. It is our conclusion that community discernment is important in taking Christian decisions (cf. Acts XIII: Paul and Barnabas; Paul’s dream at Troas; Acts XV). We must also remember that by the 3rd century Church councils or synods were very common and that a goodly number of these did not solve problems but resulted in more separation and dissension. It is also possible that the Acts do not record for us the failures of community discernment. Besides, while Acts XV shows a decision happily received in Jerusalem and afterwards in Antioch, elsewhere for several generations, the Jerusalem decision did not bring peace. The New Testament reveals some of the difficulties of pluralism. One is the matter of principle, another is the matter of application.

13. When we say that the community as such is already mission, we can encounter problems. When Vatican II mentions unity, it never omits pointing out the basis (also a public basis) for this unity, what it is that is shared in common by everyone in that unity. This question of what is the basis of our unity is crucial: after all, even among thieves there is a bond of unity. The community as already “missionary” is problematical unless we spell out clearly what is the basis for the community’s unity. Today we hear much about our shared love for Christ and about our shared faith in Christ. If we adopt the first and forget the latter, we land up being universal and shallow; if we take the second and forget the first, we land up being sectarian. Christ must be fully shared by all, and that in a public and not only a private, individual way.

14. The community is pluriformist, for it often includes difficult individual persons. When obedience is open to dialogue it can easily lead to democracy: in a democracy we encounter the majority and a more or less loyal opposition - and thus we are in a parliamentary system. Opposition there will always be, either hidden or open. But the religious life is not a parliament. Diversity in the religious life is to be seen as an enrichment, the occasion which calls us to live the tensions that others in the world and in the Christian community are called to live: we may have to go through hell to attain paradise. True renewal always means such incarnation.

15. The anthropological element is very important: the human elements of acceptance, dialogue, listening. Obedience that is open to dialogue is beyond democracy: it is a creating together, a fraternal collaboration that is dynamic.

16. The topic treated in Father Ciardi’s conference is of major importance. It is one that is reflected in major Church documents since Vatican II. Vatican II itself treated of the Church’s communion and mission in *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*. In the 1985 Extraordinary Synod’s message to the People of God the ideas of Church, KOINONIA (Trinity; Baptism), to evangelize or re-evangelize 20 years after the close of Vatican II are key points. The 1987 Synod on the laity and its mission is in line with this: particularly valuable is the Pope using the image of the vine and the branches; the same Spirit that moved Christ moves each member of Christ’s Church. “You go into my vineyard too!” is the universal invitation. Recently, when I was visiting an ill person,

another person who was present asked: "Did you bring Jesus?" This ought to be our attitude wherever we are and wherever we go.

17. The reality of "Communion" has to be lived in the context and reality of today's world. The head of the Anglican Communion in Canada says he favors ordination of women and, against those who object, says he is in communion with Christ. A black Catholic priest in the USA has founded his own church, is in disobedience to his bishop and says he is in communion with Christ. Another Catholic priest in Western Canada says that at the consecration of the Mass nothing happens: it is the community present that effects the Eucharist. Now, am I, can I be in communion with all these people who claim they are in communion with Christ? Even if we have all kinds of Church documents, the real problems persist.

18. There is the communion of faith and charity with Christ that each one bears in his heart, and that is impossible for us to judge or assess. There is also the visible communion: here there are definite criteria, a judgment or assessment is possible. Very important in the role of leadership is that of facilitating discernment.

19. Let us also read the articles published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. Regarding Jerusalem in Acts XV: there is the whole Church, which is more than Jerusalem; there are the Apostles and the Delegates from Antioch; there are the leaders of the Jerusalem Church - a college but one is especially responsible, James. While all are responsible for the community and the mission, there are special roles for specific persons. The effort is to create a consensus, a community of doctrine and life, to proceed in and achieve a harmony. That is why not only a document was sent but also a delegation.

20. Our Founder insisted on the community of the Apostles around Jesus; the Holy Family of Bordeaux Sisters have a very different notion of community and its relationship to mission.

21. Around Jesus there are believers, disciples, the 12 apostles and the especially chosen. It is a matter of how we read Pentecost: the Holy Spirit descended not only on the Twelve but on the whole community of disciples gathered together. While the Apostles are especially responsible for the whole Church, the Church is not only a Church of Apostles.

22. When the Constitutions Revision Commission asked what model of community it should place into the proposed Constitutions it had before it three possibilities: the model in the Acts (which is readily imitated in a parish or in a monastery); the model of the Hidden Life of Jesus in Nazareth; the model of the Apostles around Jesus in Mark 3:14-15 - and this is what we now have in Constitution no. 3. This is also what we have always had in the Preface to our Constitutions and Rules.

Part Two

Mission and community The Oblate Perspective

Mission and community The Oblate Perspective

After considering mission and community in the context of the Church as a whole, the Convention participants reflected on this topic from a specifically Oblate viewpoint.

In the morning of August 8, 1989, the Convention heard two conferences: one by Father Yvon BEAUDOIN on “Mission and Community according to the Founder and the First Oblates”; the other by Father Giovanni SANTOLINI on “Mission and Community according to our Constitutions and Rules”. In the afternoon, there was a panel session on these two conferences.

In the morning of August 10, 1989, the Convention heard two more conferences: one by Father Wladislaw WALKOSZ on “Mission and Community according to the General Chapters”, and one by Father Laurent ROY on “Mission and Community according to the Superiors General”. In the afternoon, there was a panel session on these conferences also.

Community and Mission according to Bishop de Mazenod and according to the First Generation of Oblates in Europe

I. The plans of the Founder (1814-1818)

In his letters from 1814 to 1816. It is in Eugene de Mazenod's letters to Father Charles de Forbin-Janson that we find the first allusions to his plans of organizing a team of missionaries to evangelize his province of Provence. On October 28, 1814,¹ he tells his friend that he is of two minds: either to go hide himself away "in some well regulated community of an Order," or to set up in the diocese of Aix a society of missionaries. This second plan seems to him to be the more useful of the two, "given the dreadful plight to which the people have been reduced." He adds: "The community, which in any event, only exists in my head, would be set up in my house... I also have in mind some rules to propose for I insist that we live in a completely regular manner."

One year to the day after this, Eugene has finally decided to act. The more salient features of his plan appear more clearly in two letters to priests whom he is inviting to join him. In the first of these, a letter to Hilary Aubert, a priest from Provence and director of the major seminary at Limoges,² he writes:

"It is a matter of some priests banding together and continually preaching mission in all sectors of this vast diocese (of Aix) and surroundings... Ah! if we could form a nucleus, there would soon cluster around it the most zealous elements in the diocese... Oh! do not doubt that we will become saints in our Congregation, free but united by bonds of the most tender charity, by exact submission to the Rule we would adopt, etc..."

¹ *Oblate Writings, Letters of Bishop de Mazenod...*, vol. 6, p. 3.

² Undated letter, (September or October 1815), *ibid.*, p. 5.

In the second of these letters, a letter dated October 9, 1815,³ and addressed to Father Tempier, assistant parish priest at Aries, we already hear certain echoes of the preface and the main ideas of the Rule of 1818:

My dear friend, read this letter at the foot of your crucifix with a mind to heed only God and what is demanded in the interests of his glory and of the salvation of souls from a priest like yourself. Stifle the voice of cupidity, love of comfort and convenience; dwell deeply on the plight of our country people, their religious situation, the apostasy that daily spreads wider with dreadfully ravaging effects. Look at the feebleness of the means employed to date to oppose this flood of evil; ask your heart what it fain would do to counter these disasters and then reply to my letter. ... We... full of confidence in the goodness of Providence, have laid down the foundations of an establishment which will steadily furnish our countryside with fervent missionaries. These will ceaselessly engage in destroying the empire of the demon, at the same time as providing the example of a life worthy of the Church in the community which they will form. Indeed, we will live together in one house..., under a Rule we shall adopt with common accord... Happiness awaits us in this holy Society which will have but one heart and soul. One part of the year will be devoted to the conversion of souls, the other to seclusion, study and our individual sanctification...; we wish to choose men who have the will and the courage to walk in the footsteps of the apostles. It is important to lay solid foundations. The greatest regularity must be planned and introduced in the house as soon as we enter it...

Father Tempier's answer is dated October 27.⁴ He highlights the features of the proposed project which made a deeper impression on him:

May God be blessed for having inspired you with a plan to prepare for the poor, for the people who live in the country, for those who are most in need of religious instruction, a group of missionaries who will go proclaim to them the truths of salvation... I perceive ... what it is you are seeking most of all when you choose your fellow-workers: you want priests... who are ready to walk in the footsteps of the apostles, to work for the salvation of souls without any other reward here on earth other than a great deal of toil and suffering. By the grace of God I feel within myself this desire, or if I do not have it, I deeply desire to have it and, with you, everything will become that much easier. So, you can count on me absolutely.

On the 15 of November 1815,⁵ Eugene thanks Father Tempier for his ready willingness and specifies:

I count on you more than on myself for the regularity of a house which, in my mind and my hopes, must reproduce the perfection of the first disciples of the apostles. I base my hopes on that much more than on eloquent discourses. Have they ever converted anyone?

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

⁴ *Oblate Writings*, second series, vol. 2, pp. 9 and 10.

⁵ *Oblate Writings, Mazenod...*, vol. 6, p. 11.

On December 14, he adds⁶:

Know that you are **necessary** for this mission work... Were it a question of going out to preach more or less well the word of God, mingled with much alloy of self, of going far and wide for the purpose, if you wish, of winning souls for God without taking much trouble to be men of interior life, truly apostolic men, I think it would not be difficult to replace you. But can you believe I want merchandise of that sort? We must truly be saints ourselves... The second reason, which made me regard it as a present from heaven the resolution to join us at which you have arrived, is the need we have of a priest who thinks as you do about the interior life of our community...

These first letters of Father de Mazenod and of Father Tempier are well known, but it was important to recall them here. They will be ever memorable and precious within the Congregation as being at the very origin of the thinking and the plans of Father de Mazenod. If, according to Jeancard, the Founder of the Oblates was far from knowing, as he first set to work, the full extend of his mission,⁷ we can nonetheless affirm that the nature, the charism of the future Institute already become apparent in this rough drafting of his original plans. In fact, these few excerpts from the first letters already highlight in a powerful way the key ideas which he will restate hundreds of times in every way, shape and form, during the course of his life: a well regulated community of priests with one heart and one soul, who, burning with a great love of Christ and of the Church, reproduce the perfection and the zeal of the apostles to evangelize the poor, especially by preaching missions.

In the Rule of 1818. The first article of the 1818 Rule summarizes all these themes: The end of the Institute is "to form a group of diocesan priests who live together (as brothers)⁸ and who strive to imitate the virtues and the examples of our Lord Jesus Christ, mainly by spending their time preaching the word of God to the poor."⁹ Then, too, the foreword began with these words: "If priests, to whom the Lord has given the desire to

come together in community to work more effectively for the salvation of souls and for their own sanctification, wish to accomplish some good in the Church,” etc...¹⁰

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13; The same ideas are contained in the request for authorization addressed to the Vicars General of the Chapter January 25, 1816, cf. *Oblate Writings*, vol. 13.

⁷ Jacques Jeancard, *Melanges historiques...*, Tours 1872, pp. 70-71.

⁸ This is added in the Latin text approved by Rome in 1826.

⁹ *Règle de 1818*, Duval edition in *Missions OMI* 1951, p. 13, lines 6-11. 10 *Ibid.*, p. 11, 4-7.

The first part of the Rule sets forth the means suggested to work for the salvation of souls and the second sets forth the means necessary for the sanctification of the missionaries. In the lengthy developments of the Rule it is surprising that one does not find a particular emphasis on community, although community is always presupposed.

In the chapter on missions, the Founder simply states that “we will never go out alone on missions; we will be at least two together.”¹¹ All the members of the community participate in the missions, organized into “groups” according to the arrangements made by the superior.¹² The community gathered in the chapel witnesses the departure.¹³ During the mission the Fathers perform their exercises of piety in common and eat together.¹⁴

The second part of the Rule, “Special obligations,” is equally reticent in its use of the word community even though it is the hidden reality underlying most of the articles. The Divine Office is recited in common;¹⁵ mental prayer is in common twice a day¹⁶ as well as the examinations of conscience.¹⁷ In addition, the community meets regularly to treat of internal affairs: the coulpe,¹⁸ the theological conference¹⁹ and the reading of the Constitutions.²⁰

If we examine these articles of the Rule in the light of the Founder’s letters, the importance of the community is beyond any shade of doubt. Oblates seek sanctity together, pray together, do the work of evangelization together. The whole second part of the Rule makes explicit the communitarian striving toward perfection so that the ministry, which also is carried out in community, should, by the blessing of God, become fruitful.²¹ In the sixth paragraph which treats of the various ministries, the Divine Office which all the Oblates must recite in common is even presented in this light: “The Institute considers this exercise as the source of all the blessings which are to be poured over the entire holy ministry in the length and breadth of the Society.”²²

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20, lines 22-23.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 24, l. 105.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 25, l. 128.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26, l. 170 and p. 29, lines 288-289.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41, l. 200-201 and p. 60, lines 547-549.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61, l. 566-567.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62, lines 585-587.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65, l. 78-80.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67, l. 121-125.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, lines 126-128.

²¹ Gerard Fortin, *Reflexion sur la fin de la Congrégation*, in *Etudes Oblates*, 21 (1962), p. 207, footnote 16 and p. 214.

²² *Règle de 1818, op. cit.*, p. 41, lines 199-206.

II. The first communities and the first Oblate missions (1816-1826)

Well regulated and charitable communities. Eugene, a man of action, did not let his plans lie dormant; they soon began to be realized. In the fall of 1815, he had written to Hilary Aubert, a diocesan priest: “Ah! if we could form a nucleus, there would soon cluster round it the most zealous elements in the diocese.”²³ As of the spring of 1816, this nucleus of a few missionaries already existed. “The most zealous elements in the diocese” did not follow his lead. However, some young people from the Youth Association of Aix or from the parishes where the first missions were given did associate themselves to his group. In 1818 already, in the house at Aix, the young Society counted among its members 7 priests and 9 novices. This formed a sizable and important community.

At the time of the pontifical approbation of the Rules in 1826, 15 priests and 15 novices or scholastics were gathered especially in the two main communities of Aix and of Notre Dame du Laus. But even the communities of more recent foundation, namely, those of Calvary at Marseille and of Nîmes, each counted among their members 3 or 4 Fathers and Brothers.²⁴

The archives are well enough stocked with writings which deal with the first decade of the Congregation’s history. They describe the first communities in a rather idyllic fashion, characterizing them as true families where one worked at becoming saint through a rigorous practice of the Rules and of fraternal charity and where the work of evangelization was carried out successfully.

The community as the Founder wanted it had as its immediate goal the patterning of oneself on the saints, especially by the practice of the religious life and of fraternal charity.²⁵ Father de Mazenod never missed any opportunity of exhortation along these lines.²⁶ But he was happy to see that his first disciples were making serious efforts to be regular and charitable and did succeed in forming communities which were truly abodes of the blessed while at the same time never losing sight of the salvation of souls. A letter to diocesan priest, Father Viguiet, dated January 6, 1819, gives a good summary of all these aspects.

²³ *Oblate Writings*, vol. 6, p. 5.

²⁴ J. Pielorz, *Les Chapitres généraux au temps du Fondateur*, Ottawa, Archives d'Histoire oblate, t. 22 (1968), introduction to the first chapters.

²⁵ Cf. G. Santolini, *Evangelizzazione e missione, teologia e prassi missionaria in Eugenio de Mazenod*, Bologna 1984, pp. 110-114; Y. Beaudoin, *Le Fondateur et l'observance des CC. et RR...*, dans *Vie Oblate Life*, 43 (1984), pp. 102-108.

²⁶ Cf. Mazenod to Tempier, February 24, 1816, to Forbin-Janson, October 9, 1816, to Tempier, August 12 and August 22 and November 4, 1817, February 22, 1819, to Courtes, November 8, 1821, March 3, 1822.

We live in community under a mild Rule which fixes our duties and gives a very great value to the least of our actions. The spirit of charity and of the most perfect brotherhood reigns amongst us. Our ambition is to gain souls for Jesus Christ.²⁷

Repeatedly in the many letters written during the first years of the Congregation, the Founder tells of his joy and his gratitude. For example, March 18, 1823, he writes to Father Sumien and to the scholastics:

Oh! I have no doubt that you will follow the footsteps of your elder brothers -see the prodigies that it has already pleased the Lord through their ministry! ...live always in this intimate union which makes of our house a true paradise on earth and whenever you are enjoying your family life and speaking amongst yourselves of your happiness, the greatest that one can taste here below, think of your father who languishes far from you...²⁸

Even while preaching missions Father de Mazenod experienced the same happiness. Did he not write the following to Father Tempier from the mission of Grans on February 24, 1816? "Between us missionaries... we are what we ought to be, that is to say, we have but one heart, one soul, one thought. It is admirable! Our consolations, like our hardships, are unequalled."²⁹

In a few letters written by the novices and the scholastics of Notre Dame du Laus, we find the same description of community. For example, on May 11, 1822, the novice, Jacques Joseph Marcou, writes to the seminarian, Hippolyte Guibert: "We are all striving towards perfection, a perfection which we will not fail to attain by following faithfully our holy Rule. We have here but one heart and one soul..."³⁰

Their love was such that from 1826 to 1829 three Oblates requested the Founder's permission to offer their lives to God to die in place of Father Suzanne whom they considered to be more important than they.³¹

²⁷ *Oblate Writings, op. tit.*, vol. 6, p. 55.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. III; cf. also: Mazenod to Tempier, August 12, 1817, to his father and his uncles September 6, 1817; canonical visit of Notre Dame du Laus, August 12, 1821; Mazenod to Courtes, March 3, 1822, February 22, 1823, to Tempier, December 9, 1825, to Bishop Philibert de Bruillard, August 18, 1834, etc.

²⁹ *Oblate Writings, op. cit.*, vol. 6, p. 20.

³⁰ Cf. Also Coulin to Miss Martineng, August 14, 1820, to Mazenod, November 24, and December 8, 1820; Rambert I, 301-302.

³¹ Dupuy to Mazenod, September 10, 1826; Rambert I, 525.

Those who were lukewarm felt ill at ease in these fervent and charitable communities. In 1825, at Notre Dame du Laus, Father Dupuy, an arbitrary, muddle-headed person, had heard it said that they were thinking of dismissing him from the Congregation. He became his own accuser before the Founder and promised to mend his ways:

I am led to believe, he writes, that you have decided to dismiss me, either because of the bad example I am giving to the community, or because it is your set purpose to rid your community of those half religious who could only be harmful to the good of the community. This thought distressed me deeply; I was inconsolable. Before God I bewailed the fact that that was the way I was, to my misfortune, a stumbling block and a scandal, even though I acknowledged my unworthiness to dwell in a house of such holiness in the company of saints... My very dear and beloved Father, all of your children give you a thousand times more consolations than I do; I cannot tell you this without

soaking the paper with my tears. All are walking in your footsteps and are authentic religious. I seem to be the only black sheep among them...³²

We know how Bishop Jeancard, an eyewitness to the first years of the Congregation, spoke with admiration of the first community at Aix

gathered, he says, in the name of Jesus Christ and which was "a sanctuary," a family. Everyone lived the same kind of life and all hearts blossomed under the same influence... Everybody to a different degree happily submitted to this yoke, light and sweet. The *cor unum* and the *anima una* which the Founder enjoined upon his Oblates in his Rules as one of the characteristics of the Society was the distinctive trait of this small community... The news of the missions given by the Fathers, ...as well as the news which had to do with the Church in general, were not passed over any more than those which had to do with the well being and the progress of the Congregation. All of these conversations breathed forth a spirit of zeal. They urged each other on to perfection in the service of God, and imbued all their relations with each other with as much of charity as of holy cheerfulness...³³

In 1818, Father Arbaud, vicar general of Digne, invited Father de Mazenod to establish an Oblate community at Notre Dame du Laus. Father Rambert tells the story of how this invitation initially put the Founder in a very difficult situation and he gives the reason for this:

His plan up until then, he writes, had been to set up one community only of diocesan missionaries... To extend the actions of these missionaries beyond this, to send them forth, to establish them outside the limits of Provence, would that not have meant stepping out of this special vocation?... And then, too, it has to be said, the fascination and allurements of this little group, its strong attraction, was the family spirit, a family spirit developed to a very high degree. This unassuming house, the Mission, was truly a foretaste of Heaven...³⁴

³² Dupuy to Mazenod, October 11, 1825; cf. also Touche to Mazenod, February 8, 1832.

³³ J. Jeancard, *op. cit.*, pp. 3, 18-19, 22, 29, 33, etc.

³⁴ Rambert, I, 280, cf. also pp. 265, 467, 469.

Missionary communities. The foreword of the Rule did indeed state that they would live in community in order to work more effectively for their own sanctification and for the salvation of souls. The Founder wanted to have holy religious in order to better evangelize the poor. He restated it many times, as for example in this letter to Father Tempier and to the novices, August 22, 1817:

...We are, or we ought to be, holy priests who consider themselves happy and very happy to devote their fortune, their health, their life in the service and for the glory of our God. We are put on earth, particularly those of our house, to sanctify ourselves while helping each other by our example, our words and our prayers. 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 must tend; as long as we will not have spent our whole life and given all our blood to achieve this, we have nothing to say... This spirit of being wholly devoted to the glory of God, the service of the Church and the salvation of souls, is the spirit that is proper to our Congregation, a small one, to be sure, but which will always be powerful as long as she is holy...³⁵

The first collaborators of Father de Mazenod responded well to his exhortations. He admired their zeal and their dedication.³⁶ In spite of the very limited number of Fathers who were engaged in various works in Aix, Marseille, and Notre Dame du Laus, 50 missions of 4 and 5 weeks in length were preached in the course of the first 10 years, missions often given in the larger population centres and which required the presence of 5

or 6 missionaries.³⁷ Evangelization, then, was carried out in community and, even if not everyone went off to preach missions, everyone participated in them in one way or another. For example, Fortune de Mazenod tells us how the departure for the mission of Barjols was conducted November 8, 1818:

Their departure from here, he writes to the father of the Founder, was very moving. After having recited publicly in the church the prayers prescribed for travelers and having received the blessing of the Blessed Sacrament, they set off, accompanied right up to the bridge of the three waterfalls by the novices, members of the youth group and other pious persons. I need not tell you that I was part of the procession as well.³⁸

³⁵ *Oblate Writings, op. cit.*, vol. 6, pp. 37-38; cf. also: Mazenod to Tempier, November 4, 1817, to Bishop Arbaud, January 1, 1819, to Bishop Miollis, February 13, 1819, to Father Courtes, February 22, 1823, to Bishop de Richery of Frejus, November 12, 1823, to Father Courtes, July 30, 1824, etc.

³⁶ Cf. for example: Mazenod to Tempier, August 12 and 22, 1817, to his father and to his uncles, September 6, 1817, to diocesan priest Viguiet, January 6, 1819, etc.

³⁷ Cf. J. Pielorz, *Premières missions des Missionnaires de Provence*, in *Missions OMI*, 1955, pp. 549-561, 641-655.

³⁸ Archives of the Postulation, DM, fonds Boisgelin.

Prayers and sacrifices were offered for the missionaries. The 14th of January 1826, Father Dupuy tells us how Father Albini had mobilized the community of Aix on behalf of the success of the mission of Ribiers. He writes:

That is where I learned of the novenas of communions that were being made at Aix for the success of our future mission as well as of the prayers that were to be made at midnight for the space of two or three hours, in one's night-shirt, turned toward the church, always with the same intention, and in order that we poor fellows would not allow ourselves to suffer from the cold, three or four times a week he had granted them as an extraordinary concession the permission to whip themselves to the point of drawing blood, etc.-⁴

The priests, and very soon the religious, who made up the first Oblate communities met Father de Mazenod's expectations, it seems. They practiced an intense well regulated life; they loved each other as brothers and worked as a group to evangelize. Everything took place under the watchful gaze of the father of the family.

Through care and example as well as through the instructions of the venerable Founder, wrote Jeancard, the virtues of the apostolic man were spread throughout this community of Aix. They passed them on from one to the other. It was, I love to repeat it, a Cenacle where a portion of the gifts that came from Heaven the day of Pentecost was the object of a continuous communication. They filled this entire cloister with the good odor of Jesus Christ.⁴⁶

III. Oblate communities and mission in France and England from 1826 to 1861

With the development of the Congregation and the opening of several houses, Bishop de Mazenod was not able to follow as closely as before each Oblate and each community. However, faithful to himself and his plans, and in spite of a more rapid expansion than the number of members would really permit, all the houses that he opened were made up of enough Fathers and Brothers to form real communities of life, of prayer and of action. We have accurate figures for the years 1840 and 1854. In 1840, each of the 7 communities was made up of from 5 to 10 Fathers and Brothers. In 1854, the 14 houses of France each had from 5 to 8 Fathers

³⁹ Cf. also: Mazenod to Mrs. de Servan, August 20, 1818, to Fortune, December 9, 1818, to the community in Aix, March 7, 1819, etc.

⁴⁰ J. Jeancard, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

and from 1 to 4 Brothers. In England, each of the 5 communities had from 3 to 5 members.⁴¹

The religious in each one of these houses shared in the work of one, two and even three ministries, as for example, at Notre Dame de Lumières which was a shrine, a juniorate and a mission house all at the same time. In 1861, for example, the Congregation in France listed 8 houses of formation, 7 Marian shrines with their teams of missionaries, and 7 mission houses, all of them situated in important centres: Aix, Marseille, Nancy, Limoges, Autun, Paris and Angers. The 7 houses of England and Ireland likewise gave the Fathers an opportunity to share in the work of two houses of formation, that of Sickling Hall and of Glen-Mary, in the work of the reformatory in Glencree and in the 4 parishes or mission houses of Liverpool, Leeds, Inchicore and Leith.⁴²

Even if Bishop de Mazenod was not able to be present everywhere, he still continued to give direction and to administer his Congregation through his letters, his canonical visits and his personal contacts with the Fathers traveling through. The publication of his letters has sharply profiled the basic themes of his exhortations. They never changed: regularity and obedience, charity, zeal.⁴³ The word “community” seldom appears, but it is always the underlying reality. His exhortations were known and recognized by the Oblates much as one might and recognize the refrain of a song and they were able to repeat his exhortations to the letter. For example, September 20, 1860, Father Joseph Matthews wrote to him:

⁴¹ Cf. J.M. MacGee, *The State of the personnel of the Congregation... January 1840*, in *Etudes Oblates*, 20 (1961), pp. 61-78; et *Etat général de la Congrégation*, January 1854, A.G.R.

⁴² Cf. J. Pielorz, *Les chapitres généraux, op. cit.*, in *Archives d'Histoire oblate*, n. 23 (1968), pp. 109-121.

⁴³ Father Fabio Ciardi has done a thorough study of the relations which existed between these different points in the article: « *Quelques traits de la communauté à la lumière de la vie apostolique, Vie Oblate Life*, 36 (1977), pp. 203-224. In particular, he has shown how “with this profound instinct for the imitation of the Apostles, the Founder took his place in the great traditions of the religious life” which was first of all separation from the world (the anchoritic life - regularity, etc., for the Founder), then, in the 4th century, community of both heart and of possessions (the cenobitic life - fraternal charity for the Founder) and, finally, above all the proclaiming of the Gospel (the Mendicant Orders, etc., starting from the 13th century). The knowledge he had of the New Testament and the sense of the Church and of its history enabled the Founder to find and to want to revive these basic elements of the Religious life. But we can say as well that these three elements corresponded well with his temperament. First of all, he loved “to put thing in order”, cf. Rules of the Youth Association and of his own resolutions in his retreat notes. No doubt that corresponded to a general tendency after the disorders of the Revolution (F. Ciardi, *art. cit.*, p. 213), but it was also a matter of personal taste. Then, too, Eugene would have felt stifled in a community which was not fraternal and charitable; his heart would allow him to live fully only where he found affection, mutual understanding, warmth. Finally, by nature, he was a man of action, a leader, well suited to imitate the Apostles in the mission of evangelization that they received from the Saviour.

At Lys-Mary everyone is animated "without exception by the true spirit of our dear Congregation. All the virtues are seen to be practiced here in most becoming fashion, just like at Montolivet, especially those which are most specific to our holy Congregation and to the spirit with which you wish that it should be animated, that is, fraternal charity, obedience, regularity, zeal for what is good..."

"Regular" communities. The Founder demanded of his sons that they should live in community in order to more surely sanctify themselves and to evangelize in a more effective manner. What he wrote in the Acts of Visitation to Notre Dame du Laus, June 22, 1818, he often wrote on other occasions, namely, that he was "deeply convinced that the sanctification of the members of our Society and the success of their works depend on their fidelity to a meticulous observance of the Holy Rules..."⁴⁴

Along with the theme of charity, we have there the basic theme of his letters. February 19, 1853, he wrote to Father Martinet "That is the only way we can be pleasing to God;" then, again, in the Acts of Visitation of Notre Dame de l'Osier, July 16, 1835:

The external ministry should never distract the community from the exercises prescribed by the Rule, exercises which in the affection of each member of our Institute as well as in their practice should supersede everything. According to these principles which flow from the spirit specific to our Congregation, and as a result, which should be adopted by all members of the Society, no one will be surprised that we did not give our approval to the fact that, on Sunday, all exercises in common were done away with in order to give oneself entirely to the external ministry.⁴⁵

Charitable communities. In the Rule of 1818, the Founder had written: the missionaries "will all be united in bonds of the deepest charity."⁴⁶ In his family, he wanted to see relived the life of the Apostles and of the first Christians. Fraternal charity and sharing were main points. Sometimes in his exhortations, he drew his inspiration from the Acts of the Apostles,⁴⁷ but we know that this will to form fraternal communities sprang from a natural need of his heart and of his temperament, for one day he wrote: "That is the character of the heart (that God) has given me, this effusion of love which is specific to me and which pours out on each one (of my sons) without prejudice to the others, in the same manner as -if I dare say it - with the love of God for men."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Cf. also: Mazenod to Bishop Pavy, December 4, 1848, to Bishop Dupanloup, April 10, 1856. Rarely did the Founder say explicitly that the missions or the apostolate were means of personal sanctification, except on one occasion in the Rule of 1818, *op. cit.*, p. 55, lines 371-374.

⁴⁵ Cf. for example: Mazenod to Guibert, July 29, 1830, to Tempier, August 13, 1830, to the Fathers at L'Osier, August 18, 1834, to Guigues, May 27, 1835, to Couriers, December 30, 1846 and April 4, 1848, to Father de L'Hermite, August 17, 1852, to Martinet, February 19, 1853 ("That is the only way to please God."), to Ch. Baret, November 9, 1856, etc.

⁴⁶ Régie de 1818, *op. cit.*, p. 55, line 380.

His exhortations treated the subject of charity as often⁴⁹ as they did regularity. The clearest text on this subject is found in a letter to Father Guibert in 1830:

Charity is the pivot on which our whole existence turns. That which we ought to have for God makes us renounce the world and has Vowed us to his glory by all manner of sacrifice, were it even to be our lives... Charity for our neighbour is again an essential part of our spirit. We practice it first amongst us by loving each other as brothers, by considering our Society only as the most united family which exists on the earth, by rejoicing over the virtues, the talents and other qualities that our brothers possess just as much as if we possessed them ourselves, in bearing with

These themes of regularity and of fraternal charity are also those which are most often used by the local superiors in their letters to the Founder. Unfortunately, it is often in order to complain of the lack of regularity of certain members, of selfishness, of jealousies and of quirks of character. This appeared especially when they were living more in community during the summer.⁵⁴ To be sure, not all the Oblates were successful in following the Founder in his requirements of regularity and charity. The expulsions and departures⁵⁵ find here their basic explanation.⁵⁶ However, in general, and in spite of the many failings, Bishop de Mazenod declares that he is satisfied with the regularity⁵⁷ and with the charity of the Oblate communities⁵⁸ and even claims that at least one of the aims of the Congregation seems to have been attained: the Congregation has succeeded in sanctifying its members; the majority of the 69 Oblates who died before he did lived, and especially died, in a holy fashion and formed the Oblate community of Heaven.⁵⁹

Apostolic communities. The Congregation founded by Eugene de Mazenod has as its special goal the evangelization of the poor. The Founder never forgot it and always reminded his sons of this. On this score, they rarely had to be reprimanded. The Oblates evangelized, and as a general practice, did it as a community: The secretary of the General Chapter of 1837 wrote:

Rev. Father General addressed a few weighty and paternal words to the community. During his address, he was not able at first to contain his strong emotion, an emotion shared by all, as he saw around him children whom he had seen born under his very gaze and formed by his own hand, now become apostles, conquerors, men of miracles, since by an outstanding protection of the Lord wondrous works were born where they trod...⁶⁰

In order to give good examples for this part of my study, I should know more thoroughly the history of our Oblate houses of France and of England during the lifetime of the Founder. I plan to do this little by little in view of writing a few brief monographs on each of them for the Oblate lexicon. Ample documentation and sufficiently detailed monographs exist only for the seminary of Marseille, Calvary, Notre Dame de Bon Secours, Notre Dame de Lumières, and Notre Dame du Laus.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Cf. Mazenod to Bishop Philibert de Bruillard, August 18, 1834. Canonical Visit at Laus, May 28, 1834, at Lumières, October 10, 1840; but they often complain of the lack of charity, v.g. Canonical Visit at Calvary, 1831; Mazenod to Mille, April 21, 1832, to Courtes, June 12, 1832; dismissal of Eymar, December 1, 1836; Mazenod to Martin, January 10, 1845; Circular letter of August 2, 1853, of February 2, 1857, etc. Many Oblates speak highly of the fraternal charity in their communities, v.g. Dassy to Tempier, May 29, 1829; Sabon to Mazenod, September 9, 1847; Chavard to Mazenod, July 16, 1849 and February 19, 1850; Aubry to Mazenod, June 3, 1854; Martin to Vincens, February 1, 1861; *Notices nécrologiques* I, p. 160 (Brother Martel), 342 (Father Gilligan), 373 (Father Pons); II, 66 (Father Gubbins), 141 (Father Belletoise), 143, 145 (Father Healy), 286 (Father Anatole Hiden); III, 22-23 (A. Camper), 57 (Brother Achille Faure), 274-275 (Father Patrice Hickey), 427-428 (Father Th. Ryan); IV, 392 (C. Pare); V, 376 (Father Hermitte).

⁵⁹ Cf. *Oblate Writings*, vol. 7, pp. XXIII-XXIV, 104, 119, 121, 167; vol. 9, pp. XXI-XXII and Mazenod to diocesan priest Lusso, May 22, 1856.

⁶⁰ Cf. also: Mazenod to Tempier, August 22, 1817; circular letter of August 2, 1853; Mazenod to Riccardi, February 17, 1826; Tempier: canonical visit at Notre Dame de l'Osier, October 7, 1838, etc.

Indirect apostolate. Bishop de Mazenod set forth various ways of evangelizing, directly and indirectly as well. At first, he repeated over and over again that regularity and fraternal charity in community were already a means of apostolate since this drew down the blessing of God on the Congregation and on its works⁶² but at the same time as they were giving good example inside the community, they were leading on to perfection the seminarians, the novices and the scholastics in the houses of education, the people attending a retreat and the pilgrims at places of pilgrimage. This example, of necessity, became an inducement and an authentic proclamation even outside the community.

The Founder would certainly have subscribed to Mark Twain's statement: "What you are speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you are saying." For example, he wrote in this same vein to Father Daly on December 6, 1845: "You know that we preach even more by example than by words," or to Father Bellon in England on December 15, 1848: "the edification which the regularity of their lives gives produces perhaps as many conversions as their words."⁶³

It is fitting to highlight here how the prayers, the regularity of life and the work of the brothers contributed to the smooth functioning of the communities, and by this fact, contributed to the apostolate of the Congregation. The obituary notes of the brothers often brings out this all too forgotten role.⁶⁴

It really seems that the exchange of prayers and of sacrifices between the Fathers preaching missions and their confreres remaining in the houses always existed as in the

⁶¹ Yvon Beaudoin, *Le grand séminaire de Marseille...*, Ottawa, *Archives d'Histoire oblate*, n. 21, 1966; V. Gabin, *Chronique de Notre-Dame de Bon Secours et de la maison du Calvaire à Marseille*, typewritten; Bernard Cousin, *Notre-Dame de Lumières, Trois siècles de dévotion populaire*, Paris, 1981; G. Simonin, *Chronique de la maison du Laus*, 1818-1841, in *Missions OM1*, 35 (1897), pp. 59-105, 173-230, 324-337.

⁶² Cf. Mazenod to Tempier, August 13, 1830, to Guigues, October 9, 1834, to Dassy, October 11, 1844, to Bellon, September 4, 1851, to Berne, July 9, 1852, to Charles Baret, January 21, 1853, to Desbrousses, October 29, 1859; Visitation of the houses in England, July 22, 1850, etc.

⁶³ Cf. also Mazenod to the Fathers of l'Osier, August 18, 1834, to Guigues, October 6, 1834, September 3, and October 8, 1835, to Mille, May 18, 1836, to Nicolas, March 25, 1850, to Berne, February 5, 1854, to Bishop Bourget, July 14, 1858; Visitation at l'Osier, August 2, 1836, at Lumières, June 2, 1837, in England, July 22, 1850, etc.

⁶⁴ Voir *Notices nécrologiques*, I, 177-180 (J.M. Roux), 378-379 (Featherstone); III, 267 (Brother Etienne Clavel); IV, 35, 37 (De Stephanis); VII, 388 (Hourdier), etc.

beginning of the Congregation, but details are few concerning this subject. In 1829, Father Guibert attributed the success of the missions to the prayers of the novices.⁶⁵ Fifty years after, for the same reason, Father Martignat expressed his thanks to his confreres at Notre Dame de la Garde.⁶⁶ In 1829 when Father Suzanne was dying, he promised to never forget his confreres on earth.⁶⁷ In 1861, Bishop de Mazenod and in 1883, Father Edmond Adam, offered their sufferings for the success of the apostolate of the Oblates.⁶⁸

Direct apostolate. But it is especially with a view of evangelizing in a more effective way that the Oblates lived in community, under the authority and the direction of superiors. In the Rule of 1818 in the paragraph dealing with the main observances, the founder had written:

They will all be united in the bonds of the deepest charity and in perfect submission to their superiors under whose sway they will live in the meticulous practice of holy obedience.⁶⁹

Bishop de Mazenod never lost sight of the fact that he was the superior, the general of an army of well disciplined apostles who should go where he, himself, or the local superiors wished them to go. He always commanded with great firmness, without holding back,⁷⁰ with the knowledge that everyone knew of his affection and his heart and would not be offended by the harshness of his language. To the local superiors as well, he recommended the practice of uniting gentleness to firmness.⁷¹ In moments of difficulty, his orders became more urgent, in particular when it was the case of a death or of unexpected departures from the Congregation. Such was the case in his letters to Fathers Courtes and Aubert on the 25 and 26 September, 1836:

⁶⁵ Guibert to Mazenod, November 15, 1829.

⁶⁶ Martignat to the Fathers of his community, 1877, cf. Codex of the house of Notre Dame de la Garde, p. 61, A.G.R.

⁶⁷ Jeancard, *op. cit.*, p. 341.

⁶⁸ Circular letter of Father Fabre, May 26, 1861; *Notices nécrologiques*, V, pp. 234-235. & *Regie de 1818*, Duval edition, p. 55, lines 380-383.

⁷⁰ Cf. Mazenod to Aubert, October 11, 1834, to Courtes, November 11, 1836, to Moreau, November 25, 1842, to Medevielle, January 3, 1859, and again in *Oblate Writings*, vol. 9, pp. XVIII-XX; vol. II, pp. XVIII-XX.

⁷¹ Cf. Mazenod to Mouchette, July 9, 1853, to Vandenberghe, August 24, 1854, to Boisrame, September 30, 1858, etc.

He writes to Father Aubert:

The sudden death of Father Pons, whose absence will always be felt, and the blameworthy departure of Father Pachiaudi, place me in the necessity of calling you to the major seminary at Marseilles. In consequence, the novitiate will follow you to Marseilles. It is not through mere flightiness that I am changing the project in this way; but who can cope with completely unforeseeable events? Who can offer resistance to the very power of God? The ways of Providence are a deep mystery to me. Our part is to submit ourselves to whatever they bring that is hard or painful, without ever being disconcerted, even when they pitch us into situations of great difficulty. When we cannot proceed under full sail, then we must resort to tacking and make progress with sails trimmed, even down to the smallest sail that is raised on the mast-head and called the topgallant sail. All I ask in these painful and perplexing circumstances is that the pilot be in charge during the storm, that the crew obey in silence and that I be spared complaints that are out of place in a crisis when each one must carry out his task as best he may in the post assigned to him.

He writes in the same vein to Father Courtes:

I had everything arranged, counting on the two men who have been snatched away from me; I must perforce fall back on our remaining resources to meet various sacred commitments, conformable moreover as they are to our vocation. I don't conceal from myself the fact that many things are suffering in consequence; but I repeat, I'm not the master of events. Our duty to all is to do

our best, each in his own sphere, with the means that remain to us. These trials should not be beyond our courage. Small wonder when a boat bowls along with the wind behind it! The sailors can relax. But when the wind is contrary and the seas are rough, that is the moment for them to jump to so as to make a happy landfall. So let's show patience and be of good courage; don't let's allow ourselves to be beaten. How many times have we had the calm after the storm! So let there be no weakness but put a good face on things; man may pass, let us wait on God's good time.⁷²

As we have seen, Bishop de Mazenod had accepted works which obliged the Fathers to work in cooperation for a common goal: houses of formation, shrines, mission houses. The houses of formation were without doubt those works which the Fathers liked the least because they had the impression of not working in a direct enough fashion for the evangelization of the poor,⁷³ but that was where community life and team work were the most intense. It is rare that the Founder had any complaints on that score.⁷⁴

⁷² In spite of the sway the Founder held over the Fathers and Brothers, on occasion, he had to face refusals and he complained about them. cf. Mazenod to Pelissier, December 16, 1836 and May 30, 1839, to Dassay, August 14, 1847, to Vincens, April 12, 1850, and again in *Oblate Writings*, vol. 10, p. XIX; Sometimes the local superiors found it even more difficult than that to obtain obedience. For example, Father Magnan who was then superior at Ajaccio, wrote April 2, 1856: "For 26 years...the only kind of subjects I encountered were those who took umbrage at the authority of the superiors and superiors who were offended by the insolence of their subjects..."

⁷³ Cf. Yvon Beaudoin, *Les réponses des Oblats de France à la vision et à la pratique de l'évangélisation du Fondateur*, in *Vie Oblate Life*, 42 (1983) pp. 155-156.

Marian shrines were always considered as the houses that corresponded most closely with the ends of the Congregation. There, one part of the year was spent preaching missions "to evangelize the most abandoned souls" and the other was spent in prayer and study within the community with periods of a regulated life, but with short periods of intense apostolate on behalf of the pilgrims "in order to exalt the glory of his holy Virgin."⁷⁵ Most of the Fathers and Brothers were happy to live in these communities because the work there was varied and gave scope for the development of everyone's particular talents.⁷⁶ The number of pilgrims increased in all the shrines in the first years of the arrival of the Oblates. Father Martin, the superior of Notre Dame de Bon Secours gave the reason for this in 1851:

Our shrine offered us an abundant harvest. The faithful came in droves, providing every day a new display of edification. In general, it is known that a community serves the pilgrimage, also there is a larger concourse of people than in the past...⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Cf Marseille seminary: Dassy to Tempier, May 29, 1829; Rey to Fabre, September 26, 1853, Rambert to Fabre, March 19, 1854; Rey I, 428; seminary at Frejus: Mazenod to Berne, July 9, 1852, to Martinet, February 19, 1853; Rambert to Fabre, April 27, 1878, etc; seminary at Ajaccio: Mazenod to Moreau, February 15, 1843; Canonical visit of Casimir Aubert, April 17, 1856, June 15, 1858; seminary at Romans: Mazenod to Berne, February 5, 1854; Berthuel to Aubert, September 8, 1856; Chavard to Aubert, September 28, 1856, etc.

⁷⁵ Visitation at l'Osier, July 16, 1835.

⁷⁶ Cf. Visitations conducted by Bishop de Mazenod, Fathers Tempier and Aubert, and again, Yvon Beaudoin, *Les réponses...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-149. The servant of God Francois Gaschon (1732-1815) exercised his ministry in the diocese of Clermont with a few confreres. He had gained the reputation of an effective missionary in the diocese and he wrote the following about his work: "I like preaching missions...because it is a congenial mixture containing the alternation of regular discipline and of proclamation of the Gospel, of action and of seclusion, of prayer and of the apostolate. The life of the missionary is shared between a rest which is always busy and a work which is always apostolic, and then, too, everything directs him back to God. The Rule leads him, the example of others sustains him, the fervour of others rekindles his spirit and, compelled by fortunate obligation he does that which he perhaps might not do by inclination, if he was left to his own devices. The labor and the merits of each one find a common basis which benefits everyone and that is something for which I feel a deep personal need..." Words quoted by diocesan priest Grivel, *Le Père Gaschon*, 1857, pp. 13-15.

⁷⁷ Martin to Mazenod, December 20, 1851.

Four of the eight mission houses were accepted toward the end of Bishop de Mazenod's life. Consequently, he does not have much to say about them. Almost everywhere they went to preach missions, they went in rather large teams. There were exceptions, especially at Notre Dame de Bon Secours where the parishes of the region of Ardèche were often mere groupings of a few houses where the parish priests were poor.⁷⁸ The Founder had often to remind superiors and Bishops that, according to the Rule, the Oblates were to go at least in twos and were not to spend 12 months of the year outside of their houses⁷⁹ because, as he wrote: "It is essential for their way of being to live in community."⁸⁰

These houses of missionaries located in the towns provided the Fathers with an opportunity to dedicate themselves to various kinds of work when they returned to their communities: the service of a chapel (Aix, Calvary, Paris, Nancy, etc.) chaplaincies of religious and of prisons, preaching on occasion, etc. The spirit of dedication and of obedience of each one remained always awake and ready.

Conclusions

1. It was Father de Mazenod's set purpose that his confreres, and then his sons, should live in community in order to "work more effectively ... at their own sanctification."⁸¹ In their own houses the Oblates strove through study, prayer and the regular life, to grow in the knowledge and the love of the Christ who dwelt among them. They assisted each other by their good example, fraternal correction and charity.

2. In like manner, the Lord gave them "the desire to come together in community to work more effectively for the salvation of souls."⁸² It is, therefore, in "groups"⁸³ and supported by the prayers and the sacrifices of the community that they evangelized the

poor. In 1819, Father de Mazenod was writing to Bishop Miollis of Digne about this matter:

There are certainly priests in your diocese who are called to the work of the missions, others for whom the regular life and life in community is necessary to avoid being lost; in confiding them to us you are not depriving yourself of them because by the fact that you assure their salvation, they will work more effectively for the conversion of your own flock, for a great number of whom the only thing Christian about them is their Baptism...⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Cf. V. Gabin, *Chronique de Notre-Dame de Bon Secours*, passim.

⁷⁹ Cf. Mazenod to Courtes, October 17, 1844, to Bishop Buissas, February 20, 1848; to Bise, July 24, 1858; cf. also: Bellon, canonical visit at l'Osier, September 13, 1851; Martinet, canonical visit at Bon Secours, May 18, 1868, etc.

⁸⁰ Mazenod to Courtes, February 26, 1848 and March 2, to Buissas, September 22, 1856.

⁸¹ Foreword of the Rule of 1818, Duval edition, p. 11.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 24, line 105.

3. Inside the Oblate houses, just as in full apostolic activity, community life is characterized by an intense fraternal charity made up of “cordiality”, “blending”, “perfect union” so as to form only one heart and one soul just like the first Christian communities.”⁸⁵

4. The family life at home in the community is especially intense in the houses of formation. It penetrates so deeply into the hearts of the missionaries and has left such a pleasant perfume of union in their memory that they never forget those years of formation and thus feel always united to their Oblate family even if they must live alone or with only one other companion.⁸⁶ Moreover, the Founder often reminded his Oblates that no matter where they were, they were all united several times a day before the tabernacle.⁸⁷

5. The Oblate communities do not live turned in on themselves; rather, they find their place in the life of the universal Church and the local Churches and they open themselves up to the world these Churches are to evangelize.

In fact, it is first of all the love of the Church which impelled Father de Mazenod to

⁸⁴ Letter of February 13, 1819; cf. also Mazenod to diocesan priest Arbaud, January 1, 1819 and other letters in vol. 13 of *Oblate Writings*.

⁸⁵ Mazenod to Courtes, November 8, 1821, to Bishop de Bruillard, August 18, 1834, etc.

⁸⁶ Cf. Yvon Beaudoin, *F. de Paule Henry Tempier, Oblate Writings* II, 1, pp. 153-156, and *Montolivet*, in *Etudes Oblates*, 27 (1968), pp. 261-262. The international scholasticate was founded in order to preserve the same family spirit in the Congregation scattered as it is throughout the world. (Rules 1928, art. 544). Father Soulerin wrote already in 1868: “The family spirit seems to be growing weaker and weaker among us. Our young people live with us without becoming our friends; they leave us without remembering us or any expression of gratitude. Nevertheless, that is the family spirit which our holy Founder wanted to instill into us. That is the spirit which distinguishes us from other Congregations which we resemble because of the similarity of our works. Who will revive this spirit? Who will sustain it if not the direct, constant and paternal action of the Superior General and his assistants exercised over the nursery of the Congregation.” (General archives, Soulerin to an assistant general, 1868).

⁸⁷ Cf. *Vie Oblate Life*, 47 (1988), p. 252, footnote 124 and Fabio Ciardi, *Eugenio de Mazenod e V eucarestia*, in *Quaderni di Vermicino*, n. 3, 1877.

⁸⁸ Cf. Paul Sion, *L'amour du Fondateur pour l'Eglise* in *Vie Oblate Life*, 36 (1977), pp. 103-126.

⁸⁹ Cf. E. Lamirande, *Le zèle de toutes les Eglises chez Mgr de Mazenod*, dans *Etudes Oblates*, 19 (1960), pp. 108-146.

found his family of religious.⁸⁸ He always took an interest in all the problems of the universal Church.⁸⁹ He loved the Sovereign Pontiffs and obeyed them even at the cost of great personal sacrifice. It was his wish that his sons should follow his example.⁹⁰ He even wrote to Bishop Adinolfi in 1825: "I will not add to that that our Society is the group in the clergy of France which is the most devoted to the holy apostolic See."⁹¹

But the Oblate communities were at the immediate service of the local Churches as well. As much as possible, the Founder wished that the Oblate houses should be located in the city where the bishop had his see in order to be all the more at the service of the Bishops.⁹² The thirteenth volume of the letters of the Founder contains several dozens of letters to the Bishops of France. In these letters, Bishop de Mazenod restates this particular characteristic of the Congregation and always highlights a point which is specific to him, namely, that each bishop becomes the father of the family or of the Oblate community of his diocese. In 1828, he writes to Bishop de Chaffoy of Nîmes: "As soon as they adopt us, we look upon the bishops as our fathers; their diocese becomes our family and I can guarantee that these children of adoption will be the rivals of anyone else in affection and in dedication."⁹³

The Oblates also cultivated good relations with the parish priests who asked for them. From the beginnings of the Congregation, the Fathers, especially during the summer, used to take the place of parish priests who were ill or would work in those parishes where there was no priest. They continued this service for a long time. Some Bishops, as for example Bishop Buissas of Limoges, took advantage of them.⁹⁴

When he was preaching missions himself, the Founder paid special attention to these relationships. Several letters in this vein were discovered in parishes where he preached, as for example the one written to the parish priest of Aubagne in 1822: "It is my hope that your Vicars will be so kind as to help us (for confessions...) Over all, I flatter myself in thinking that we will all form one family of which you will be the father and that we will really have only one heart and one will..."⁹⁵ It is in this same spirit that the houses of the Congregation, particularly those located near pilgrimage sites always welcomed the parish priests from the surrounding area, especially for their annual retreats.

On a few occasions the Founder wrote, among others, to Father Tempier in 1817:

"Let's be united, let's have only God in view, and we will be very strong."⁹⁶ He is almost echoing a statement found in the book of Proverbs: "Brother helped by brother is a

fortress, friends are like the bars of a keep."⁹⁷ Yes, brothers unified, especially by the bonds of charity, work more effectively toward the perfection and evangelize the poor in a more effective manner.

Yvon BEAUDOIN, o.m.i.

⁹⁰ Cf. F. S. Cianciulli, *Mgr de Mazenod et le Pape, sentiment romain du Fondateur*, in *Etudes Oblates*, 15 (1956), pp. 204-220.

⁹¹ Mazenod to Adinolfi, December 23, 1825; cf. also Mazenod to Marquis de Croza, July 22, 1829: "Do not forget to assure the Holy Father that he does not have in France any sons more devoted to him than we are," and Mazenod to Montalembert, October 24, 1831, to cardinal Orioli, July 30, 1847, etc.

⁹² Cf. E. Lamirande, *Les Oblats, hommes des évêques...d'après Mgr de Mazenod*, in *Etudes Oblates*, 16 (1957), pp. 302-320.

⁹³ Father de Mazenod to Bishop de Chaffoy, March 10, 1828 and other letters to the Bishops of France in *Oblate Writings*, vol. 13.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* especially Mazenod to Bishop Buissas, February 20, 1848.

⁹⁵ Mazenod to M. Figon, October 5, 1822; to the parish priests of Aix, October 20, 1825 and other letters in vol. 13 of *Oblate Writings*.

⁹⁶ Mazenod to Tempier, October 22, 1817 and Sermon for ordination day (to the subdiaconate), s.d. (December 1909).

⁹⁷ Proverbs 18:19, translation: The Jerusalem Bible (Reader's edition).

Mission through Apostolic Community according to our Constitutions and Rules

Introduction

I have been asked to speak on Oblate community and, in the light of the different editions of our Constitutions and Rules, to say how it can and ought to be missionary. My contribution, moreover, must be placed within the context of the present Convention whose study theme is: "The Oblate mission through apostolic community". I am therefore presupposing the presentation of other topics that concern the *status quaestionis* of the Oblate community from both the theological and historical points of view, as well as that which considers it from the perspective of an Oblate value.

My purpose is clearly not to speak of the community in the thought of Bishop de Mazenod nor as to how he envisaged community life for his "little Congregation". It is true, nevertheless, that we cannot understand the Constitutions and Rules of the Oblates without being acquainted with the life and ministry experiences that prompted them. They are, in effect, the result of the community life that the Founder and his first companions lived together. This community life has its foundation and its motivating force in the founder's grace that God granted to Blessed Eugene de Mazenod.

In like manner, we cannot understand the theology and writings of St. Paul unless we are acquainted with the experience of Christ he received at his conversion: this experience becomes the key for interpreting his entire ministry and all his apostolic work. Similarly, we cannot grasp the requirements of Oblate spirituality if we are not acquainted with the experience of Christ's call that Eugene de Mazenod lived, first as a simple lay person and then as a newly ordained priest. That is why, in this introduction, I would like to pause a little on the text of the Preface to the Constitutions and Rules.¹

To begin with, here is what the 1980 General Chapter says about it:

¹ Leo DESCHATELETS, O.M.I., *Le Préface de nos Règles et les premiers écrits de notre vénéré Fondateur*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 15(1956), 193-202.

For the Oblates, the Founder's Preface to the Constitutions will always be an unrivalled expression of his charisma and a bond of unity for the Congregation... Each succeeding generation of Oblates has treasured (it) as its Rule of Life.²

In regard to our topic, we find very clear statements in the Preface which help us to understand Bl. Eugene de Mazenod's thought on the importance and necessity of community life for the mission.

a) The valid response to the situation of abandonment in which the Church languishes consists in the choice men make to give their whole life to Jesus Christ and to be truly "apostolic men".³

b) These men want to relive the experience that the Twelve had of the intimate communion with Christ that they lived during the three years that preceded their being sent out into the world to proclaim the mystery of their Master's death and resurrection. Such an experience demands the total commitment of their whole person.⁴

c) From such a choice flows the need for a Rule, that is to say, a code which helps to govern the life of the new community so that each member can be imbued in his spirit with the same sentiments and zeal and be animated with the same fervor.⁵

d) The apostolic community is the fruit of the Lord's call to become personally holy and to work for the conversion of others.⁶

From this community perspective, it is plain that all the Constitutions and Rules ought to be read in the same spirit as that which we find in the Preface:

How, indeed, did our Lord Jesus Christ proceed when he undertook to convert the world?... And how should men who want to follow in the footsteps of their divine Master Jesus Christ conduct themselves if they, in their turn, are to win back the many souls who have thrown off his yoke?⁷

Because the Preface has always been placed at the beginning of the Constitutions and Rules, the apostolic community is the key for interpreting the different editions of the same, from that at the time of the

founding to that of today. Thus, in the thought of the Oblates, it is the foundation on which they can build their whole religious and missionary life.

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| ² | <i>Constitutions and Rules of the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate</i> , Rome, 1982 (henceforth: <i>CC & RR</i> , 1982), Foreword, 8. |
| ³ | <i>CC & RR</i> , 1982, Preface, 11-12. |
| ⁴ | <i>CC & RR</i> , 1982, Preface, 11-12. |
| ⁵ | <i>CC & RR</i> , 1982, Preface, 13. |
| ⁶ | <i>CC & RR</i> , 1982, Preface, 13. |
| ⁷ | <i>CC & RR</i> , 1982, Preface, 11. |

I. Brief historical overview of the different editions of the Constitutions and Rules

A cursory glance at the 173 years' existence of our Congregation, from the founding of the Missionaries of Provence right up to our own time, reveals that there has been quite an evolution in the text of our Constitutions and Rules.⁸

Father Sion gives three main reasons for updating our basic code of life: "the development of our Institute and of its works, the calls and directives of the Holy See, the changes and new needs of the contemporary world."⁹ I will thus follow the division that he proposes so that we may have a clear and systematic view of the changes that occurred in our Constitutions and Rules.

1. In the Founder's time

a) A first period, which could be called the time of the manuscripts, includes:

- the "Demande d'autorisation adressée à Messieurs les Vicaires généraux d'Aix" (Request for authorization addressed to the Vicars General of Aix), dated January 25, 1816.¹⁰

⁸ For a deeper study, cf. the following:

Paul SION, O.M.I., *Evolution historique de nos Constitutions et Règles*, in OMI DOCUMENTATION, 93/80 (April 1980), 1-9.

Leo DESCHATELETS, O.M.I., *Notes sur l'histoire de nos saintes Règles*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 1(1942), 11-27.

Germain LESAGE, O.M.I., *Nos saintes Règles selon nos Supérieurs Généraux*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 4(1945), 187-192.

Georges COSENTINO, O.M.I., *Les origines de nos saintes Règles*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 7(1948), 46-62.

Gerard BLANCHARD, O.M.I., *Au coeur de notre spiritualité: les art. 287-298 de nos Règles*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 17(1958), 193-211.

Femund JETTE, O.M.I., *Esprit oblat et Règles oblates*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 21(1962), 3-21. Gerard FORTIN, O.M.I., *Les idées-forces de la deuxième partie des Constitutions*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 23(1964), 77-93.

Fernand JETTE, O.M.I., *La Règle, « un don, une grâce du Seigneur*, in VIE OBLATE LIFE, 40(1981), 97-102.

⁹ Paul SION, *Evolution...*, I.

- the “Constitutions et Règles de la Société des Missionnaires de Provence” (Constitutions and Rules of the Society of the Missionaries of Provence), written during August and September 1818 and presented to the General Chapter the following October.¹¹

b) Next are the compositions of the first definitive texts:

- In view of requesting papal approval in Rome, the Founder prepared a text of the Constitutions and Rules which corrected and completed the text which had preceded. After it had been presented to the Commission of Cardinals appointed to examine it, this text was approved by Pope Leon XII on February 17, 1826.¹²

- During the Founder’s lifetime, this text was revised on the occasion of the 1850 General Chapter. This readjustment was needed on account of the acceptance of foreign missions, a factor that ushered in a rather rapid development for the Congregation. These changes introduced into the first Constitutions were approved by the Holy See in March 1851, and were solemnly promulgated from Marseilles on February 17, 1853.

2. After the Founder

a) After the Founder’s death, a second revision was made in 1884 and another in 1910. These two revisions, however, even though they introduced many modifications, retained a good portion of the Founder’s text nevertheless. In 1917, the Holy See promulgated a new code of canon law and asked all the religious congregations to revise their Constitutions according to the tenor of this code.

Of the many revisions of our Rules, this is “the most important of them all,” wrote Archbishop Dontenwill; in the spiritual parts, however, there had been no tampering with the Founder’s text. Of 798 articles, 641 were still the Founder’s. No paragraph had been added or suppressed, but about a hundred changes were made: in style, precision, adaptation to Canon Law or new requirements.¹³ This text was solemnly approved by Pius XI on May 21, 1928.¹⁴

¹⁰ Eugene de MAZENOD, *Supplique adressée aux Vicaires Généraux Capitulaires d’Aix*, in MISSIONS O.M.I., 79(1952), 268-272.

¹¹ Eugene de MAZENOD, *Constitutions et Règles de la Société des Missionnaires de Provence. Premier manuscrit français*, in MISSIONS O.M.I., 78(1951), 9-97.

¹² Eugene de MAZENOD, *Constitutiones Regulae et instituta Societatis missionariorum oblatoium Sanctissimae et Immaculatae Virginis Mariae. Premier texte latin officiel*, in MISSIONS O.M.I., 78(1951), 321-479.

b) At the 1953 General Chapter was raised the question of a new revision of the Constitutions and Rules, but this revision was, in fact, made only by the 1966 Chapter.

This latter Chapter, instead of studying and following the text already prepared by the Preparatory Commission, preferred to undertake the composition of a new text, written in the light of Vatican Council II which had just ended. The new text appears more like a truly new composition rather than the revision of an existing text. It touches not only the text's formulation but also its content. These Constitutions and Rules were promulgated on August 2, 1966 by Father Leo Decathletes and were presented to the Congregation as a text *ad experimentum*.¹⁵

c) This text was studied by the entire Congregation and a Commission was given the task of preparing, on the basis of the Oblates' observations, a revised text which was to be submitted to the 1980 General Chapter for examination. This Chapter worked out, in common accord, the text of the Constitutions and Rules that we have today and which was approved by the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes on July 3, 1982.¹⁶

To simplify the recourse to references, I have decided to follow mainly the 1928 and 1982 editions of our Constitutions and Rules. Before entering into the core of our topic, however, let us take a glance at how the different editions of the Constitutions and Rules present the element of community.

¹⁵ Paul SION, O.M.I., *Evolution...*, 6.

¹⁴ *Constitutiones et Regulae Congregationis missionariorum oblatores Sanctissimae et Immaculae Virginis Mariae*, editio 1928, Romae, 1928. For the English translation: *The Constitutions and Rules of the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of the Most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary*, Rome, 1945. (Henceforth, referred to as CC & RR, 1928).

¹⁵ *Constitutiones et Regulae congregationis Missionariorum oblatores Sanctissimae et Immaculae Virginis Mariae, a Capitulo Generali XXVII exaratae*, Rome, 1966 150 p. (Henceforth referred to as CC & RR, 1966).

¹⁶ CC & RR, 1982, 184 p.

II. The Oblate Community in the various editions of the Constitutions and Rules

1. The Petition addressed to the Vicars General of Aix

In this petition for approval, even though it is the preaching of missions to the people and the ministry that are mostly stressed, the Founder does clearly state that the end of the new Society is to provide its members with the means to practice the religious virtues and to live in community.¹⁷

In this regard, Father Ciardi, in an article that treats of the Oblate community's nature at the time of the founding,¹⁸ says that Father de Mazenod wanted to organize a team of missionaries who would respond equally to the evangelization needs as well as to those of religious perfection. Here is what he says:

When de Mazenod considers the members of the community, he has in mind not just any kind of priests, but rather apostolic men with an interior life, who are capable of reliving together the perfection of the Apostles and of the first Christians of the Church in Jerusalem, men who are capable of being together so as to form one heart and one soul and thus give witness by their life itself of the Gospel that they are called to proclaim. If, in the period that preceded and is contemporary to the founding, the objective of the religious life as such was not as yet quite clear - though we can already perceive it as a future goal and an orientation - community life was a clear and essential element. Both for mission preaching and for attaining holiness, living in community is a necessity, and that in a community with certain precise characteristics.¹⁹

2. The Constitutions and Rules of the Missionaries of Provence

The Founder several times speaks of community in the 1818 Rule. In the very first article, in fact, he repeats and sums up the same ideas that he had already expressed in the above-mentioned petition, namely, that he had in mind a community of priests who would live together in order to imitate the examples of Jesus Christ and to preach to the poor.²⁰

¹⁷ "The end of this Society is not only to work for the salvation of one's neighbour by dedicating itself to the ministry of preaching: its chief aim also includes providing its members with the means necessary to practice the virtues of the religion to which they are so strongly attracted that the greater number of them would consecrate themselves for life to their observance in some religious Order, did they not nurture the hope of finding in the Missionaries' community more or less the same advantages as in the religious state to which they wanted to pledge themselves." Eugene de MAZENOD, *Supplique...*, ibid., 269-270.

¹⁸ Fabio CIARDI, O.M.I., *Fisionomia e nature della comunità oblata nel periodo della fondazione (1815-1818)*, in CLARETIANUM, XVI (1976), 173-275..

¹⁹ Fabio CIARDI, O.M.I., op. cit., 201-202.

The part that mainly concerns us, however, is the passage at the end of the first chapter of Part Two: "One the Missionaries' Special Obligations". After having spoken of the spirit of poverty and of the vows of chastity, obedience and perseverance, there is an unnumbered paragraph entitled: "Other main Observances". This paragraph treats of the life of the missionary community.²¹ This is a most important text both because of its content and because it does not depend on any other author.²² In the article mentioned above, Father Ciardi says:

Indeed, we find in this passage one of the most outstanding traits of Father de Mazenod's community: launched as it is in the most difficult apostolate, it is at the same time formed in the privacy of the house just as though we were dealing with a cloistered Order. And, paradoxically, the main occupation of the missionaries who belong to it is not preaching, nor prayer, nor recollection or contemplation in the house: they are to strive for ecclesiastical and religious perfection, which finds its summit in the total and perfect identification with Christ... In this striving to imitate Christ is found the principle of unity for the life of each missionary and for the community itself. Christ is presented to us as the Institute's guide, or more accurately, as its very Founder, while the Apostles, who were the first to follow him and to be formed in his school, are considered as the first members of the missionary community that is gathered around Father de Mazenod.

²⁰ Eugene de MAZENOD, *Constitutions...*, *ibid.*, 13.

²¹ "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 Congregation, and that of the holy Apostles, our first Fathers. In imitation of these great models, the missionaries will give one portion of their life to prayer, recollection, and contemplation, while living together in the seclusion of God's house. The other portion of their life they will zealously devote to the works of the ministry, namely, to missions, preaching, the hearing of confessions, catechizing, directing the young, visiting the sick and prisoners, giving retreats, and other works of this kind. Whether out on missions or at home, their chief concern will always be to make progress in the way of ecclesiastical and religious perfection. They will cultivate especially the virtues of humility, obedience, poverty, selfdenial, the spirit of mortification and so forth. In a word, they will strive to become other Jesus Christ, spreading abroad everywhere the fragrance of his amiable virtues. They will be united in the bonds of the closest charity and in perfect submission to the superiors under whose direction they will live in the most proper practice of holy obedience." Eugene de MAZENOD, *Constitutions...*, *ibid.*, 54-55.

²² "... The second chapter makes him pause. 'Frequenting the sacraments, oraison and some exercises of humility'. These are excellent things, to be sure, things that will be beneficial. But charity urges him...humility cannot be treated in a few lines only. He has to express what he deeply values. Two large pen strokes mark off the separation. As for the title, he hesitates, erases, and finally writes: 'Other main observances': other, that is, in regard to the 'special observances' mentioned in the general title and in regard to the vows. And now he gives free rein to his personal thought which he is eager to do, restrained somewhat as he had been by the overly rigid framework of the text that had been guiding him. We have noticed something similar in Part One. After he had expressed in juridical terms the ends of the Congregation, he added a vibrant *Nota Bene*, what later became part of the Preface to the *Constitutions*." Gérard FORTIN, O.M.I., *Les idées-forces de la deuxième partie des Constitutions*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 23(1964), 80-81. Also cf. Georges COSENTINO, O.M.I., *Histoire de nos Règles*, I, 96.

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. Being apostolic men, an idea which de Mazenod had greatly stressed during the first undertakings, finds its full meaning here. The entire Rule has to be read from this perspective and here is the focal point which gives unity and value to this style of community life that in appearance is so antithetical. By imitating Christ and the Apostles as their great models, Oblates live in contemplation and in the most zealous activity.²³

The topic of community is not limited to this sole paragraph: it remains the key basis for all missionary activity. We shall have the occasion to speak more deeply about this below. It is interesting to note the directives the first Rule gives for the preaching of missions to the people.²⁴

3. The Oblate Constitutions and Rules according to the various editions from 1826 to 1928

I shall treat these various editions together because, while certain structures may be different from each other, the substance is not changed and, in regard to the topic of community, we find therein the same passages that are already found in the Rules of the Missionaries of Provence.

²³ Fabio CIARDI, O.M.I., op. cit., 253.

²⁴ Fabio CIARDI, O.M.I., op. cit., 258-266.

²⁵ "This new order is interesting. The first chapter deals with the vows, as is done in the Rule of St. Alphonsus. The extra chapter that came immediately thereafter is relegated behind the 'Alphonsus block' which, in turn, becomes chapter II, after it was enriched by the paragraph on prayer which had been left hanging. The extra chapter thus became chapters III and IV, for the last part dealing with sickness, funerals and suffrages now formed a special chapter. In chapter III, the details concerning the habit, meals, relations with outsiders, to which the Founder adds some regulations concerning trips, are arranged in separate paragraphs. We naturally wonder why the Founder thus inverted the original order by making the 'Alphonsus block' precede his extra paragraph." Gerard FORTIN, O.M.I., op. cit., *ibid.*, 84.

Before taking his manuscript to Rome in order to get it approved, the Founder divided its text into articles and polished up its formulation. He also rearranged the order of the chapters and paragraphs.²⁵ The passage on "Other main Observances" is placed after the sector based on St. Alphonsus. "Probably, he simply wanted to bring balance into his material and to avoid long detailed prescriptions being placed between the Mazenod sector (charity and humility lived far from the world and close to the Eucharist) and that of Alphonsus which treats of the practice of this life of fraternal charity (silence, prayer, mortification, etc.). This inversion has the great advantage of bringing these two sectors closer together and -was this deliberate? - of achieving a crescendo which makes

²⁶ Gerard FORTIN, O.M.I., op. cit., *ibid.*, 84.

²⁷ In the 1928 edition of the Constitutions and Rules, this part became articles 287-298. In this regard, cf. Gerard BLANCHARD, O.M.I., op. cit., *ibid.*, 193-211.

²⁸ "Thus we can understand why the First paragraph of this chapter III mentions flight from the world. We can thus see the sense of the insistence on charity (art. 291), the spontaneous confidence of openness to the superior (art. 307), the meals in the house (art. 319), the ban on communicating with outsiders (art. 330) or on bringing them into the house (art. 325), on ourselves going outside the house (art. 334), the concern to remain united in heart with the family while on unavoidable trips (art. 341) and the joy of coming home (art. 348). This rapid glance on the wealth of this chapter III is an invitation to our spiritual writers to explore this vein and to present to us in convincing terms what I would dare to call the 'mystique of our houses'." Gerard BLANCHARD, O.M.I., op. cit., *ibid.*, 194-195.

the Mazenod sector on charity and the Mass the capstone for chapters II and III (and even IV)."²⁶

Even though the first paragraph of the third chapter of Part Two of these Constitutions and Rules contains the very core of the Founder's thought on community²⁷, we can find the presence of this notion throughout the entire text. Of the 798 articles, the community is explicitly or implicitly mentioned in more than 120. This is a sign of the Founder's and the Oblates' concern to put community as the basis for the apostolic life. If we were to sum up this thought, we could say that he wanted to create within the Congregation an acute sense of family life as well as a fierce determination to maintain it at all costs against any outside interference.²⁸

It is true that, if we look at these Constitutions and Rules with today's sensitivity to community, we will say that, besides the paragraph on charity, humility and flight from the world, and that on community meetings, there is no specific description of community; that community is considered more under the juridical aspect (formed or non-formed houses, number of members...) of a society with superiors and subjects, an ensemble of exercises, a place of silence and of flight from the world, a means of sanctification and apostolic preparation, rather than under its doctrinal or spiritual aspect. The comparative study of the Constitutions and Rules made in view of the 1980 Chapter, however, clearly brings out the community dimension in the 1928 Rules.²⁹

²⁹ "1928 does not have a chapter that explicitly speaks of community life as such. This observation should be especially noted because it throws light on a *new emphasis* that we feel exists in the 1980 text. There is, therefore, no special chapter on the community - community meetings are a special community exercise (270-286). The 1928 text, however, immerses the life of an Oblate into a community context. For the Founder, community is at the base of an Oblate's life. The community pursues a double objective: the pursuit of perfection and preparation for effective missionary activity. Besides its christocentric and missionary dimension, it bears also the following basic marks: the unity in spirit of the members among themselves is achieved through the uniformity of practices and behaviour, with mutual charity and Christ's presence remaining as the supernatural constant factors of this oneness (art. 246-286); its nourishment is a strong, multi-faceted fraternal love which makes the Oblates be a real family (art. 291, 349-353, 714-717, 728); it manifests a fraternal and monastic character, thus reproducing the regular life of a religious community (art. 243 ff.); it also manifests the following traits: a community of prayer (art. 254-262), of penance (art. 263-269), of interchange and fraternal correction (art. 270-283), of mutual service (art. 288-296). AUCTORES VARII, *Constitutions et Regles O.M.I., 1928-1966-1980. Etude comparative*, Ottawa, 2-12 juillet 1980. Pro manuscrito, 18-19.

³⁰ This paragraph, which comprises Constitutions 42-48 and Rules 87-97 is inserted into Part Two: "The Apostolic Man", in the second chapter: "Apostolic Requirements". *CC & R*, 1966, 16-17.

³¹ *CC & RR*, 1966, Constitution 7.

³² "Except for the general definition which is given in art. 1, the articles of the Constitutions in Part One are developed around five key words, which the Chapter considered to be the essential characteristics of the Congregation. Thus: art. 1: The call of CHRIST who gathers together...

art. 2: Members of the CHURCH,

art. 3: To EVANGELIZE the most abandoned souls,

art. 4: Especially the POOR,

art. 5: In APOSTOLIC COMMUNITIES,

art. 6: Under the patronage of MARY IMMACULATE. AUCTORES VARII, *The Congregation Renewed. A Reading Guide for the Constitutions and Rules*, Rome, 1968, 30.

4. The 1966 Constitutions and Rules

As we have seen, the 1966 edition of the Constitutions and Rules reworked the text as a whole and, in regard to our topic, it contains a special paragraph.³⁰ Its very title, "Life in Apostolic Community" indicates its basic orientation and this is made all the stronger by the context. The introduction to Part Two on "The Apostolic Man" stresses that "their religious consecration is...one with their apostolic life and is the foundation of their close union of thought and action."³¹ The community is therefore seen as a constitutive element of the Oblate charism³² and Constitution 5 is witness of this.³³ Constitutions 44-45 are imbued with the new doctrinal perspectives of Vatican Council II. Constitution 45 states an essential value: "The members will thus bear witness that Christ lives in their midst and unites them intimately, in order to send them forth to proclaim his Kingdom."³⁴

Constitution 44 completes the ensemble: "Each Oblate will do all that he can to foster, in a joyful atmosphere, the growth of unity in mind and heart..."³⁵

Two essentially practical points are insisted on in this presentation: a) The community is not something which affects only the interior life of the house, its internal organization and the personal relations of the members. In a missionary institute like ours, the community is deeply involved in its mission, its apostolic activity, which is the burden of all as a collective undertaking, b) The community does not find its principal expression in the external details of its functioning, but more basically in the relations, the interchanges, the converging mentality and orientation of the members of which it is composed.³⁶

The proper characteristic of a community "is far more than a juridical entity; it is a communion in charity, it is the Lord's family... The three articles 42, 44, 45 accentuate the special character of an apostolic community: one is a religious missionary only in and through the community, as the place where the missionaries foregather and where activities are planned (art. 42); interchange and dialogue have a primordial role in their spiritual development, intellectual pursuits and in the apostolate of one and all (art. 44); the mission to announce the kingdom is what establishes and binds together the unity of the members (art. 45)."³⁷

³³ "To fulfill their role in the Church, the members are gathered together in apostolic communities. Bound together by the strongest ties of charity and obedience, priests and brothers will work with one heart, each in his own ministry and in his own field, for the advancement of the Kingdom of God. They will rejoice when they find themselves in one another's company, but will nevertheless willingly accept to live alone even for prolonged periods, if necessary, in the service of the Gospel. Prompted by their Superiors, they will seriously examine from time to time whether they are living up to their holy vocation..." *CC & RR*, 1966, Constitution 5.

³⁴ *CC & RR*, 1966, Constitution 45.

³⁵ *CC & RR*, 1966, Constitution 44.

³⁶ AUCTORES VARII, *The Congregation Renewed...*, 154.

³⁷ AUCTORES VARII, *The Congregation Renewed...*, 155. For a more extensive treatment, cf: Donat LEVASSEUR, O.M.I., *Les Constitutions et Règles des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée à la lumière de Vatican II*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 26(1967), 97-202. Maurice GILBERT, O.M.I., *Reflexion sur la vie oblato à la lumière des nouvelles Constitutions*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 25(1966), 5-85..

Thus the 1966 Constitutions and Rules insist much more on the major elements of community life than they do on the particular determinations of living the same. Hence, in the Rules themselves a number of regulations concerning the sick, precedence, correspondence and the like were omitted. Father Zago, in an article written in 1972, points out that, taken as a whole, the presentation of the community betrays certain limitations and raises a number of question marks.³⁸ The reflection which followed within the whole Congregation as a preparation for the 1980 General Chapter seems to have deepened this issue and to have filled in what was lacking.

5. The 1982 Constitutions and Rules

From the 1966 General Chapter onwards, the issue of community has been more and more discussed and deepened both by individual Oblates as well as on the level of the entire Congregation. Thanks to this fact, we have achieved a most remarkable formulation in the new Constitutions and Rules. What the Capitulars had in mind was to integrate community into the unity of the Oblate's life.

In organizing the Constitutions as a whole, the Capitulars wanted to make this unity of life more apparent. The project proposed to the Chapter comprised four parts: the mission of the Congregation, the Oblate community, formation, the Congregation's organization. In the last days of the Chapter, a Capitular asked that the first two parts be grouped together in order to underline the unity of our life, according to the teaching of the Council: "In these institutes (dedicated to the apostolic life), apostolic and charitable activity is of the very nature of religious life" (PC 8) This proposal pleased the members of the Chapter and, after some discussion, the decision was taken to give Part One the title, "The Oblate Charism" and thereafter putting into a first chapter our missionary life, which is at the same time religious life. Thus the unity of our life was better expressed.³⁹

The community thus regained its original place in the Oblate charism. Two sections in the 1982 Constitutions and Rules are entirely dedicated to it: in Part One, section III of the second chapter: "The Apostolic Community"; and in Part Three, the whole second chapter: "The Local

Community". But there is even more: the community dimension pervades all the Constitutions and Rules.⁴⁰

First we come upon Constitution 3 which achieves a perfect synthesis of all the

³⁸ Marcello ZAGO, O.M.I., *Evaluation et perspectives de la communauté oblate*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 31(1972), 67-80. In this article, Father Zago observes that in the 1966 Constitutions and Rules: a) community does not play much of a role in achieving the purpose of the Oblate vocation; b) in living community, the fraternal aspect is emphasized and the element of tending to perfection less so; c) the sanctifying activity of the community is not stressed; d) rather, the community is considered in the perspective of being sent out to the world, not as a flight or withdrawal from the world.

³⁹ René MOTTE, O.M.I., *Spiritualité oblate selon les nouvelles Constitutions et Règles*, in VIE OBLATE LIFE, 43(1984), 50-51.

wealth contained in the preceding editions of our Rules: "The community of the Apostles with Jesus is the model of our life."⁴¹ Here is the foundation of our community, according to the Founder, who saw the Apostles not only as the men who implanted the Church to the ends of the earth but also as the companions of Jesus: "Our Lord grouped the Twelve around him to be his companions and to be sent out as his messengers (cf. Mk 3:14). 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."⁴²

In this second part of the Constitutions, we rediscover the riches of articles 5 and 45 of the 1966 Constitutions and Rules, and especially the Founder's idea in Rule 291 of 1928, which repeated what was already in the Constitutions of the Missionaries of Provence.⁴³

The community, born of "the call of Jesus Christ" who invites the Apostles "to follow him and to share in his mission through word and work"⁴⁴, is "a sign that, in Jesus, God is everything for us."⁴⁵

The section that explicitly treats of the apostolic community (CC. 37-44) reveals its characteristic traits to us. They are: fraternal charity which ought to support each one's zeal⁴⁶; solidarity which binds each to the other in life and missionary activity⁴⁷; joy and simplicity, the joy of the beatitudes; sharing what we are and what we have⁴⁸; prayer in common which directly brings us together around Christ; fraternal correction and

forgiveness⁴⁹; welcoming everyone, for charity must radiate⁵⁰; solicitude for those in trial, for we are members of one and the same body⁵¹; charity and equity in regard to those who leave us.⁵² In this entire section there is an appeal that is to be made and to be received.

In Part Three, which treats of the Congregation's organization, we meet the different realities and various levels of Oblate community. What is most striking, however, is the overall outlook:

United as brothers in one apostolic community, we are all equal before God our Father who distributes charisms and ministries so that we can serve his Church and its mission. Our organizational structures, accordingly, are set up in function of that mission.⁵³

The whole Congregation, therefore, is one community at different levels: local, provincial, regional and general. Moreover, "the governmental process presupposes living apostolic communities, fully recognized and respected in their relative

⁴⁰ To become aware of this, it suffices to consult the analytical index under the word "Community". Community is mentioned in 45 Constitutions out of 125 and in 26 Rules out of 154, not to mention the articles where the reality of community is envisaged without naming it.

⁴¹ CC & RR, 1982, Constitution 3.

⁴² CC & RR, 1982, Constitution 3.

⁴³ Eugene de MAZENOD, *Constitutions...*, 55

⁴⁴ CC&RR, 1982, Constitution 1.

⁴⁵ CC & RR, 1982, Constitution 11.

⁴⁶ CC & RR, 1982, Constitution 37.

⁴⁷ CC & RR, 1982, Constitution 38.

⁴⁸ CC & RR, 1982, Constitution 39.

⁴⁹ CC & RR, 1982, Constitution 40.

⁵⁰ CC & RR, 1982, Constitution 41.

autonomy."⁵⁴ That is why "the Congregation's vitality and effectiveness depend largely on the local community which lives the Gospel."⁵⁵ It is therefore true that "local communities are the living cells of the Congregation."^{56 and 57}

After this brief overview of the different ways in which the community is presented in the history of our Constitutions and Rules, we can now treat explicitly the topic that I have decided to deal with, namely, the community as the source and principal agent of our apostolate.

III. Community life is itself mission

I chose this title for this third part because of the statement made in the final document of the 1986 General Chapter. This document states:

Oblate community is an essential dimension of our vocation. The report of the young Oblates to the Chapter reminds us of that again. 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.⁵⁸

⁵¹ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 42.

⁵² **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 44.

⁵³ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 71.

⁵⁴ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 75.

⁵⁵ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 76.

⁵⁶ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 87.

⁵⁷ For an extended treatment of this topic, cf.

Marcello ZAGO, O.M.I., *Community*, in *VIE OBLATE LIFE*, 47(1988), 3-10. Rene MOTTE, O.M.I., op. cit., ibid., 37-

60. Robert EIMER, O.M.I., *Community and Religious Life*, in *VIE OBLATE LIFE*, 44(1985), 147-155.

⁵⁸ 1986 GENERAL CHAPTER, *Missionaries in Today's World*, Rome, 1986, no. 109.

The General Chapter reminds us that Constitution 37 of 1982 emphasizes the bonds that link community and mission, and then proceeds to offer us a good explanation for the same.⁵⁹

However, within the framework of this research, which must limit itself to the Constitutions and Rules, we have to arrive at understanding well the reasons why the Oblate community is in itself missionary.

It is true that Constitution 37 states:

We fulfill our mission in and through the community to which we belong. Our communities, therefore, are apostolic in character.⁶⁰

At first sight, however, one would say that it does not state on what basis it can say this. If we are to understand well in what sense the Oblate community is mission, I think we must first define the broad outlines of the Oblate mission, the meaning that they give to this mission and what they include under evangelization. After a brief analysis of this, we will understand better the reality that “an evangelizing community” is.

In defining the Oblates’ mission, I shall base myself solely on the 1982 Constitutions and Rules.

⁵⁹ “Theological reflection and lived experience show how the community is missionary: it is a gift from God, it is a sign of the Spirit’s power to transform hearts and to inspire a form of social life in conformity with the Gospel. In this way it becomes a message to today’s world. Theological reflection also shows that mission is communitarian: 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 and to his superiors and it is with the community that he gives thanks.” 1986 GENERAL CHAPTER, op. cit., no. 115.

⁶⁰ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 37.

⁶¹ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 1.

⁶² **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 11.

⁶³ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 5.

⁶⁴ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 7.

⁶⁵ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 8.

⁶⁶ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 5.

⁶⁷ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 8.

Our mission is to cooperate with Christ the Saviour⁶¹, to make Christ and his Kingdom known⁶² to the most abandoned to whom we are sent⁶³. The discovery of “who Christ is” awakens or reawakens the faith in them.⁶⁴ Our mission is “to present Gospel demands in all clarity”⁶⁵ and to bring to the many categories of the poor the salvation and the hope “which only Jesus Christ can fully bring”⁶⁶, “to bring all people... to the full consciousness of their dignity as human beings and as sons and daughters of God.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, our mission is to make visible the Father’s love in

Jesus⁶⁸ through an “unselfish love”.⁶⁹ The Oblates are to be witnesses of God’s justice and holiness and are to “announce the liberating presence of Jesus Christ and the new world born in his resurrection”⁷⁰, “desiring that those in whom he continues to suffer will know also the power of his resurrection.”⁷¹ Finally, as a consequence of this proclamation of God’s Word, “which finds its fulfillment in the celebration of the sacraments in service to others, our goal is “to establish Christian communities and Churches deeply rooted in the local culture and fully responsible for their own development and growth.”⁷²

The community, therefore, if it wishes to be missionary, has to respond to these requirements. If we look at the different editions of the Constitutions and Rules that have appeared since the Founder up to our day, I think that this has always been true, even though it is only recently that we have spoken about this in a more clear and explicit way; if we are able to read beyond the modes of expression which are linked to the culture and the language of the times, we will find the same reality.

First of all, I would like to get rid of an equivocation which could lead to an error of evaluation. When we speak of the community as a “means” for the apostolate, we do not understand this term in a functional sense, as something that we use “for” the apostolate, as something “that is useful to achieve an objective”. It is true that at times we have distorted the Founder’s meaning in this sense: “We live in community in view of the salvation of souls”, or, “Fraternal charity aims at achieving the salvation of souls.”⁷³ In this regard, it seems to me that Father Maurice Gilbert has already given us an excellent clarification when he wrote the following about our religious life:

If we sometimes say that our religious life is ordained to our apostolate, let us not misunderstand this. It is indeed ordained to the apostolate, not, however, as a means to its end (in the latter case we would really be in the active life, a life where action is the end and the specifying factor), but as cause to its effect, as the source of our apostolic life.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 59. ⁵⁹ *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 2.

⁷⁰ *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 9.

⁷¹ *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 4.

⁷² *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 7.

⁷³ “The religious life provides as best as it can to his dedication to the apostolate. Since he is most of the time on the front lines, it is especially in carrying out his ministry that the Oblate acquires and practices the religious virtues which assure its fruitfulness. But the community to which he returns after his apostolic expeditions, does not fail in having him ‘exercise’ these same virtues: that is the role of religious observances...” Gerard FORTIN, O.M.I., op. cit., *ibid.*, 92. “Our devotion to the Sacred Heart and to Mary Immaculate, our cult to the glory of God, our devotedness to the Church, to the Papacy and to the Episcopacy, as well as our practice of the virtue of fraternal charity are ordained to the salvation of souls.” Germain LESAGE, O.M.I., *Thèmes fondamentaux de notre spiritualité*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 4(1945), 18.

Consequently, the reality of a community which is itself missionary has its theological roots elsewhere than in the notion of simple means; it finds these roots in the mystic domain no less.

1. Jesus lives in their midst

By growing in unity of heart and mind, 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.⁷⁵

The community is mission because not only is it sign of Jesus' presence, but also the locus of this same spiritual presence of Christ.

Christ calls us, he brings us together (cf. CC. 1,3) and he is present in our midst. We follow him and become his cooperators in the community and through the community, because Christ makes himself present within it: "where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst" (Mt 18:20). Holiness and mission come through the community not because it is a means for their achievement, but because Christ is present in the community and through it. Of course this presence is not realized by sacramental formula as in the Eucharist. It is realized by the way we live as Christians. Article 37 of the Constitutions provides the theological key and points out the method for realizing the community, for making Christ present, for making the community missionary...⁷⁶

The community is a group of men who are gathered together in Jesus' name because they have heard the call he had addressed to them and have responded to it:

The call of Jesus Christ, heard within the Church through people's need for salvation, draws us together as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.⁷⁷

Here we find again one of the major themes of Eugene de Mazenod's spirituality: being the companions of Jesus Christ. I have already touched on this topic and here I want to refer to the Nota Bene which speaks of this:

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...⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Maurice GILBERT, O.M.I., *Vie active ou vie mixte* in ETUDES OBLATES, 7(1948), 289.

⁷⁵ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 37, which takes up **CC & RR**, 1966, Constitution 45..

⁷⁷ Marcello ZAGO, O.M.I., *Community*, in VIE OBLATE LIFE, 47(1988), 10.

⁷⁷ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 1, which takes up **CC & RR**, 1966, Constitution 1.

The Oblate community ought to be the community of the Apostles. The former Rule said:

It has already been said that the missionaries ought, as far as human nature allows, to imitate in everything the example of Jesus Christ our Lord, the chief Founder of our Congregation, and that of the holy Apostles, our first Fathers.⁷⁹

The Founder, as we know, attributed an enormous importance to this article in the commentary of the Rule that he made during his 1831 retreat.⁸⁰ Walking in the Apostles' footsteps⁸¹ obviously meant living with Christ and learning from him his way of life.

The community is born from the Lord's convocation and from each one's gathering around him. Then, immediately, from a community that is gathered together it is transformed into a community of communion wherein there is but one heart and soul. Personal assimilation to Christ the Saviour - the christological coming together - results, even before being sent out on mission, in apostolic group being constituted around the Lord. As the Apostles were gathered together in the cenacle, in the same way the Oblates are gathered together in community. It is not a coincidence that the Founder's testament is modeled on that of Jesus: "I give you a new commandment. Love one another" (Jn 13:34). Being one heart and soul - the leitmotiv of the Founder's writings - thus becomes the key for understanding the Oblate community more deeply.⁸²

⁷⁸ Eugene de Mazenod, *Constitutions...*, Nota Bene, p. 12. *T> CC & RR*, 1928, art. 287.

⁸⁰ "Would anyone believe that the Rule has sufficiently insisted on the indispensable necessity of imitating Jesus Christ? No. Indeed, it presents to us the Saviour as the real Founder of the Congregation and the Apostles, who were the first to have walked in the footsteps of their Master, as our first fathers. Is it possible to have something more appealing to urge us to imitate them? Jesus, our Founder! The Apostles, our forebears, our first fathers! And this is taught to us by the Church, it is Peter through the mouth of Leo who tells us this. Let us swear to be faithful, to become worthy of our great vocation! Tam dictum est missionarios, quantum humana patitur fragilitas, imitari debere in omnibus exempla Christi Domini, praecipui Institutoris Congregationis, necnon Apostolorum nostri progenitorum.' Therefore, do we have to live their life, carry on their ministry, practice their virtues? There can be no doubt about it..."

Eugene de MAZENOD, *Nos saintes Règles*, October 8, 1831, in *CIRCULAIRES ADMINISTRATIVES*, I, 124.

⁸¹ Cf. Maurice GILBERT, O.M.I., *Sur les traces des Apôtres*, in *ETUDES OBLATES*, 16 (1957), 293-301. "We think we can express this real bond between the Apostles and the Oblates by saying that they achieve the same substantial effect at different periods of time. The Apostles and the Oblates are by their very nature 'apostolic men', so much so that we are able without exaggeration to call the Apostles the first Oblates. By the same token, the Founder is justified in calling them 'our first fathers', and also to name Jesus Christ as 'the chief Founder of the Congregation'." Gerard BLANCHARD, op. cit., *ibid.*, 195.

⁸² Fabio CIARDI, O.M.I., op. cit., *ibid.*, 269-270.

The fact that we are one family implies a lifestyle such that it conditions everything else and even the organization of the ministry ought to be done in view of it. If we look at the mission regulations written by the Founder in the Rule of the Missionaries of Provence, we immediately see the point of view that he adopted: everything is in view of unity. The missions and all the other works of evangelization or proclamation of God's Word are not to be accomplished as a personal or individual ministry.⁸³ The ministry, in whatever domain, is not the result of independent activity, but is the expression of an apostolic corps acting through its different members.⁸⁴

I do not wish to dwell further on this point which, most important as it is, has already been sufficiently studied in depth.⁸⁵

2. The unifying force of the community as a bond of perfection

Above I have already mentioned that one of the aims of the mission is to bring to the many categories of the poor "the hope which only Jesus Christ can fully bring."⁸⁶

To be truly missionary, the community must respond to the deep desires of the people of every age and time. What is the answer to this great void which makes mankind cry out in its search? The only answer is God, who alone can fill the desire for love, quench the thirst for perfection, and bring to term the search for the Absolute which constitutes the great mystery of man's heart. The Oblate, by his very community life, witnesses to the Absolute that is God:

Our mission is to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to seek it before all else (cf. Mt 6:33). We fulfill this mission in community; and our communities are a sign that, in Jesus, God is everything for us. Together we await Christ's coming in the fullness of his justice so that God may be all in all (cf. 1 Cor 15:28).⁸⁷

⁸³ Fabio CIARDI, O.M.I., op. cit., *ibid.*, 258-270.

⁸⁴ Cf. Gerard BLANCHARD, O.M.I., op. cit., *ibid.*, 198-199. Marcello ZAGO, O.M.I., op. cit., *ibid.*, 8. Fabio CIARDI, O.M.I., op. cit., *ibid.*, 271.

⁸⁵ Cf. Fabio CIARDI, O.M.I., *Quelques traits de la communauté d la lumière de la vie apostolique*, in VIE OBLATE LIFE, 36 (1977), 203-224.

⁸⁶ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 5.

⁸⁷ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 11, cf. **CC & RR**, 1966, Constitution 17.

Putting God in the first place and choosing him as the everything of their life is what enables the Oblates to unify their own lives and their mission. This idea was already contained in the 1928 Constitutions and Rules which stated:

The whole life of the members of our Society ought to be a life of continual recollection. To attain this, they will first of all make every effort to walk always in the presence of God, and frequently to bring him to their minds by short but fervent ejaculatory prayers.⁸⁸

To say that “in Jesus, God is everything for us” reminds us of a theme that was very dear to Eugene de Mazenod, namely, that of religious perfection. By assiduously imitating the virtues and examples of Jesus Christ⁸⁹, the Oblate can seriously strive to be a saint. The new Constitutions and Rules put it in this way:

We achieve unity in our life only in and through Jesus Christ. Our ministry involves us in a variety of tasks, yet each act in life is an occasion for personal encounter with the Lord, who through us gives himself to others and through others gives himself to us.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ **CC & RR**, 1928, art. 246-247.

⁸⁹ **CC & RR**, 1928, art. 1.

⁹⁰ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 31. In the same vein, cf. **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitutions 53, 54, 56, and **CC & RR**, 1928, art. 290: “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 abroad everywhere the fragrance of his amiable virtues.”

⁹¹ On this matter cf. Henri VERKTN, O.M.I., *Monseigneur de Mazenod et la vie religieuse*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 26 (1967), 343-382.

⁹² Eugene de MAZENOD, *Allocution au Chapitre Général de 1850*, in Jozef PIELOZ, *Les Chapitres généraux au temps du Fondateur*, D, 8.

The theme of perfection is paramount for Eugene de Mazenod. “A perfect religious in order to be a good missionary” is a dictum Bishop de Mazenod will repeat without ceasing.⁹¹ Here is but one example:

It is a source of consolation for all the members who in France or elsewhere are occupied in the ordinary ministry of our holy vocation, but it ought also to be a subject of edification and the motive for a noble competition. We must now more than ever comprehend how necessary it is to be a perfect religious in order to be a good missionary. We have to be convinced that the most effective way of achieving great results in souls is holiness of life and the practice of all the duties of our state.⁹²

What I would like to underline is the following: if, at that time, the element of perfection was perceived as the fruit of individual humility and mortification⁹³, in the new outlook the element of religious asceticism is perceived as the

⁹³ "By this mode of life they will become well versed in the virtue of humility, a virtue that they will not cease to implore from God, since it is so necessary for the perilous ministry in which they are engaged. Rich, indeed, are the fruits of this ministry, yet it is to be feared that such marvelous achievements, due as they are to grace alone and whose glory consequently belongs only to God, might prove a dangerous snare for imperfect missionaries, who have not sufficiently cultivated this fundamental and absolutely necessary virtue of humility. **CC & RR**, 1928, art. 292. And also: "Wherefore, the missionaries will take pleasure in occupying the last place, and without ostentation they will gladly and humbly do the lowest work in the house. They will cordially rejoice in humiliations and contempt; and, when these fall short of their pious desires, they will apply to the Superior for additional opportunities of self-abasement." **CC & RR**, 1928, art. 293.

⁹⁴ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 2, cf. **CC & RR**, 1928, art. 254.
⁹⁵ For in-depth studies, cf.: Georges COSENTINO, O.M.I., *L'introduction des vœux dans la Congrégation*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 13(1954), 287-308. Jean-Guy LEMARIER, O.M.I., *L'obéissance religieuse et les Oblats de Marie Immaculée*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 31(1972), 60-66. Jean DROUART, O.M.I., *From an Apostolic Community to a Religious Congregation*, in ETUDES OBLATES, 31(1972), 205-224. Fernand JETTE, O.M.I., *La vie religieuse dans le charisme oblat*, in VIE OBLATE LIFE, 41(1982), 105-113.

⁹⁶ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 12.

⁹⁷ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 14, cf. **CC & RR**, 1966, Constitution 19.

⁹⁸ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 19, cf. **CC & RR**, 1966, Constitution 25.

⁹⁹ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 24, cf. **CC & RR**, 1966, Constitution 33.

¹⁰⁰ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 9, cf. **CC & RR**, 1966, Constitution 40; **CC & RR**, 1928, art. 244..

¹⁰¹ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 12.

fruit of something that is communitarian. Constitution 2 is evidence of this:

Our apostolic zeal is sustained by the unreserved gift we make of ourselves in our oblation, an offering constantly renewed in the challenges of our mission.⁹⁴

3. We commit ourselves to be a leaven of the Beatitudes at the heart of the world

The Oblate community bears the seal of the evangelical counsels which mark it with a special character. The vows unite us to Christ; they are a response to his call and he, for his part, is our model:

Our mission requires that, in a radical way, we follow Jesus who was chaste and poor and who redeemed mankind by his obedience.⁹⁶

The same is stated for each of the vows: chastity⁹⁷, poverty⁹⁸, obedience⁹⁹, perseverance¹⁰⁰. We live our vows as missionaries, as "our mission requires"¹⁰¹. One could make the remark that the term "requires" is too strong. Does the mission require religious consecration? If we want to be at the heart of the world as a leaven of the Beatitudes, then we cannot do otherwise. The requisite is one of love, a limitless love for Christ. This is how Father de Mazenod understood things from the very beginning.¹⁰²

In speaking of each of the vows, the Constitutions and Rules open us up to the missionary dimension: they present the vows as forces that are going against the current,

as the leaven of a new world. In this way, the community that lives the vows becomes a sign and a witness before men.

Against the tendency to egoistical relationships, chastity makes us available for service to all¹⁰³ and enables us to go where the needs are most urgent and together give witness to the Father's love for us.¹⁰⁴

In order to contest the excesses of power and wealth and to free us from egoism, poverty urges us to live in the closest communion with Christ and the poor and to proclaim the coming of a new world that is open to sharing.¹⁰⁵ Poverty impels us to share with others, especially with the poor, everything that we possess, for our temporal goods are primarily at the service of the mission.¹⁰⁶ Sharing does not only involve material goods, but takes in everything. The community is the result of this putting into common of everything by everyone:

In sharing what we are and what we have with one another, we find acceptance and support. Each of us offers his friendship and places his God-given talents at the service of all. This enriches our spiritual life, our intellectual development and our apostolic activity.¹⁰⁷

In order to contest the spirit of domination, the Oblates will become the servants of all and witnesses of a new world wherein people will acknowledge close interdependence.¹⁰⁸

Finally, against inconstancy in our love, perseverance is a sign of Christ's fidelity to

¹⁰² "I have said that, in dedicating myself to the ministry of the missions in order to work especially in instructing and converting the most neglected souls, my intention had been to imitate the example of the Apostles in their life of devotedness and abnegation. I had convinced myself that, if we were going to obtain the same results in our preaching, we would have to walk in their footsteps and, according to all our possibilities, practice the same virtues. I therefore considered the evangelical counsels to which they had been faithful as indispensable." Eugene de MAZENOD, *Memoires justificatives*, in Toussaint RAMBERT, O.M.I., I, 187.

¹⁰³ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 15.

¹⁰⁴ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 16.

¹⁰⁵ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 20.

¹⁰⁶ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 122.

¹⁰⁷ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 39.

¹⁰⁸ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 25.

his Father.¹⁰⁹

It is interesting to note that the relationship between the superior and the community is always stated in terms not of power or domination, but rather of unity and apostolic dynamism.¹¹⁰

Because it is not afraid to present clearly what the Gospel requires, the community is a response on behalf of all who, through difficulties and contradictions, are seeking to fulfill themselves in the world. In presenting the way of the evangelical counsels, the community is pointing to the road of the Beatitudes, of joy and happiness.

Joy has always been a characteristic trait of the Oblate community. In article 297 of the 1928 Constitutions and Rules the Founder writes:

84

**MISSION THROUGH APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY ACCORDING TO OUR
CONSTITUTIONS AND RULES**

When the mission season is over, the missionaries will return with joy to the holy solitude of their own house, so that they may, in due time, renew the spirit of their vocation. They will do this by meditation on the divine law...¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 29.

¹¹⁰ "...For the Founder, obedience breaks down to charity when it passes through the prism of the Superiors, just as light breaks down into attractive colours. We must above all note that this alchemy is required 'in order to hasten the Kingdom of Christ.' The Founder is in a hurry: he wants quick results. If obedience is necessary for the unity of the enterprise, charity guarantees all its effectiveness and it is the Superiors, whose duty it is to translate orders into a common will, to translate obedience into charity." Gerard BLANCHARD, O.M.I., op. cit., *ibid.*, 199. Also cf. Fabio CIARDI, O.M.I., op. cit., *ibid.*: 265; Marcello Zago, O.M.I., op. cit., *ibid.*, 9; AUCTORES VARII, **The Congregation Renewed**, 79-80.

¹¹¹ **CC & RR**, 1928, art. 297. Cf. Gerard BLANCHARD, O.M.I., op. cit., *ibid.*, 206-207:

the image of the lowly travelling pigeon.

¹¹² **C C & RR**, 1982, Constitution 39, cf. **CC & RR**, 1966, Constitution 44.

¹¹³ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 29.

¹¹⁴ **CC & RR**, 1982, Rules 25, 26, 27, 28; Constitution 41. ¹¹⁵ Eugene de MAZENOD, **Constitutions**, cap. I, art. 3, #3.

And in the 1982 Constitutions and Rules we read:

A spirit of simplicity and joyfulness marks our communities.¹¹²

We will help each other find joy and fulfillment in our community life and in our apostolate...¹¹³

In this regard, I would also like to underline the capacity for welcoming and hospitality that our communities ought to have: welcome to the community members themselves, welcome to other Oblates, welcome to all others who wish to take an active part in our mission and our community life.¹¹⁴ The mark of welcome is a quality from the Founder who wanted each community to be a place of renewal and rest for all priests who were seeking the same.¹¹⁵

Joy is also the sign of an accomplished life which, by its own convincing power, thus becomes a call that summons other apostolic workers:

Jesus never ceases to call people to follow him and to proclaim the Kingdom. Some are drawn to answer that call through the joy and generosity of our lives.¹¹⁶

4. We come before him bearing with us the daily pressures of our anxiety for those to whom he sends us

The community is missionary because it is able to celebrate the mystery of God among men and to consecrate the sufferings and daily cares of people to the presence of God.¹¹⁷ The Founder already expressed this notion:

Finally, the missionary, fearing lest his preaching might be in vain, will pray and get others to pray to the divine Master of hearts, to deign to accompany the words of his minister with that powerful grace, which moves and converts, and without which all words are as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.¹¹⁸

Our mission is to bring about the discovery of God's Kingdom which is already present in people's hearts.¹¹⁹ God is present in history and the Oblate ought to live a life of the theological virtues so that he may recognize him and manifest him to others.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 52. ¹¹⁷ Cf. *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 32. ¹¹⁸ *C C & R R*, 1928, art. 117. ¹¹⁹ *C C & RR*, 1982, Constitution 6.

120 "While maintaining within ourselves an attitude of silence and inner peace, 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. We are pilgrims, walking with Jesus in faith, hope and love." *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 31.

¹²¹ *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 33; cf. *CC & RR*, 1928, art. 144.

¹²² *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 33.

¹²³ *C C & R R*, 1982, Constitution 33 and 56.

The community ought to be a place of prayer where a part of the divine office is celebrated in common.¹²¹ Furthermore, communities put the Eucharist at the heart of their

¹²⁴ *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 40; cf. *CC & RR*, 1928, art. 45, 341. ¹²⁵ *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 26; also cf. Constitution 87, 105. ¹²⁶ <> AUCTORES VARII, *The Congregation Renewed*, 76.

¹²⁷ "Real collaboration and constructive participation require spiritual discernment which helps to discover God's will (cf. C.C.26, 72b). The Constitutions and Rules remind us of the need for discernment for openness to prophetic voices (R. 10), for making important decisions (R.18), for new forms of community (R.24), for adopting new prayer forms (cf. R.20). Discernment must be one of the qualities of the Superior (cf. C.18). The Constitutions and Rules also provide some criteria for discernment although they do not get down to explaining this important exercise which was formerly reserved for personal direction and is now extended to the community. The will of God must be sought together (cf. C.26) in faith and in response to the call of the Spirit (cf. C.C. 68, 72). Meditation on the Word of God is a help in this matter (cf. C.C.31b, 33b)." Marcello ZAGO, O.M.I., op. cit., ibid., 8-9. Also cf. Rene MOTTE, O.M.I., op. cit., ibid., 56-57.

¹²⁸ Cf. *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 35.

¹²⁹ *C C & R R*, 1928, art. 188-189.

life and mission.¹²² Finally, the Oblates want to remain as listeners to God's Word so that they are able to read the events of history in the light of faith.¹²³ In this perspective, we can better grasp the content of Constitution 40:

Whatever the demands of our ministry, one of the more intense moments in the life of an apostolic community is the time spent praying together. One in spirit with those who are absent, we turn to the Lord to praise him, seek his will, beg forgiveness and ask for the strength to serve him better.¹²⁴

I see the concern for discernment as contained in the determination to place oneself before God in order to read the events of one's daily life:

As individuals and as a community, we have the responsibility to seek the will of God. Decisions which express this will are best reached after community discernment and prayer.¹²⁵

It was the common consideration of the actual distress and urgencies of the times, and the desire to respond to them, that provided the unitive force for this small band of men who grouped themselves around Father de Mazenod. For us, the "community" consists above all in "looking together in the same direction", for the work of God will not wait.¹²⁶

Seeking God's will is the fruit of an undertaking that is made together within the community and in union with the superiors and with the Church.¹²⁷

5. Ever better disposed to serve God in his people

The community never exists for its own sake, withdrawn into itself. On the contrary, its intimate life is like the fire in an open fireplace which, if it is to give light and warmth to others outside, needs to be nourished and fed from within. The community, therefore, needs its own life of intimacy in order to be able to serve better the neighbor to whom it is sent.¹²⁸ The Founder was thinking of this double dynamic in terms of enriching the community as much as the ministry when he spoke of the two portions lived inside and outside the community.¹²⁹ In a certain sense, it is the same idea as that of

¹³⁰ "...like the Apostle we preach 'Jesus Christ and him crucified...'not with pretentious speech, but in the demonstration of the Spirit', that is to say...we make it evident that our hearts have long cherished the words which issue from our lips, and that we begin to practice, before attempting to teach." **CC & RR**, 1826 II partie, ch. 3, #1, art. 5: **CC & RR**, 1928, art. 100. Also cf. Gerard **THEMATIC COUNCIL OF THE OBLATES**, 216.

MISSION THROUGH APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY ACCORDING TO OUR CONSTITUTIONS AND RULES 186

¹³¹ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 73. Cf. **CC & RR**, 1928, art. 668: "...All the members of the Institute should be of such a mind as to strive to take the lowest place like true disciples of Him, who though God and Lord of all, came not to be ministered to but to minister..."

¹³² Cf. **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 5.

¹³³ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 92,72. Cf. Rene MOTTE, O.M.I., op. cit., *ibid.*, 55.

¹³⁴ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 9.

¹³⁵ **CC & RR**, 1982, Constitution 87.

St. Dominic's *contemplata aliis tradere*. Our mission is to transmit to others what we have ourselves lived in an intimate life with Jesus and in the apostolic community.¹³⁰

The community is called to be of service as was Jesus who "washed his disciples' feet".¹³¹ We have said that "our principal service is to proclaim Christ and his Kingdom to the most abandoned"¹³²; and the first service that the community can offer to mankind is to radiate the mystic and beautiful presence of Jesus, who lives in it as he lived among the Twelve who were gathered together in his name.

In our community life we find the strength to be missionaries, because community life is a salvation event. In the community it is the oblate (offered) life of Christ which is at work, a love which gives itself and serves. Through Jesus, we overcome the forces of division in order to build up together. This is already the Kingdom of God which is being accomplished. This is a strength that sustains us in the ministry. Here, the proclamation of the Gospel explicitly transmits what we are living together. What is true of the local community is true also for the Province (which is a real apostolic community) and for the entire Congregation which gathers all Oblates together into one sole apostolic community.¹³³

6. We announce the liberating presence of Jesus Christ and the new world born in his resurrection

The community is prophetic¹³⁴ and therefore it becomes witness to the justice and the holiness of God in the measure that it has the power and capacity to free man.

Local communities...should help us to become more prayerful and reflective and to live the Gospel to the full, thereby freeing us for ever greater fidelity to our calling.¹³⁵

Living the Gospel without compromise is living the Risen Lord's power of love, following him on the way of the Cross, and ourselves becoming free to love wherever we are called to serve. Prophetism is founded on the faith of the paschal mystery:

The cross of Jesus Christ is central to our mission. Like the apostle Paul, we "preach Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). 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 (2 Cor 4:10).¹³⁶

Prophetism is a new way of looking upon reality: it enables us to see the world through the eyes of the crucified Saviour. It is also the certitude that we have from knowing the power of the resurrection. This certitude becomes a witness of liberation and the source for developing the whole person in all of its values.

Awareness of our shortcomings humbles us, yet God's power makes us confident as we strive to bring all people - especially the poor - to full consciousness of their dignity as human beings and as sons and daughters of God.¹³⁷

Just as society is at the service of the person, so we can say the community is at the service of the new man.¹³⁸ Human, Christian, priestly and religious development and fulfillment must obviously be accomplished according to the requirements and modalities of the paschal mystery, which is always a matter of death and resurrection.

To make the community prophetic sign intelligible, we have to adopt values that are comprehensible to the people of our day, in the culture in which we are called to live.¹³⁹ That is why the community ought to be fraternal, open to dialogue, poor, committed to justice, and always open to others and to the Other.

Finally, the mark of this prophetic faith which impels the community will be the community's élan to move ahead.

Prophetism is not easy to achieve, or to understand; through community discernment, however, we will manage to discover what actions and requirements the

¹³⁶ *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 4. Cf. *CC & RR*, 1928, art. 263.

¹³⁷ *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 8.

¹³⁸ Prophetism is well expressed by the Founder in the Preface, especially when he says:

"...It is supremely important—that we teach these degenerate Christians who Jesus Christ is..., to act like human beings, first of all, and then like Christians, and, finally, we must help them to become saints." Eugene de MAZENOD, *CC & RR*, Preface, 10.

¹³⁹ *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 7; Rules 8, 29.

Spirit wants of us. Finally:

Whatever their work, Oblates will collaborate, according to their vocation and . by every means compatible with the Gospel, in changing all that is a cause of

oppression and poverty. They thereby help to create a society based on the dignity of the human person created in the image of God.¹⁴⁰

IV. Conclusion

We have examined our Constitutions and Rules in terms of how they have evolved and especially as to how they present the element of community. We have tried to discover what link there is between community life and mission. In order to show this link, which is a close and strong one, I analyzed the traits of the mission in order to see how the community is involved therein. Let us take a glance at the distance we have covered.

The community is sign of the presence of Jesus, a true presence which, even though not sacramental, gives value to every community activity.¹⁴¹ Jesus lives amidst the members of the Oblate community and he himself is the mark of authenticity of their ministry: he seals it with the mark of the divine and the supernatural. The Gospel word, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20), is always an incentive of reflection for us, for it is of a major importance, both in terms of the conditions for its realization and for the consequences that follow as well.

We are united in his name: therefore, also in charity, in the Gospel, in mutual love. Hence, we are united for no other purpose, no other motive than for Him.¹⁴² Jesus is the

sole reason for our unity, the sole reason why we are community, and not the apostolate, our ministry, even the mission or whatever other activity we may do: these latter things are but consequences.

We can then ask the question: Are our communities really gatherings of men who

¹⁴⁰ *CC & RR*, 1982, Rules 9, Constitution 34.

¹⁴¹ Marcello ZAGO, O.M.I., *op. cit.*, *ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴² Cf. *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 1.

have chosen to remain together solely for the name of Jesus? If they are, then they are apostolic communities, reliving the same dynamic reality that was lived by the community of the Apostles with Jesus. If, to the contrary, they are not thus motivated, then they are nothing else but functional communities, communities of work, teams that have been set up to achieve a practical goal, a simple means for accomplishing something in the immediate here and now.¹⁴³ Once this established goal is achieved, there no longer is any reason to stay together, not even to exist. Since, however, the Master who has called us will never fail us - "I shall be with you all days, even until the end of the world

(Mt 28:20) - the community will always have its reason for existing.

And now the consequences of this unity. The community is missionary because it is the sign of Jesus' presence: "You are witnesses of all these things" (Loc 24:48). Being witnesses to Christ's presence means continuing his mission. This says it all. This reality is the starting point for every expression and manifestation of the Oblate community.

We therefore have to suppose personal effort towards a continual conversion which leads on to perfection: a conversion understood not in an individualist sense, but in the sense of a mutual love; a perfection which at every instant ought to purify our intentions in order to keep us properly oriented in terms of Jesus' presence which we ought to promote. He is the Perfect One and in Him we are to find perfection and, by the same token, the unity of our life and of our lives.

The community radiates this light through the spirit of the Beatitudes. If, in fact, to have Jesus in our midst we are to lose everything else, if to follow him as the Apostles did we must leave everything behind, it is also true that in Him we find everything. In the community, the locus of God's presence, we have the hundredfold: hundred houses, families, friendships, fathers, mothers, brothers, children. In Jesus, the source of the hundredfold, we again bring joy to the world. What greater mission can there be than to show the world that, when we give everything, we possess the All-Mighty and in Him everything else!

¹⁴³ Cf. Fernand JETTE, O.M.I., *Problématique de la vie communautaire évangélique*, in *ETUDES OBLATES*, 29(1970), 4-7.

To be sure, if we are to enter into this dynamic which I have labeled one of death and resurrection, we need on the part of each a constant effort to believe in the regenerating power of the Cross. Each time that I die to myself, each time that I give up

my own self in order to generate the presence of Jesus in the community, I am witnessing to my faith in the resurrection of Christ, the basis of the Christian mystery. We celebrate this mystery in the Eucharist; but are we capable, have we the courage to celebrate it each day within the community? If we are, then our communities, born of the sacrifice of each in order to be transformed into member of Christ's Body, in order to manifest divine life and allow oneself to be modeled by his Spirit¹⁴⁴, will be prophetic and will have the strength to proclaim: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord" (Loc 4:18-19).

Together with you, I would now like to ask God the Father that, as he did long ago in the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus may still today cast his eyes upon all our communities and say: "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing" (Loc 4:21).

Giovanni SANTOLINI, o.m.i.

Panel Session

(August 9, 1989, 14.00 - 16.15)

¹⁴⁴ *CC & RR*, 1982, Constitution 45.

The main points made during the panel session are the following:

1. By “regularity of life”, the Founder meant living out all that was contained in the 2nd part of the Rules (religious life, exercises of piety). If this was lived out, an Oblate would be a good religious and would become a saint. As has been said (v.g. in the Dumais conference), the community is missionary or evangelizes by its very being and also by its capacity to effectively proclaim God’s Word. In the Founder’s view, the community helps us to be saints, and thus equips us to evangelize effectively. The Rules are there to help each Oblate become a saint: all the spiritual exercises they contain are meant to lead us into a deeper union with Christ. Ciardi has shown that the community becomes mission inasmuch as it unites us to Christ.

2. The Founder also remarked that the Apostles were effective evangelizers also because they had the gift of working miracles; that Oblates generally have not received this gift, and they have to make up for this by their holiness of life if they wish to be effective missionaries.

3. What the Founder considered regularity seems to be only regimentation. The 1980 Constitutions and Rules eliminated all this regimentation and placed regularity as a fidelity to spiritual sources.

4. We would gravely misunderstand the Founder if we saw his Rule as so much “regimentation”. There was a profoundly valid spirit in which the Rules were to be lived out. The French school of spirituality saw Jesus as the “perfect religious and adorer of the Father”. Living the prescriptions of the Rule was a matter of fidelity, being faithful to the vocation one had accepted.

5. It has been pointed out that a community is made up of different and often difficult individuals, and that this gives rise to tensions and to conflicts. There is always the dream of an idyllic community, v.g. the novitiate as the ideal community - and yet there too we meet conflict. We see moments when the Founder was faced with community conflict: with a local bursar, with Father Suzanne, in 1837 when he complains of so much lukewarmness. It is a fact that half of the Oblates left the Congregation during the Founder’s time.

The Founder’s ideal was that men who joined our community undertook to be saints. From 1840 on, an official record of expulsions was kept, and it contains at great length the reasons why each was expelled. For the Congregation as a whole, the Founder was satisfied; but he did insist that a young Congregation such as ours could not tolerate the corruption and decadence that plagued old Orders and Congregations. Out of 1000 who joined the Congregation in the Founder’s time, 350 left as novices and 130 left after profession: this adds up to about 50% being faithful. Statistics for that time show that only 29% were faithful among the Jesuits, 12% among the Dominicans, and 4% among the Trappists.

6. Santolini has stated that the community is like a sacrament. Vatican II has presented the Church as the sacrament of salvation. Vatican II also presents the Christian family as a little, domestic Church. The religious community shares in this aspect of “sacramentality”: where two or three are gathered in Christ’s name, Christ himself is in their midst. The religious community is in its own way a sign that effects salvation. We

do have to distinguish between a sacrament in the strict sense which is effective “*ex opere operato*” and the sacramentals which are effective “*ex opere operantis*”. In regard to the religious community, we should insist on each one’s intention and capacity to make Christ tangibly present within the community milieu.

7. Did the Founder ever accept Oblates working alone? How did he see special situations? In 1982, we introduced the notion of residences and district communities.

In principle, the Founder admitted no exception. He had to contend with a great deal of individualism among the Oblates. Cases like that of Jeancard and Dupuy consist of men who could not live or work in community. It was a long time before the Founder admitted exceptions and these were very few: they occur towards the end of the Founder’s life and it was a matter of exceptional men v.g. Dassy, who was allowed to live alone in the Community he had founded; Gondrand, who was an excellent preacher, writer, held in high regard by the Founder, was allowed to live alone in support of his family. When Father Fabre became Superior

General, these few individuals were given an ultimatum: either live with other Oblates or else leave the Congregation.

The above may be true for France. But we also encounter cases in the missions (Red River; Ceylon) where men were in very difficult circumstances and lived alone, all the while observing a very regular life. The Founder knew about this and, out of necessity, accepted. He insisted that they be at least 2 in each mission, and held the superiors responsible in conscience that this be so. This was not always carried out: in the Red River mission, also for a time in Sri Lanka; the Founder himself lived “alone” for almost 10 years. He wanted these Oblates to be closely linked to the Congregation and that is why he insisted on a yearly letter from them. It is a fact that most of these Oblates mentioned the good times they had when they used to be living in community.

The Founder saw the Oblates in France as replacing the ancient monastic Orders that had been destroyed by the French Revolution. His own social class looked to these Orders as to a model. So perhaps the Founder and the Oblates had to experience the transition from the ideal of the monastic community to that of the apostolic community.

It is obvious that the Founder’s idea evolved. The Congregation developed rather rapidly. In the beginning, there was only to be a regular, charitable, apostolic community at Aix of 12 members, somewhat patterned after the Sulpicians. In Algeria, the Oblates landed up being placed one by one into different parishes by the Bishop and the Founder withdrew them. There were also difficulties with Bishop Allard in Natal. The Founder had difficulty accepting some Canadian situations. The Founder was in touch with all these different situations and his idea evolved in the process. He understood that the Oblates could not all live in one big community.

8. Districts did not appear with the 1980 editions of the Constitutions and Rules. They began to appear in the real life situation of the dispersal and expulsions that took place in France. Residences and districts are already clearly contained in the 1928 Rulebook.

9. Father Jean Drouart narrated his experience when he came as Assistant General to make a canonical visitation of Laos. Bishop Loosdregt was then both the Vicar Apostolic and the Provincial. In Laos, Father Drouart found all the Oblates living alone. While this seemed odd to him, he understood and accepted it a little later after he had seen each Oblate there. Rarely has he found such a deep community spirit. He found realized what we read in the 1825 Rulebook, now on p. 48 of the 1982 Rulebook. In 1907, an article was added that Oblates should be still more attached to the Congregation the more they are deprived of the benefit of community living. While it is true that the Founder wanted to withdraw the Oblates from Red River because they were working in isolation, when Taché was named Bishop, he saw in this appointment a sign of God's will and he accepted the situation.

10. For the Founder, community was not only an end in itself but also a means of evangelization. We need only contrast the situation in Algeria where the Founder took the Oblates out with that in Natal where "the living Rule", i.e. Allard, was sent and where his rigidity created many difficulties to which the Founder himself then reacted.

11. What was the impact on community of the context in which the Oblates were founded and developed? The conferences we have heard are quite bereft of the contextual element.

This is a question for historians to pursue. The Founder did accept exceptions, did not really change much either. The Oblates in Canada and Sri Lanka preached missions in almost the same way as in France. The Founder realized that you cannot always have large communities. He would have always liked the minimum of two by two. In Natal, they had a monthly retreat of three days, and it took them several days to come together and several days to go back to their posts. Only towards the end of his life, when he was much over-extended and no longer really on full control, the Founder allowed things to go their way - most likely leaving it to his successor to find a better solution.

12. Some of what has been said above seems to be a bit over-simplified. It is based on an Oblate viewpoint solely. The Founder's practical dealings were more complex: he had to deal with Bishops who were responsible for parishes. In fact, in Algeria, the Oblates were supposed to be all in one parish: while looking after that parish, they were to begin evangelizing the Moslems. When the French Government forbade all missions to the Moslems, the Bishop separated the Oblates, assigning each to a different parish. This moved the Founder to the conclusion that in Algeria we were not in our place; at the same time, the request came from the Holy See that we go to Natal. Regarding Red River, we must also remember that there could not be mass conversions, for the population was too sparse.

13. The community must be seen not only as an instrumental means for the mission, but also as a “locus theologicus” both in regard to itself and in regard to the mission.

14. Cf. last text of the Founder in 1982 Rulebook, a text which is from a circular letter of the Founder. It stresses our apostolic spirit and that we are to form but one heart and soul. It also refers to what is the resume of our whole Rule: cf. art. 291 of 1928 and the long text reproduced in p. 38 of our 1982 Rulebook. Father Resle in his commentary says that here we have what is most characteristic of our spirituality. The so-called “two portions” of our life have often been seen as a dichotomy! Yet the Founder says that whether we be on mission or in our Oblate house, we are to strive to be “other Jesus Christs”, and for that grace is needed. The way to achieving this is through charity and obedience, and this is the sense of the long article on humility: an identifying with Christ who is meant to live within us and in our midst. The practice of authentic charity and obedience makes Jesus Christ present in our lives and in our communities. Jesus Christ is the basis for the unity of our life. Also the 1982 Constitutions and Rules retain this in regard to charity and obedience: cf. CC. 3, 38.

15. Concerning the idea of community: there is what the Founder thought and also the more recent experience: our charism is being lived within the Church. As missionaries we are to proclaim the Kingdom, to recapitulate all in Christ, to gather together God’s People. We have the lived experience of the Kingdom, we are a living sign of the Kingdom. The whole Congregation is a community, not just the local community: we are all to be an apostolic corps. All together we are missionaries. Our community should be immersed in the Church community, open to the greater communion that is the Church universal.

16. When he penned the first Rule at St. Laurent du Verdon, the Founder, in his idea of community, followed not St. Alphonse but St. Ignatius Loyola: the will of God and being open to every good work that priestly charity can think of. We see a flexibility in the Founder here from the very beginning in regard to the way community can be lived in the Congregation.

Community and Mission according to the General Chapters

Introduction:

Today, many of our ministries are individualized. The link between community and mission is less evident. Thus, the community is in danger of losing its vigor and the mission its support.¹

These are the very words of the last General Chapter. The Chapter is expressing its awareness that the Congregation is in danger of neglecting one of the fundamental values of the Oblate vocation, that of “living in apostolic community and acting as an apostolic community.”²

The Chapter refers back to the Constitutions and Rules in these words: “Constitution 37 - expressing the historical heritage of the Founder - underlines the bonds which unite community and mission.”³

¹ *Missionaries in today's world*, Citta Nuova 1986, p. 42.

² Text on Formation of the 1972 Chapter, in *Acts of the General Chapter 1974* Citta nuova 1976, p. 78.

³ *Missionaries in today's world*, p. 43.

In the light of the General Chapters from 1818 to 1986, I will try to present this historical heritage of Constitution 37. First of all, I will endeavor to point out the ideal of our apostolic community and its concrete realization, and then, I will dwell on two indispensable conditions suggested by the General Chapters to live this ideal in today's world.

The sources for this study are the minutes of the General Chapters and the documents developed by the 1972 Chapter: (*Missionary Outlook*,

Community,⁴ the 1972 Chapter's document on formation), and by the 1986 Chapter's document, (*Missionaries in today's world*). We have these minutes in “manuscript” form. During the initial period (from the 1826 Chapter to the 1953 Chapter), all the minutes were handwritten. The minutes of the 1959 Chapter and the minutes of all subsequent Chapters to our day were typewritten. In this study, when I refer to minutes, I will use the term “manuscript” for the handwritten minutes but for the typewritten minutes, I will use the term “minutes.”

The method adopted. To see more clearly the development and the full expression of the thinking of the General Chapters, I have adopted the chronological-analytical method. Moreover, I have divided the history of the General Chapters into three periods:

the first one, from 1818 to 1856, bears the stamp of the Founder's personality; the second period, from 1861 to 1959, has as its distinctive mark the Chapters' insistence on the observance of the Constitutions and Rules; the third period is characterized by the renewal of the Congregation and its adaptation to the demands of today's world.

I. The ideal of our community

1. Jesus and the Apostles

As planned by Blessed Eugene de Mazenod, the ideal of the Oblate community was that of walking in the footsteps of Christ and of the Apostles.⁵

The General Chapters take up this theme again, but do not treat it thoroughly. However, the few texts that do speak of it are worthy of our consideration.

The two texts which I found in the first period are drawn from the Chapters of 1837

⁴ *Community*, strictly speaking, is not a document of the 1972 General Chapter. The elaboration of this document was entrusted to the Central Team who in writing the text based themselves upon the Chapter discussions. ("Community, a draft submitted by the Ad Hoc Committee; "Apostolic Community" and "The Religious Apostolic Community.") These schema can be found in the General House Archives. Since, by its formula, "The Central Team's document on COMMUNITY LIFE (Oct. 1972) is still totally relevant, (*Acts of the General Chapter 1974*, Citta Nuova 1976, p. 15)" the General Chapter of 1974 reconfirmed the document *Community*, I considered it a good thing to include it in my study with the other schema which come down to us from the General Chapter of 1972.

⁵ cf. Fabio Ciardi, *Fisionomia e natura delta comunita oblata*, Esercitazione per la licenza, Roma, 1976, p. 7-38. cf. Yvon Beaudoin, *Communauté et mission d'après. Mgr de Mazenod et chez les premières générations d'oblats en Europe*, Rome, 1989.

and 1843.

In 1837, while the Founder is drawing the capitulants' attention to the main points of the Rule, at the same time, he firmly underlines:

If it does not consist in walking in the path trodden by J(esus) Christ and the Apostles before us, what a different, illusory and fantastic idea might not one have of perfection. That is our purpose! Other Orders may have a purpose which is more severe, but a purpose more perfect than this one does not exist.⁶

At the Chapter of 1843, the Founder draws particular attention to the flourishing missions of England and Canada and invites all the Oblates to practice "more faithfully still the apostolic virtues that this vocation demands..."⁷

This theme recurs often in the course of the second period - no doubt because the General Chapters were then concentrating on the observance of the Constitutions and Rules and had made it the main object of their concern.⁸ The most significant text appears in the Chapter of 1953: "constant ongoing union with Jesus should be the soul of our existence."⁹

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, following the signs mapped out by the Church, the Congregation adjusted itself to the new demands of the modern world while

seeking to maintain the original spirit of the Institute. In the light of Oblate tradition, the ideal of the Founder is recalled and examined in depth.

When speaking of renewal, the Chapter of 1966 states that the Founder certainly “would ask us to examine, to review our positions (...) by an energetic return to the holy Gospels, a return to the pristine thought of our religious Institute (...). He would like to

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| ⁶ | Joseph Pielorz, <i>Les chapitres généraux aux temps du Fondateur</i> , Ottawa, 1968, vol. I, p. 127. |
| ⁷ | Ibid., p. 183. |
| ⁸ | cf. Aloysius Kedl, <i>Les Oblats et l' évangélisation dans les chapitres généraux de 1867 à 1966</i> , in <i>Vie Oblate Life</i> , 42/1983, p. 285. |
| ⁹ | <i>Procès verbal du chapitre général de 1953</i> , p. 51. ¹⁰ <i>Procès verbal du chapitre général de 1966</i> , vol. I, p. 10. |

see us follow more closely the examples of Our Lord and of his Apostles.”¹⁰

In fact, the discussions then treated of this point and the following text was developed: “Imitating the examples of the Apostles, the Oblates consecrated themselves entirely to the proclaiming of the Gospel, in order to be cooperators of the Saviour in his Paschal Mystery.”¹¹

In 1972, the assertion is made that we strive to identify ourselves with Jesus Christ.¹²; in 1980, there is still an explicit reference made to the words of the Founder: “It is said that he wanted us to be men of the interior life, apostolic men, men who work seriously at becoming saints.”¹³ It is stressed that the spirit which inspires the Oblates is that of 1818: “to be the cooperators of the Saviour,” ‘to live together and to strive to imitate the virtues and the examples of our Saviour Jesus Christ.’”¹⁴

2. The glory of God and the salvation of souls

The General Chapters strive to make the Oblates more aware of the fact that the Oblate communities do not live for themselves, but for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

This very important dimension of Oblate life is set forth in bold relief by the Founder in the Chapter of 1826 when he speaks with joy of the approbation of the Constitutions and Rules: “God sanctioned the plans that we had made for his glory; he blessed the bonds which unite us; henceforth we will war against the enemies of heaven (...).”¹⁵

Upon examination of a suggestion which concerns the formation of members of the Congregation in view of the mission, the Chapter of 1831 emphasizes that this issue is: “extremely important for the glory of God and the good of the Society.”¹⁶

The same theme of the glory of God and the salvation of souls is mentioned yet

¹¹ *Procès verbal ...1966*, vol. I, p. 138; cf. *Procès verbal ... 1966*, vol. I, p. 103; 207; 208.

¹² cf. *Procès verbal ... 1972*, Vol. II, p. 233. "We forget that no one more than Christ himself drew near to the poor to the point of taking upon himself their misery, to the point of identifying with them." *Procès verbal... 1972*, vol. II, p. 238.

¹³ *Procès verbal... 1980*, p. 257.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁵ Pielorz, op. cit., p. 76.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

again in the General Chapter of 1837. When speaking of the apostolate that the Fathers in Corsica are very zealously exercising, Bishop de Mazenod says: "The people scattered about in this half-wild island are responding to the selfless work carried out on their behalf for the glory of God and the salvation of their souls."¹⁷

I was unable to find the use of such expressions in the second period. Perhaps it was superfluous to insist upon that which the Oblate community considered as being basic and which was clearly expressed in the preface of the Constitutions and Rules.¹⁸ In any case, the very apostolate carried out by the Oblates at the time gives ample evidence of their conviction that the community does not live for itself but rather for a supernatural

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁸ "(...) ready to sacrifice goods, talents, ease, self, even their life, for the love of Jesus Christ, the service of the Church, and the sanctification of their brethren. And thus, filled with unbounded confidence in God, they are ready to enter the combat, to fight, even unto death, for the greater glory of his most holy and sublime Name." Preface of the Constitutions.

¹⁹ cf. "Concrete implementation of our ideal," in this study.

²⁰ *Procès verbal... 1966*, vol. I, p. 103; cf. also, *Ibid.*, p. 138 and 207.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103; 139; 208.

²² *Procès verbal... 1972*, vol. II, p. 233.

purpose.¹⁹

In the third period, there are no lack of texts to show forth this dimension of the Oblate community. We can even say that it is viewed as an essential element which unites the personal charism of the Founder with that of the Congregation. The General Chapters draw upon his thinking and develop its content more in depth while at the same time making reference to the New Testament and to the official documents of the Church.

Already in the Chapter of 1966, we notice the emergence of a certain new element which spotlights the significance of the glory of God and gives an explanation of what constitutes this glory: "Throughout their life they wish to dedicate themselves to the glory of God. This glory is the conscious and deliberate welcoming (...) of the salvation of God."²⁰

The Oblates continue to live in the world, "the world which God so loved that he gave his only Son (John 3:16) not to condemn the world but to save it. The Oblates will keep in mind that it is this same love which consecrates them and sends them forth."²¹

This theme was studied anew and further developed in the Chapters of 1972 and 1974.

One expression of the 1972 Chapter strikes us immediately: “Is it not for Christ that we live?”²² By dying and resurrecting to a new life, Christ brought to men the hope of a liberation which transcends all purely human powers²³, and then, the Chapter quote continues:

As men striving to be free ourselves so as to be able to free others, we are continuing the mission of Christ who came “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives” (Luke 4:19).²⁴

Christ wants us to manifest, by living together in spite of difficulties involved, that his love and his Spirit are stronger than all the forces of disruption.²⁵

In short, let the Oblate community “take care to always place in bold relief Jesus Christ whom the individual is in danger of forgetting.”²⁶

The Chapter of 1974 continues in the same vein and shows forth in even bolder relief that the Oblates are “called by Jesus Christ to evangelize the poor,”²⁷ and if they wish to give a lived response to the questions of the world, they must “go forward to meet the Lord.”²⁸

On the other hand, as if it wanted to see more clearly if the deeper analysis which had taken place before was truly consistent with the personal charism of Blessed Eugene, the Chapter of 1980 reverts to the Founder’s way of expressing himself, that is,

he wished that we should be men who (...) are wholly devoted to self-denial, who have in mind only the glory of God, the good of the Church, the edification and the salvation of souls; men who are shock troops, an elite corps at the service of the Church; men who should be coworkers, models, supporters of their fellow priests.²⁹

²³ *Missionary Outlook*, Citta Nuova, 1976, p. 19.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ *Community*, Citta Nuova 1976, p. 11

²⁶ *Religious Apostolic Community*, the schema of the General Chapter of 1972..

²⁷ “Capitulants’ Letter to Oblates,” in *Acts of the General Chapter 1974*, p. 12.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁹ *Procès verbal...* 1980, p. 257.

³⁰ *Procès verbal... 1986*. Superior General’s Report, p. 9.

When it addressed the question of the criteria of our action in the world of today, the General Chapter of 1986 emphasized article 5 of our Constitutions: “We are a missionary Congregation. Our principal service in the Church is to proclaim Christ and his Kingdom to the most abandoned.”³⁰ We can say that if the Congregation wishes to be faithful to the ideal and to the charism of the Founder in his choices and his criteria for action, it can never ignore or overlook this article.

3. Unity of the body

To walk in the footsteps of Christ and the Apostles for the glory of God and the salvation of souls is something which must take place in the context of a unified apostolic body. In this regard, the General Chapters seek to heighten the awareness of the members of the Congregation by showing them that a religious institute is a spiritual reality and a communion of souls, but a community as well, a social body whose members are involved in a common apostolic work and a form of common life.³¹

³¹ cf. *Procès verbal... 1974*, vol. I, p. 29.

³² cf. Pielorz, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 301-302.

³³ Ibid., p. 302.

³⁴ Pielorz, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 70.

³⁵ cf. Ibid., p. 62.

³⁶ cf. Ibid., p. 165.

³⁷ cf. Manuscript (Ms) 1861-1887, p. 29-30; cf. Ms 1893-1898, p. 28; Ms 1904-1932, p. 33.

So it is that the General Chapter of 1850 emphasizes that the spirit of unity and of fraternal charity is characteristic of our Congregation.³² The Founder invites all the members of the Chapter to take this spirit back to their houses with them; he adds: "When they are promulgating the decrees that have just been issued, the local superiors will take pains to insist on the good spirit which must more than ever reign (among) us along with a g(reat) love of our vocation."³³

To help maintain this spirit of fraternal unity the Chapter of 1856 ordained that: "All the members of the Society will be obliged to write a letter to the superior general at least once a year."³⁴ Moreover, it cautions people against a certain spirit of independence which it notices in America.³⁵

In 1861, it is stressed that fraternal unity calls down the blessing of God and assures a glorious future.³⁶ But, the predominant idea in the second period is that of "group solidarity," "l'esprit de corps."³⁷ In this regard, we find the most expressive texts in the Chapters of 1867, 1893 and 1904.

"Group solidarity," "l'esprit de corps" are possible only if the Oblates and the Oblate communities do not turn in upon themselves. That is why the 1867 Chapter voices the following reproach:

Nor is there among us to the degree in which we would like to see it that group solidarity, that kind of life in the Congregation which leads the religious to be truly a religious, not only for himself, but also and especially for the Congregation to which

he has the good fortune to belong. It was painful for us to notice often that the religious is too concerned with his own interests, that the local house is thinking too much of itself and not enough perhaps of the Congregation as a whole.³⁸

The Chapter of 1893 repeats almost the same thing:

As a Congregation, there does not exist among us the esprit de corps which we find elsewhere and which constitutes the strength of an Institute. Selfishness on the personal level, on the local level, on the provincial level, we find it all too often: One thinks of himself, of his house, of his province and that to the detriment of the general spirit of the Congregation.³⁹

Because of the religious persecution going on in France, this theme becomes an even more important topic at the Chapter of 1904. In order to ensure unity in dispersion, the Chapter reiterates that l'esprit de corps among Oblates is a question upon which "the superiors should especially insist."⁴⁰ Moreover, "the General Chapter expresses the wish that the administration on the general level and the provincial level take all the practical measures needed to develop among us l'esprit de corps."⁴¹

The texts of the first and the second period suggest another consideration as well, that is, that the structures and formation should assist and encourage unity in the Oblate family⁴²

The third period offers a deeper analysis of unity as much on the spiritual level as on the level of solidarity of life and in apostolic action.

The most important texts appear in the Chapter of 1966. Love and solidarity should be the hallmark of Oblate life: “United by the bonds of a deep love and their apostolic obedience, they will always remain in solidarity in their life and the missionary action which calls them together.”⁴³

However, the Oblate community should strive toward a deeper dimension of unity, that dimension which is communion between persons.

They will make every effort to increase among themselves a communion of heart and of spirit. They will develop sharing, dialogue, fraternal assistance for their spiritual growth, their intellectual research and their apostolic activities.⁴⁴

The *raison d’être* of this communion is Christ himself. He personally “creates their

³⁸ Ms 1861-1887, p. 29-30.

³⁹ Ms 1893-1898, p. 28.

⁴⁰ Ms 1904-1932, p. 53.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² cf. Pielorz, vol. I, p. 283-286; cf. Georges Cosentino, *Chaptires généraux*, Ottawa, 1957, p. 56; cf. Ms 1904-1932, p. 278 and 499; cf. Ms 1938-1947, p. 80.

⁴³ *Procès verbal... 1966*, vol. I, p. 143.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

unity.”⁴⁵ When this unity is authentic, it is never restricted to family members only, even if family members do occupy a privileged position. An authentic unity within the community leads to unity in Christ with the people of God. That is why:

Through active participation in the liturgical action of the People of God for the glory of the Father through the Son in the Spirit and in order to present the world as an offering to God, the Oblates will live the mystery of the Son of God in the Eucharist. They will intensify their fraternal communion with all men, especially those of their community and those to whom they are sent.⁴⁶

The thorough rethinking of the unity of the apostolic body carried out in 1966 will serve as a basis for the thinking of the subsequent Chapters which basically repeat the same ideas⁴⁷

We notice a few new elements in the Chapter of 1972 which reminds us that “the charism of our Founder is collective in nature. The Holy Spirit makes Oblates always and everywhere participants in it. Our unity is achieved in the context of our diversity and our complementarity.”⁴⁸

In short, the unity of the Congregation depends especially on fundamental values.⁴⁹

The Chapter of 1980 summarizes pretty well this whole period as it seeks to make the Congregation more aware of the mutual sharing which should extend to the point of spiritual communion among the members of a community. It is necessary to strive to achieve this kind of unity if we wish to fully live the religious life.⁵⁰

4. Communion with “our saints”

As we have seen, the communion which the Oblates seek to live among themselves within the community has a supernatural dimension. Consequently, this union continues even after death. The Oblates here below can count on the help of their brothers in heaven.⁵¹ They are the protectors of their family which still lives here on earth.

⁴⁵ Ibid. cf. Ibid., p. 213.

⁴⁶ *Procès verbal... 1966*, vol. I, p. 143.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Community*, p. 12, 16 and 27-28; cf. *Missionary Outlook*, p. 23 and 26; cf. *Procès verbal ... 1974*, vol. I, p. 29; cf. *Procès verbal ... 1980*, p. 39; cf. *Procès verbal ... 1986*, Superior General's Report, p. 9.

⁴⁸ *Procès verbal... 1972*, vol. I, p. 67.

⁴⁹ Cf. Ibid., p. 19.

⁵⁰ *Prods verbal... 1980*, p. 60.

In 1856, when speaking of the Oblates who died as a result of their zeal and their dedication in the apostolate, the Founder praises them in a beautiful way: "If we do not as yet have martyrs of the faith, we really do have martyrs of charity, and we are justified in considering them our protectors in heaven."⁵²

This awareness of the communion of the saints, and in a special way of communion with "our saints," continues to be brought up often in the course of the second period.⁵³

The Chapter of 1861, held not long after the Founder's death, expresses the conviction that his soul "without doubt, presides over this assembly which has been called together to elect the one who is to carry on his work."⁵⁴

In addition, the unanimity of the Chapter is perceived as "the assistance of the Holy Spirit; the visible protection of our good Mother, the Immaculate Virgin; the support of s(aint) Joseph, ... and the paternal influence of our holy Founder."⁵⁵

But the most beautiful thought of all was expressed by Father Joseph Fabre, the one elected by the Chapter: "I am experiencing the assistance of our beloved Founder, he has not left us! I was at his death bed: You will always be with us I said... Yes, he answered, and he has kept his promise."⁵⁶

Love in the Oblate family does not cease with death; it continues on forever. That is what the Chapter of 1873 states very clearly: "Our beloved Father and all of our Brothers who make up his Congregation in heaven are sharing these same thoughts."⁵⁷ "They are now in God's presence with our beloved Father! They loved their religious family here on earth, they love it still in heaven where they are praying for us who remain in exile."⁵⁸

The third period passes over this theme in silence. I found only one text which, without any explicit reference to communion with the Oblates in heaven, mentions our

⁵¹ cf. Ms 1861-1887, p. 258.

⁵² Pielorz, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 48.

⁵³ cf. Ibid., p. 161, 163, 165; cf. Ms 1861-1887, p. 29, 34, 110, 118 and 308-309.

⁵⁴ Pielorz, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 161.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 163.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 165.

⁵⁷ Ms 1861-1887, p. 110.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 118.

Oblates who have died.⁵⁹

II. Concrete implementation of our ideal

1. Striking a balance between the religious and the apostolic life

In reading through the documents of the General Chapters, we notice some problems which the capitulants sought to resolve in order to strike a proper balance between the religious life and the apostolic life. The most significant ones are: an excessive zeal which interferes with regular community life; an individualism which leads people to lose their sense of belonging to the Congregation; the isolation of our Fathers in the missions and the loss of a sense of a communitarian mission.

Excessive zeal. In the first period, the emphasis is placed on the internal discipline of the community. Because of overwork, the Fathers risk dispensing themselves too easily from certain community exercises. The Chapter of 1837 remarks at the very outset:

Their numerous tasks, their apostolic works, the small number of members in each house have perhaps often given the appearance of being a legitimate excuse to dispense themselves from the most beneficial of practices.⁶⁰

A balance is very important. Otherwise over involvement in the apostolate risks turning into an activism which does not bear much fruit for the good of souls. It can, moreover, produce an imbalance within the person himself. As a result, the conviction that it is especially necessary to be a perfect religious was reinforced. This theme especially drew the attention of the Chapter of 1850. While admiring apostolic zeal of the Fathers sent to the missions, the Founder reminds everyone

(that) we have to understand, now more than ever, the necessity of being a perfect religious in order to be a good missionary. We have to be solidly convinced that the most effective means to produce abundant fruit in souls is holiness of life and the faithful practice of all of the duties of our state in life.⁶¹

Individualism and isolation of the Fathers in foreign lands are the two main problems upon which the capitulants dwell during the second period.

59	cf. <i>Procès verbal... 1966</i> , vol. I, p. 143.
60	Pielorz, <i>op. cit.</i> , vol. I, p. 124; cf. <i>Ibid.</i> , vol. II, p. 51.
61	<i>Ibid.</i> , vol. I, p. 265.

Individualism was already studied in 1867. Given the fact that what is of prime importance for many Fathers is not their obligations toward religious life, but rather their own personal satisfaction and pastoral work outside the community, the Chapter reiterates the fact that “the Rule should always hold the first place,”⁶² and that “the father who has the care of souls is not for all that under a lesser obligation to observe the Rules and community life.”⁶³

But it is clear as well that in order to fulfill one’s duties without an inordinate effort, favorable conditions must be created for this. That is why the Chapter prescribes “(that) a special program approved by the provincial will create a harmonious arrangement between the demands of parish ministry and the duties of community life.”⁶⁴

Moreover, in order to avoid any ambiguity with regard to individualism, this same Chapter forbids every member of the Congregation to undertake or to direct a work “which would not be a work of the community, but rather a personal work.”⁶⁵

In subsequent years, in spite of this ruling, the problem continued. But for the most part the Chapters take refuge in exhortations which especially show the positive side of community and of work done by at least two people.

One-missionary works, the Chapter of 1873 emphasizes, “foster independence, keeping the spotlight on the individual (...). There are quite enough lone wolf preachers in other places. We are a Congregation of Missionaries. Lets remain a Congregation of Missionaries and authentic Missionaries.”⁶⁶

In 1920, superiors themselves are admonished for accepting too much outside work and for giving in to the temptation of wanting to do everything themselves.⁶⁷ All the Oblates are advised to develop that kind of a supernatural spirit without which “all apostolate remains unfruitful”,⁶⁸ and not to sacrifice “to external zeal, to work, the lot which our venerated Founder deliberately reserved for our soul.”⁶⁹

- | | |
|----|--------------------------------------|
| 62 | Ms 1861-1887, p. 30. |
| 63 | Ibid., p. 94. |
| 64 | Ibid., p. 60. |
| 65 | Ibid., p. 94. |
| 66 | Ibid., p. 116. |
| 67 | cf. Ms 1904-1932, p. 283. |
| 68 | Cosentino, <i>op. cit.</i> , p. 279. |
| 69 | Ms 1904-1932, p. 282. |

In order to forestall individualism and to help maintain the proper balance, the Chapter of 1938 advised that care should be taken not to overload the young Fathers, and not to leave them in idleness. They should have the time to accomplish their religious duties and the exercises of the Rule.TM

The Chapter of 1959 noted that Oblates possess exceptional qualities in regard to the ministry and the apostolate, but they easily dispense themselves from community exercises; and yet they should understand that the Rules help them to experience God and his indwelling in their soul; without this, they cannot pretend to be “dispensatores mysteriorum dei.”⁷

Another problem faced in this period is that of *isolation*. After the accepting of foreign missions in 1841, the Congregation extended itself toward ever more distant horizons. However, this expansion often brings on the isolation of Fathers and Brothers because of the demands of the apostolate. That is why, following the course marked out by the Constitutions of 1818, the Chapter of 1867 reiterates a norm which is meant to safeguard the value of the Oblate religious life: “Duo saltem ibunt ad missiones, nunquam unus, nisi de consensu Provincialis aut Vicarii.”⁷²

In the following years, to maintain at least a minimum of community life, the general administration refuses two vicariates and two prefectures offered them by

Propaganda Fide.⁷³ In addition to this, in the Chapter of 1873, it is suggested that the ruling be made that no other vicariate will be accepted by the Congregation, no new mission district will be entrusted to our Fathers “before the districts are supplied with sufficient personnel.”⁷⁴

Then again in 1904, an invitation is extended to consolidate the existing posts and only very exceptionally to accept any others,⁷⁵ because “even though at first glance our ministry may seem to benefit from the dividing up of the missionaries, it gains even more by everything which promotes the religious life of the missionaries themselves.”⁷⁶ To be sure, the religious persecution going on in France at the time had a great impact on the work of the Chapter of 1904.

⁷⁰ cf. Ms 1938-1947, p. 44.

⁷¹ **Procès verbal... 1959**, p. 43.

⁷² Cosentino, *op. cit.*, p. 80; “We will never go on mission alone; we will always be at least two together.” Constitutions et Règles de la Société des Missionnaires de Provence, Premier manuscrit français, Part One, chapter II, par. 1.

⁷³ cf. Ms 1861-1887, p. 159.

⁷⁴ cf. *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ cf. Cosentino, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

In the wake of the war in 1920, insistence on community life is emphasized once more. A suggestion is made to the Provincials and the Vicars concerning the “abandoning of small places, small parishes, etc... and the concentration in houses with large communities in order to remain strong.”⁷⁷ The hope was expressed that in this way, “overwork and isolation which kill bodies and drain the lifeblood from souls,” could be avoided.⁷⁸

The problem of isolation was examined once again in the Chapters of 1926⁷⁹ and of 1947,⁸⁰ but nothing new was added.

It must be said that the problem of isolation was less dangerous than that of individualism which brought with it the risk of having one lose the sense of belonging to the Congregation. Isolation was rather something brought on by the needs of the ministry and by obedience. Moreover, as one of the capitulants said in 1904:

Defections had been much rarer in occurrence among those Fathers placed in this condition because of the requirements of the apostolate than in the other vicariates and provinces, and (...) that when this situation was due to obedience, we felt upheld by an exceptional grace.⁸¹

During the third period, new solutions are suggested for the problem of isolation. When it spoke of community life, the draft of the Constitutions and Rules of 1966 did not overlook those Oblates who work alone:

Since they are missionary religious, through and by means of the community to which they belong, the Oblates will conduct themselves as such, even though because of the way they are scattered because of their ministry, they can enjoy the benefits of the common life only at brief intervals.⁸²

This text became a source of other interventions in favor of the Fathers who carried out in isolation the ministry that had been entrusted to them. So it was that in 1974 the recommendation was made not to forget those missionaries living in isolation when the official documents spoke of community life.⁸³ Moreover, in the letter of the capitulants to

⁷⁶ Ms 1904-1932, p. 27. Ibid., p. 282; cf. Ibid., p. 287, 316 and 326.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 287.

⁷⁸ cf. Ibid., p. 469-470.

⁷⁹ cf. Ms 1938-1947, p. 288-289.

⁸⁰ Ms 1904-1932, p. 27.

the Congregation, we find this declaration:

Together we must give our support especially to those of our brothers who suffer from isolation and to those whose difficult missionary situation deprives them of the communion to be found in a life shared with one's brothers.⁸⁴

The notion of community in a wide sense which includes the idea of district dominates the discussions of the Chapter of 1980.

But this option presupposes a minimum of concrete community requirements (and not only hidden in one's heart) such as meetings, sharing, prayer, mutual support... In real life, this type of extended community is often the only one possible and the one most adapted to the needs and the conditions of the modern apostolate.⁸⁵

During this period, in addition to the problem of isolation, the Chapter turned its attention to two other questions. First of all, *the relation between religious community and mission*. The issue at stake was to stimulate a renewed awareness of the reciprocal dependence to the point of mutual compenetration between community and mission bringing about their perfect union. The second question, a very important one since it was already enunciated by the Founder and brought up in the chapter of 1867, concerned community responsibility in regard to mission.⁸⁶

When speaking of the renewal of the Congregation and treating of the spirit of our origins, the Chapter of 1966 emphasizes in a special way "the truly communitarian sense of our entire lives which should not separate us from the People of God."⁸⁷

After this consideration, we come to the exposition of a very beautiful text which presents to the Oblates the paschal mystery of Christ as source of the unity of the religious and the apostolic life:

Following the example of the Apostles, the Oblates dedicate themselves entirely to the proclaiming of the Gospel in order to be cooperators with the Saviour in his paschal mystery. For them, therefore, the religious life in which they realize this consecration becomes one with their apostolic life.⁸⁸

We can see here that the emphasis is placed more on the internal aspect, that is, less

⁸³ cf. *Procès verbal... 1974*, vol. I, p. 50.

⁸⁴ *Capitulants' letter to Oblates*, p. 16 and 17.

⁸⁵ *Procès verbal... 1980*, p. 113.

⁸⁶ "Every member of the Congregation is forbidden to undertake or to direct a work which would not be a work of the community, but a personal work." Ms 1861-1887, p. 94. cf. Ciardi, *op. cit.*, p. 106-108.

⁸⁷ *Procès verbal... 1966*, vol. I, p. 10.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 138.

on the structures than on the awareness of being cooperators with Christ; it is this which brings unity to the religious apostolic life.

This deeper understanding gives rise to enthusiasm and optimism in 1972. We see the rebirth of a confidence in the religious life:

If we rediscover the essential element of the religious life, apostolic community is a response to the problems of the world. It does not fear the future. It lives this future if it lives, believes and hopes in the Spirit which it (the community) possesses to go forward.⁸⁹

And in the discussions on mission there is a clear affirmation that “community and missionary outlook” are closely linked: without apostolic community, the missionary outlook is merely an illusory vision. Without the missionary outlook, apostolic community is no longer Christian and no longer has any future.⁹⁰

That is why a radical return to the Gospel is recommended to the Oblates⁹¹ as well as a radical return to Christ⁹² who unifies the religious and the apostolic life. Moreover, the recommendation is made: “to form communities: parish communities, hostels, communities of the poor people who cannot participate in the decisions of their society, of the young, etc...”⁹³

In 1974, the following advice is given: “(that) in the Congregation, especially in the rich and industrialized world, the deliberate decision be made to fast once a week in order to better identify ourselves with the poor and those who suffer hunger, to sharpen our awareness of their misery.”⁹⁴

But to limit oneself to that would not be sufficient. “If we fast as was suggested, the money saved should be set aside for the poor.”⁹⁵

After a few years of trying out these ideas, the Chapter of 1980 reiterates the notion that the unity of the religious and the apostolic life is realized “by an intense relationship with Christ”⁹⁶ and “the identification of his will to the will of his Father.”⁹⁷ And that, on the practical level, this unity takes place in the context of a reciprocal compenetration;

⁸⁹ *Procès verbal... 1972*, vol. II, p. 188.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 187; cf. *Community*, p. 13.

⁹¹ cf. *Missionary Outlook*, p. 23.

⁹² *Procès verbal... 1974*, vol. I, p. 55.

⁹³ *Religious Apostolic Community*, the schema of the General Chapter of 1972.

⁹⁴ *Procès verbal... 1974*, vol. II, p. 173; cf. *Missionary Outlook*, p. 20.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁹⁶ *Procès verbal... 1980*, p. 112.

that is, the religious life “far from turning us away from people and the active life, rather (urges) us on to it, and that in return, our contacts with people and our apostolic action (themselves) become sources of prayer and nourish our prayer.”⁹⁸

In the Chapter of 1986, the wish is expressed that the discovery of the joy of community life should develop “always in relationship with the mission and without rigidity, accepting a certain pluralism.”⁹⁹

Community responsibility in regard to the mission is another point which is investigated in depth in the Chapters from 1966 to 1986. This is important if one wants to bring about the concrete incarnation of the reciprocal compenetration of the religious and apostolic life and to prevent this from remaining a mere pious wish.

In 1966, the issue of community responsibility on the level of the apostolic life was not treated explicitly. They began to develop it in 1972 when the fact that we are linked: “to each other on two levels: on the level of the religious life by a community life centred on the Eucharist and sharing; on the level of the apostolic life by communitarian cooperation through the coming of the Kingdom of God” came strongly to the fore.¹⁰⁰

Therefore, the apostolate: “should normally aim at operating in teams which are constantly open to being challenged by the Gospel,”¹⁰¹ and the new experiments should maintain “the communitarian dimension of all our missionary enterprises.”¹⁰²

This dimension is very important because, as the document on formation states, “to live in apostolic community and to act as an apostolic community is a basic element of the Oblate vocation.”¹⁰³

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 40.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 257.

⁹⁹ *Procès verbal... 1986*, Superior General's Report, p. 12.

¹⁰⁰ *Procès verbal... 1972*, vol. I, p. 67.

¹⁰¹ *Apostolic Community*, a draft submitted by the Ad Hoc Committee, p. 2.

¹⁰² *Missionary Outlook*, p. 24.

¹⁰³ Text on Formation of the 1972 Chapter, in *Acts of the General Chapter 1974*, p. 79. In regard to studies, this document states: “Oblates sent for specialized studies should receive the proper encouragement and moral support from the Oblate community. Oblates should undertake such studies not as a form of escape nor merely to pursue a personal interest, but only inasmuch as such studies help to promote the missionary responsibilities of their Oblate community.” Ibid., p. 76..

What is more, we can say that the very life of the apostolic community with its moments of mutual pardon and of reconciliation is already a mission because

Christ wants us to manifest, by living together in spite of difficulties involved, that his love and his Spirit are stronger than all the forces of disruption. He wants us to manifest through our lives that the liberation of man is already begun.¹⁰⁴

In the light of this deeper understanding, the Chapter of 1974 invited the whole Congregation to critically examine its lifestyle because, as Father Maurice Lefebvre of Bolivia said so well: “It is our lying lives that prevent Christ and his truth from shining through.”¹⁰⁵

The General Chapter of 1986 set forth once again what had been studied in depth in 1972. It emphasizes especially that common ministry can be very helpful to community life and vice versa¹⁰⁶ and that “community life for us Oblates is not only necessary for the mission, it is a mission in itself and at the same time a qualifying sign of the mission of the Church.”¹⁰⁷

2. Fraternal charity

Community life grows and develops in charity. This is a very important element in the thought of the Founder and it was brought up again at the Chapter of 1966.¹⁰⁸

However, charity lived within the community should always be seen in relation to mission.¹⁰⁹

The Founder himself was adamant when the issue was one of lacking in mutual respect and failing in fraternal cooperation so as to have a negative effect on the harmony of the community which had as its ideal the reliving of the virtues of the Apostles.

At the General Chapter of 1831, he spoke out sternly against certain Fathers who “allowed themselves to entertain antipathies against (their superiors), complaining and, at times, even a sort of opposition which extended to the point of censuring their acts.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ *Community*, p. 11; cf. *Apostolic Community*, the schema, p. 2. [⁹⁵ *Procès verbal... 1974*, vol. II, p. 174-175.

¹⁰⁶ *Procès verbal... 1986*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁷ *Missionaries in today's world*, p. 42. In my opinion, it seems that the same thought was expressed in 1972 in an even clearer fashion. “We believe that the common life is not a waste of time and energy, but it is the first locus of the mission which has a prophetic value... Through us who live as brothers, God challenges false values... the values of the world: money, control over others, selfish pleasure.” *Apostolic Community*, the schema, p. 2.

¹⁰⁸ cf. *Procès verbal... 1966*, vol. I, p. 65.

¹⁰⁹ cf. Ciardi, *op. cit.*, p. 5-9.

In 1837, Bishop de Mazenod pointed out that mutual respect was lacking in the Congregation, and yet, since they lived in the bosom of the same family, the Oblates should portray: “the very image of that charity which united the Apostles and the first disciples of Christianity.”¹¹¹

On the other hand, at the Chapter of 1843, he recommends deference towards superiors, the respect and the charity which is mutually due.¹¹²

With time, the exhortations concerning fraternal charity bear fruit. At the Chapter of 1850, the Founder can say that fraternal charity constitutes the distinctive character of our Congregation.¹¹³ Fraternal charity lived in community increases the heart's capacity to love all men and in a particular way those to whom the Oblate is sent.

In 1856, the Founder joyfully declares: “If we do not yet have martyrs of the faith, we do in fact have martyrs of charity.”¹¹⁴

This distinguishing mark of charity among Oblates in view of the mission is well expressed in one of the letters of the Founder to Father Semeria in Ceylon,¹¹⁵ and it is most succinctly summed up and left to the whole Congregation as an inheritance in his oral testament: “Among you, Charity, Charity, Charity, and outside zeal for the salvation of souls.”¹¹⁶

After his death, this spirit continued to be evoked and defended. Already at the Chapter of 1861, the question was raised as to whether the prayers offered for the Oblate departed should be offered as well for the novices who pronounce their vows on their death bed; the reply on that occasion was that “This favour is not due them in justice, but the charity that we should have for all members of the same family seems to demand it.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ Pielorz, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 100.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 125.

¹¹² cf. Ibid., p. 183.

¹¹³ cf. Ibid., p. 301-302.

¹¹⁴ Pielorz, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 48.

¹¹⁵ “Above all we must take the precautions necessary for the safety of our own men, and this will only make more certain the conversion of others.” De Mazenod to Father Semeria, January 25, 1848, IV, p. 7.

¹¹⁶ Ms 1938-1947, p. 174.

¹¹⁷ Pielorz, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 171.

At the Chapter of 1867, the statement is made that “charity always brings unity. Charity should be the virtue of members of the same family.”¹¹⁸

We should love the great virtue of charity and practice it with joy. As it is said in the Chapter of 1893, “That is the sign by which one should be able to recognize the children of the one who on his death bed urgently exhorted us to love each other.”¹¹⁹

In 1920, the Chapter did not limit itself to mere exhortations. It made concrete suggestions. First of all, each vicariate should take care of its own sick and aged Fathers and Brothers. “It is logical that the aged of our members should be maintained and cared for by the very vicariates where they spent their lives working.”¹²⁰

Then, another point, very important for the Congregation, is treated, that is, the way we should treat our brothers. It is stated that:

Their situation is sometimes very distressing. They should always be provided with a spiritual prefect, not chosen haphazardly, but chosen for his religious and intellectual qualities and thus provided with a rich interior life such that they do not feel that they are being treated like unpaid servants. We have no right to neglect the care of their souls (...) So let it be that in the manner of treating them they perceive much more fraternal charity rather than priestly authority. Let us train the young Fathers to see in our brothers their coworkers.”¹²¹

Fraternal charity strengthens the vocations and attracts others. Thus the future of the mission is guaranteed. The chapter then takes a critical look at itself concerning the lack of vocations: “It would be a deplorable thing if we should see this fact as the consequence that we no longer be inclined to show them respect, to love them and to form them.”¹²²

The Chapter of 1953, having in mind the Founder’s idea that the Oblates devote themselves to all the tasks to which priestly charity can urge them, completes what has already been said: “Therefore, Oblate charity means charity, priestly and communitarian.”¹²³

The Chapters of the third period, two of them in particular, speak out especially on the subject of fraternal charity. That of 1966 summarizes and sets forth once again the experience of charity in Oblate history; that of

118	Ms 1861-1887, p. 34.
119	Ms 1893-1898, p. 28.
120	Ms 1904-1932, p. 285.
121	Ibid.
122	ibid.
123	Ms 1953, p. 6.

1972 makes a kind of analysis and a more in-depth study of fraternal charity in the community context.

In 1966, the statement is made that “united by the bonds of a deep love, they will be loyally united in their life and in the missionary action which brought them together.”¹²⁴ And, so as not to remain in generalities, the same Chapter adds: “they will be filled with a very special care and concern for their brothers who are afflicted, ill, aged, who make a mighty contribution to the Kingdom of God.”¹²⁵ This charity extends as well to the departed brethren when the community remembers them in prayer.¹²⁶

In 1972, the document on “Community” emphasizes a few points which are indispensable in order to have a charity which is fully human and divine. First of all, it sets forth that “the charity of which we speak as the bond of community is scarcely charity if it remains cold, distant and intermittent, always questioning and nearly always criticizing.”¹²⁷

It is very important, therefore, to find warmth and mutual affection in community relationships because “the growth of the individual is sought through his life in community, through interaction on the human and spiritual plane with others.”¹²⁸

But there is more. Among the Oblates, community life should be lived in the perspective of a salvation which demands openness to others. In fact, we read in the same document: “Fraternal life is meant to be an experience of salvation.”¹²⁹

At the source of this life of fraternal charity one finds Christ, the poor man who urges us to share our life with others. Wherever the community is alert and tends to live this dimension of fraternal charity, we can say that the kingdom of God is being realized.¹³⁰

124	<i>Procès verbal... 1966</i> , vol. I, p. 104.
125	Ibid.
126	Ibid.
127	<i>Community</i> , p. 16. ²⁸ Ibid., p. 17. ¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 11. ¹³⁰ cf. Ibid.

3. Prayer

By nature, the Oblate community is apostolic. From its very inception, it recognizes Christ as its founder and it hears itself called by him to cooperate in the work of the redemption of humankind. That is why the members of the community seek to identify themselves to him and to allow themselves to be imbued with his spirit to live fully of the Spirit.¹³¹

But as the experience of the saints has shown, we cannot do this without pausing for long periods of prayer every day.

Already in 1818, the Founder wrote in the first Rules: “One part of their life will be spent in prayer, interior recollection, contemplation in the seclusion of God’s house which they will inhabit in common.”¹³²

For the Founder, it is obvious that only after having lived in intimacy with Christ can one proclaim who Christ is to all peoples, especially to the most abandoned.¹³³

However, it can appear strange that the General Chapters during the first and the second periods do not speak directly of prayer as such, but rather, as we have just seen, of community life and the observance of the Constitutions and Rules. Yet the problem immediately disappears when we notice that most of the community exercises are made up of prayer and of contemplation of the word of God. The Rules themselves, when they treated of behaviour within the house, were, as is fitting, at the service of the life of prayer and of contemplation.¹³⁴

The general line followed in the General Chapters of the first and the second periods can be summed up by the very words of the Founder as he spoke in the Chapter of 1850: “We have to be fully convinced that the most effective means to produce abundant fruit in souls is holiness of life and the faithful practice of all our duties of state.”¹³⁵

During the third period, when the Congregation was seeking to renew itself by a return to the spirit and the ideal of Bishop de Mazenod,¹³⁶ we become more aware that “our religious apostolic life cannot be maintained other than by a deep faith nourished by an intense relationship with Christ.”¹³⁷

¹³¹ cf. Ciardi, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

¹³² Constitution et Règles de la Société des Missionnaires de Provence, Premier manuscrit français, Part Two, chapter I, I par. IV.

¹³³ cf. Ciardi, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

¹³⁴ cf. *Ibid.*, p. 100-103.

¹³⁵ Pielorz, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 265.

¹³⁶ cf. *Procès verbal... 1972.*, vol. II, p. 238. ¹³⁷ *Procès verbal... 1980*, p. 112.

The General Chapters, in the course of their work of renewing the Constitutions and Rules took the occasion to study more in depth the meaning of personal and communitarian prayer in the absence of which a radical return to Christ is not possible, and finally, structures themselves cannot be renewed.¹³⁸

The Chapter of 1966, extends a warm invitation to all the Oblates: “Teach everywhere prayer, the love of meditation, of reflecting before God, of union with God.”¹³⁹ It goes on to emphasize that all the organizations, the structures, the meetings are important but “all that will not do one bit of good if on the inside, there is no soul. And that soul is prayer. It is a practical, real union with God, a prayer which renounces all attachments.”¹⁴⁰

Prayer, even if it is sustained by a community life, must be lived personally each day throughout one’s life to the very end. Thus the personal aspect of prayer which transforms us, which entrusts us once again to Christ, which makes us imitators of God and of Christ is shown forth in bold relief.¹⁴¹

This Chapter sums up in one phrase the necessity of prayer in Oblate life: “During their entire lives, it will be their constant concern to be permanently united to God.”¹⁴²

In 1972, the theme of the importance of prayer is emphasized even more, even to the extent of appropriating the words of Paul VI: “Fidelity to prayer or abandonment of the same is the test of the vitality or the degeneration of the religious life.”¹⁴³

The Chapter asks itself a basic question: “Might we not have to repeat the words of the Apostles: Lord, teach us to pray? And at the same time recall this saying of Jesus: You must pray always and never cease praying.”¹⁴⁴

The dawning awareness of the need for prayer is evident, but the exact form of personal and community prayer is not yet clear and there is doubt that it will ever be found, “if everything is based on personal freedom and mere spontaneity.”¹⁴⁵

138	cf. <i>Procès verbal... 1974.</i> , vol. I, p. 55.
139	<i>Procès verbal... 1966.</i> , vol. II, p. 439.
140	Ibid.
141	cf. Ibid.
142	<i>Procès verbal... 1966.</i> , vol. I, p. 105.
143	<i>Procès verbal... 1972.</i> , vol. II, p. 245.
144	Ibid.

An examination of conscience is then carried out by asking: What has replaced the old structures of prayer? At the same time, it is emphasized that prayer should hold the first place in the Constitutions and Rules and in our life.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, the fact is called to mind that

certainly one of the more intense moments in the apostolic community's existence is when it turns itself collectively towards the Lord to seek his guidance, sing his praises, implore his forgiveness and ask for the strength to continue in his service.¹⁴⁷

In this way, the community in prayer becomes the explicit sign of faith in Christ. But for a community to remain a praying community, each one must be a man of prayer and maintain a healthy personal relationship to God.¹⁴⁸

At the Chapter of 1974, and especially in 1980, prayer is viewed as a fundamental means to enable the religious and apostolic life to become in each Oblate a distinct reality.¹⁴⁹ The unity of one's life is concretized by the identification of the will of each one with the will of God.

But without a pause for prayer (...) can one come to the point of identifying one's will with the will of the Father? And even in the unified person, the love of Jesus Christ invites one sometimes to withdraw in order to be with Jesus Christ.¹⁵⁰

Unity of prayer and action is essential in the Oblate vocation because prayer, far from drawing us away from people and from action, rather urges us to it, and in turn, contact with people and apostolic action become themselves sources and fuel for our prayer.¹⁵¹

In the light of this deeper understanding, it must be emphasized that prayer, because it causes the community to live in intimacy with God, calls forth the three gifts which are indispensable: it restores the unity of the person who prays; it deepens the unity among the members of the community; and finally, it unifies the religious and apostolic life.

- | | |
|------|--|
| 145 | Ibid., p. 246. |
| 146 | Ibid., p. 245. |
| 147 | Community , p.9. |
| 148 | Ibid., p. 23. |
| 149 | cf. <i>Procès verbal ... 1974</i> , vol. I, p. 55; cf. Ibid., vol. II, p. 179; cf. <i>Procès verbal ... 1980</i> , p. 60 and |
| 257. | |
| 150 | <i>Procès verbal... 1980</i> , p. 40. |
| 151 | cf. Ibid., p. 257. |

III. To live our ideal in today's world

1. Fidelity

For the Founder, fidelity to religious commitments made in the presence of God and of the Church are the greatest expression and proof of love for Christ and the Church, the spouse which he acquired at the price of his blood.¹⁵²

That is the reason behind the intransigent attitude of the General Chapters of the first period in regard to fidelity to commitments made to the Church and the Congregation.

The Constitutions and Rules were approved by the Pope in 1826. From that time on, the Founder sees them as “the work of God himself who in some way gave them his personal sanction when he inspired his vicar to bestow upon them the character of his divine authority.”¹⁵³

From that time on, infidelity to the Rules became an offense against God. The one who did not show a sincere intention of putting them into practice and who persisted in

this infidelity was expelled from the Congregation, as for example the occurrences between 1826 and 1831.¹⁵⁴

At the end of the chapter of 1831, the Founder recommended to superiors that they see that the Rule be perfectly observed and to report to him all grave abuses, and especially the conduct of those who showed a consistent will to not observe any points whatever of the Rule. He formally declared that, as for him, he would make it his duty not to condone such a will and that expulsion from the Congregation would be the consequence.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² cf. Preface of the Constitutions.

¹⁵³ Pielorz, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 58. "He assured us that, as far as he was concerned, he saw nothing human in them and that he was so convinced that they were Heaven-inspired that it was impossible for him to see himself in them as anything other than the instrument of divine Providence." Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ "Since the last Chapter, it is the lack of sharing in the religious spirit and the lack of willingness to strive for evangelical perfection according to their state in life on the part of several who were our brothers which, through a long series of failings, has caused them to incur the worst of all evils, that of being cut off from a society to which they were united by bonds as sacred as they were precious. It was a necessary thing, very painful for the heart of a father to have to use such a terrible means. It was with great reluctance that he had recourse to it; but he was obliged to take into consideration the welfare of the family in general rather than his own natural feelings, which were urging him to spare those whose example he could no longer tolerate." Ibid., p. 99.

He wanted to be able to rely on men who were truly apostolic men, "ready to sacrifice goods, talents, ease, self, even their life, for the love of Jesus Christ, the service of the Church, and the sanctification of their brethren."¹⁵⁶

For this reason, even small infractions of the Rules were seen as a weakening of the vocation and a cause of apostasy.¹⁵⁷ This was clearly stated in the Chapter of 1837: "By these tiny daily infractions, by this lack of cooperation in the spirit and the letter of the Rule the vocation in some members has grown weaker little by little."¹⁵⁸ On this occasion, it was reiterated that fidelity should always have as its operative principle supernatural motives "which should always fill the soul of the apostle."¹⁵⁹

That is why, as the Chapter of 1850 emphasizes, the Oblates should live with a great love of their vocation and in perfect fidelity to the Rule.¹⁶⁰

In the General Chapters, the insistence that the Founder puts on fidelity and regularity as means of personal holiness¹⁶¹ has borne abundant fruit in all provinces, even from the apostolic point of view. It is sufficient to leaf through the reports of the Chapter of 1856 to become aware of this.¹⁶² The zeal and the sacrifices being made for the salvation of souls, in Ceylon in particular, is edifying.¹⁶³

After the death of the Founder, the General Chapters remain faithful to this way of seeing religious life; they centre their attention mainly on fidelity to the Constitutions and

Rules considered as “the expression of his love for God and the salvation of souls”¹⁶⁴ and as “the glorious testament of his great heart.”¹⁶⁵

The Chapter of 1861 underlines already that “their observance will be our whole strength.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁵⁵ cf. *Ibid.*, p. 109. Preface of the Constitutions.

“He indicated to us as cause of their apostasy the weakening of the original spirit of the Congregation, a spirit which is that of humility, penance, and of mortification, a spirit of perfect obedience to the Rules of the Institute and to the Superiors.

Today, are we not forced to deplore the fact of encountering in many a spirit totally contrary to this?” Pielorz, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 48. cf. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 125-126.

Pielorz, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 125.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 126. At the General Chapter of 1837, there was established the nine “cases reserved for certain faults, more serious and more contrary to the good of the Society.” *Ibid.*, p. 131. Liste des cas réservés, p. 144.

¹⁶⁰ cf. *Ibid.*, p. 303.

¹⁶¹ “He called the Chapter’s attention to the various articles and the other salient points of the Rule and read them. With such means at their disposal and with the help of their oraisons, particular examens, daily reading, and other things, it would be the fault of the individuals, if they did not work seriously for their sanctification.” *Ibid.*, p. 126-127.

One should not be surprised to find subsequently that in the second period fidelity to the Constitutions and Rules should be considered as fidelity to the charism and the spirit which animated the Founder himself.¹⁶⁷ In the Rules one sees the source of what should be the Oblate life.¹⁶⁸

The Chapters continually repeat expressions such as the following:

“to walk (...) faithfully (...) in the footsteps of our venerated and deeply mourned Founder.”¹⁶⁹

“To strengthen oneself in the religious spirit by the exact and faithful observance

of our Holy Rules.”¹⁷⁰

“To live more and more the life that our venerated Father communicated to us.”¹⁷¹ “The Rule is not loved and by that very fact is not observed with suitable

- ¹⁶² cf. *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 50-69.
- ¹⁶³ "Almost every year, cholera works its havoc; we have already had to endure the painful loss of three of our Fathers, victims of their dedication: Fathers Ciamin, Leydier and Lacombe. Before dying, the first of these three used to say: "I entered the Congregation to go to the foreign missions; I came to the foreign missions to do penance; my prayers were abundantly answered, for now, just by seeing myself condemned to never being able to work with you again, I suffer more in one hour of illness than I would suffer during a hundred years of work in the missions." Father Leydier, so outstanding for his fervor and his angelic charity, had signed with his own blood some most lofty resolutions which were found among his papers after his death. As for Father Lacombe, his virtues were so dazzling that the natives looked upon him as a saint, and they are still convinced that after his death he worked a miracle." *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- ¹⁶⁴ Pielorz, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 166.
- ¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 178; cf. Ms 1861-1887, p. 29-30;
- ¹⁶⁸ cf. Ms 1893-1898, p. 28. cf. Ms 1893-1898, p. 28.
- ¹⁶⁹ Pielorz, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 178.
- ¹⁷⁰ Ms 1861-1887, p. 29.
- ¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

"May the Lord enlighten them and not ask of them a too rigorous accounting of their infidelity."⁷³

"These holy Rules issued from the heart of our Father, approved here in Rome by Leo XII (...), they are not read; they are forgotten and too often ignored. In my opinion, that is the sad cause of the evil that we deplore."⁷⁴

Those are the most characteristic expressions of the second period.

At the Chapter of 1959, we see a tapering off of interest in this way of thinking and of speaking about fidelity to the Constitutions and Rules. We no longer encounter that almost automatic repetition of the expression: "the Rule is not observed," rather the emphasis is shifted to the love of God. The meaning of fidelity is studied in depth. The Rule is presented as a summary of the Gospel, as an expression of the love of God for us.

We need to feel, in the article written by the Founder or in the articles which were added, the fraternal charity which was the dynamic element in his life. Our law is a law of paternal and fraternal love: the one who does not sense this divine and human love of the Rule does not understand it! If you love me, keep my commandments. My yoke is sweet and my burden light. Do everything that he tells you... Law of obedience, the Rule is a law of love. It is the love which we have for the Rule which should lighten our task and be its inspiration (...). Through the Church which approved it, did not the Rule become a Word of God which we must study with faith, confidence and love?^{*175}

It is interesting to notice that fidelity is not limited to the Constitutions and Rules alone, but should be an unqualified attachment to the Holy See as well. That was the wish of the Founder, a wish restated by the Chapter of 1938:

It was his desire as well that his Oblates have a love, an unqualified attachment for the Holy See, that they should be men of the Pope, entirely at his command, and men who would follow his directives with the greatest fidelity, without departing from them under any pretext whatever."⁷⁶

The reason for the Oblate's fidelity to the Church was explained in the Chapter of 1959:

The Congregation does not work for itself when it seems to concentrate on a task whose purpose seems to be for the benefit of the Institute. We do not enlist our members for our own benefit but for the benefit of the Church and for the works she wishes us to do (...). Among us, there is no room for a narrowness of spirit which would make of the Congregation an entity alongside of the Church, an entity turned in on itself. This would be diametrically opposed to the mazenodian thought and the thinking of the Institute itself which lives only for the Church (...). The more one is an

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁷⁴ Ms 1893-1898, p. 28. Moreover, at the Chapter of 1938 it was said: "This attitude of deliberately failing to observe the Rule is an example too pernicious for us to pass over in silence." Ms 1938-1947, p. 43.

¹⁷⁵ **Procès verbal... 1959**, p. 17-18.

¹⁷⁶ Ms 1938-1947, p. 48.

Oblate religious, the more one is of the Church.¹⁷⁷

The same thought is stated and repeated at the Chapter of 1980.¹⁷⁸

The General Chapters of the third period see in Christ the ultimate reason for being faithful to the religious life. The Oblate, called by Jesus to continue his mission, should remain faithful to his identity of one sent by Christ just like he was faithful to his identity of one sent by the Father. A beautiful text from 1972 says:

We tend to forget that no one more than Christ himself drew near to the poor, the oppressed, the sinners, to the point of taking upon himself their miseries, to the point of identifying with them. And yet, it was by living his mission of "consecrated one", it was by remaining faithful to his identity of One Sent by the Father that he accomplished his work of salvation for the liberation of his brothers."⁷⁹

This fidelity to his commitment to his mission in the Church is the fundamental reason for the recommendation of the Chapter of 1980: "Formation should develop in us the dispositions which make of us men faithful to the commitments made."¹⁸⁰

In the light of a deeper theological understanding, the Chapter of 1986 reminds us that "the mission is communitarian: it does not belong to the individuals, but it is mission in the Church which continues the mission of Christ."¹⁸¹ Therefore, the one who is called to become an Oblate must be faithful to the mission of the community because it is "the community which sends forth and the mission is received in obedience and guaranteed by perseverance."¹⁸²

In conclusion, it can be said that the religious life lived in fidelity to the commitments made before God and the Church is an explicit sign of faith in the love of God who, in Christ, frees men from the slavery of sin and gives them the right to inherit his Kingdom. On the other hand, without fidelity, religious life would become an insult to God and a deceitful ploy to hide one's own selfishness.

2. Adaptation

¹⁷⁷ **Procès verbal... 1959**, p. 59.

¹⁷⁸ "The Congregation does not exist for itself. It exists for the Church, for the service of the Church." **Procès verbal... 1980**, p. 10.

¹⁷⁹ **Procès verbal... 1972**, vol. II, p. 238.

¹⁸⁰ **Procès verbal... 1980**, texte revise, p. 88h.

¹⁸¹ **Missionaries in today's world**, p. 44.

¹⁸² Ibid.

Fidelity to the religious life cannot remain static and conservative because this would lead it into a kind of traditionalism and would make it run the risk of becoming an institution foreign to society and without the strength to respond to the needs of salvation of the present reality. Fidelity does not exist for itself but rather in view of the mission. That is why the Oblate called by Christ to continue His mission in the Church, that is, to proclaim salvation to the poorest, must incarnate this in the contemporary world or remain sterile and unproductive.

For this very reason, fidelity must work in harmony with the renewal and adapt itself to the demands of the present world if it truly wants to be a Gospel leaven and an explicit sign of faith in Christ, Saviour of the world.

Adaptation is a duty, perhaps the most important duty of the General Chapters, because, as it was accurately expressed at the Chapter of 1953, “there are probably Institutes who have died because they did not adapt.”¹⁸³

The Congregation’s adaptation to the new demands of the mission was something which was already of concern to the Founder who from the beginnings of the Institute had understood this requirement and invited the Oblates to “constantly renew themselves in the spirit of their vocation.”¹⁸⁴

But very soon the Constitutions and Rules themselves needed to take into account the new situations in which the Congregation found itself. Already in the Chapter of 1831, the desire was expressed to take on foreign missions. In the way the Chapter reacted, we see “a very important step in the spirit of adaptation of the Congregation, especially in that which concerns its orientation toward the foreign missions.”¹⁸⁵

However, the Chapter of 1843 is the first Chapter to have the courage to modify a few articles of the Rule by having recourse to the Holy See “for approbation of these modifications to adapt the Rule to the needs of the times and the expansion of the Congregation.”¹⁸⁶

In this Chapter, we see very clearly that absolute fidelity is due only to God and to the fundamental values which cannot change; but as for what is concerned with secondary points in the Rule, fidelity is relative and depends on the requirements of the

183	Ms 1953, p. 51.
184	Preface of the Constitutions.
185	Cosentino, <i>op. cit.</i> , p. 36.
186	Pielorz, <i>op. cit.</i> , vol. I, p. 170.

mission. During the Chapter, the Founder himself admits that he

understands today that this unexpected development demands on his part that he should provide those means of bringing our Rule more into harmony with the needs of the society and into a more appropriate relationship to the vast horizon which is opening before us by reworking those points which new circumstances have rendered impossible of application and to add those elements which expansion requires.¹⁸⁷

In 1850, the time came to divide the Congregation into provinces and vicariates;¹⁸⁸ this became part of the modifications of the Constitutions and Rules printed in 1853 as a

logical consequence of the decisions taken by the Chapter of 1850.¹⁸⁹ The Congregation is adapting “to new demands with regard to the accepting of new ministries and religious discipline.”¹⁹⁰

The Constitutions and Rules are at the service of the religious and apostolic life and should maintain harmony between them. That is why in their accidental features, valid for a given period in time, they can and should be modified if it is our desire that it be possible for the message of salvation to become incarnate in the contemporary world of every age.

That was the conviction of the Founder and it was also the conviction of the Chapters of the second and the third periods.

The second period is especially characterized by three revisions of the Constitutions and Rules carried out by the Chapters of 1867, 1908 and 1926, and by three initiatives taken by the Chapters of 1947, 1953 and 1959 in regard to the adaptation of the Congregation to the new demands of the modern apostolate.

The new draft of the Constitutions and Rules *ad experimentum* of 1966 launched the third period; then, following some lengthy discussions in subsequent Chapters, and thanks especially to the commission formed by the Chapter of 1974 which was to consult all the provinces, the Congregation’s adaptation to the modern world was crowned with success in 1980 with the appearance of the new Constitutions and Rules. This desire of the Oblates to respond to the signs of the times gives witness to the vitality of the Congregation.

187	Ibid., p. 183.
188	cf. Ibid., p. 283.
189	cf. Ibid., p. 243.
190	Cosentino, <i>op. cit.</i> , p. 56.

As for reflections on the adaptation which took place in the second and the third period, it is worth the trouble to analyze a few texts which speak about it. In order to maintain the spirit of the origins of the Institute, we generally have recourse to the thought of the Founder who serves as our communications link.

In the Chapter of 1947, for example, two questions are asked: “How can one maintain intact our religious life in the face of the demands of modern life? How can we carry out an effective apostolate among the working class who are unreached by our influence?”¹⁹¹

In an effort to find an answer, they have recourse to the thought of the Founder while at the same time emphasizing that “it is, in fact, a question of ‘rethinking’ the Oblate ideal, just like our Founder certainly would have done if he had been living in our day. It is especially in the Preface of our Holy Rules that we will find the guiding principles to accomplish this work of up-dating.”¹⁹²

In 1959, a proposal is made to keep that thought of the Founder which contains his original inspirations, but to follow the teaching of the Pope on the adaptation of religious life to our time.”¹⁹³

The 1966 Chapter urged us to avoid the kind of attachment to the past which would prevent the renewal that the Founder would surely want;¹⁹⁴ it offered the reminder that adaptation must take place in the Church.¹⁹⁵

Because of the rapid changes taking place in modern society, the Chapter of 1972 made the proposal “that each community should give itself the structures which it believes to be the best adapted to its style of life”¹⁹⁶ while at the same time always keeping the Founder’s spirit of the ideal of evangelization.¹⁹⁷

In adaptation, we must above all not forget the fundamental values. The 1974 Chapter reminds us of this:

- | | |
|-----|--|
| 191 | Ms 1938-1947, p. 328. 192 Ibid. |
| 193 | cf. <i>Procès verbal... 1959</i> , p. 41. |
| 194 | cf. <i>Procès verbal... 1966</i> , vol. I, p. 10. |
| 195 | Ibid., p. 42. |
| 196 | <i>Religious Apostolic Community</i> , the schema of 1972; cf. <i>Missionary Outlook</i> , p. 25; cf. <i>Community</i> , p. 17-18. |
| 197 | cf. <i>Procès verbal... 1972</i> , vol. II, p. 238. |

This fundamental value is first and foremost Jesus Christ - and no one can call that into question - but it is the Church as well which is the continuation of the life of Christ in our times; yet again, it is the hierarchy who, according to our Catholic faith, in its basic lines reaches right back to Christ (...), the vows too (...). And among the fundamental values of our community (...) we have to include the Constitutions.¹⁹⁸

In 1986, we are reminded as well that the structures, as indicated by the Constitutions, “have no other goal than to sustain the mission...; they should remain flexible enough to evolve according to the rhythm of our lived experience.”¹⁹⁹

This external adaptation is very important, but personal and communitarian conversion must of necessity follow. That was once again emphasized at the last Chapter: “Our communities will be truly missionary only if each of us is rooted in a total availability which makes us ‘the servants of all’.”²⁰⁰

Conclusion

Throughout the history of the Congregation, the General Chapters illustrate without any shadow of a doubt that the Oblate community and the Oblate mission are very closely linked.

Without community, mission is an unsubstantial vision. Without mission, community turns in upon itself. The General Chapters bring out the fact that the reason for this inter-dependence is Christ himself who calls the Oblate community to cooperate with him in the work of the redemption of mankind. Thus, it becomes evident that the

community does not exist for itself, but like Christ, it exists for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

Jesus and the Apostles are the models that the Oblate community aims to imitate to the point of reaching the summit of sanctity, that is, to the point of personal identification with Christ and of allowing ourselves to be completely imbued with his Spirit.

Cooperation with Christ is lived in the unity of an apostolic body. This unity finds its strength in the permanent union with God, nourished by personal prayer and group prayer, as well as by mutual love among the members of the community.

¹⁹⁸ *Procès verbal... 1974*, vol. II, p. 124.

¹⁹⁹ *Procès verbal... 1986*, Superior General's Report, p. 7.

²⁰⁰ *Missionaries in today's world*, p. 45.

Charity and unity should be the distinguishing marks of the Oblate community in such a way that the community itself becomes a place of mission, that is, the explicit sign of salvation and of the love of God for all men.

In other words, the Oblate community, called by Christ to participate in his mission of one sent by the Father, must accept the responsibility of making actual in its life the prayer of Christ: "By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples" (John 13:35) and "May they all be one.... so that the world may believe it was you who sent me" (John 17:21).

This journey through the General Chapters, in spite of its brevity, sought to emphasize in a special way that community is a gift from God for the world of today, as well as the aspect that "mission is communitarian: 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."²⁰¹

Wladyslaw WALKOSZ, o.m.i.

The Apostolic Community according to the Superiors General

Introduction:

How did our Superiors General speak about apostolic community? What was their thinking on this subject? What orientations did they give to the Congregation in reference to apostolic community?

Our Superiors General have had a lot to say about Oblate community and the Oblate community in relation to mission. The difficulty I am experiencing in broaching this subject does not come from a lack of texts. Quite the contrary. My difficulty rather is to treat my subject without trespassing on the territory allotted to the studies by Fathers Beaudoin, Santolini and Walkosz. The Superiors General - and that was completely normal - when they spoke about community and the mission, continually referred to the Founder. This is especially true for Father Fabre who had known the Founder well, and for Fathers Decathletes and Jetté who studied a great deal the Founder's life and his writings.

The Superiors General frequently quote and comment upon the Constitutions and Rules. They continually come back to them, basing on them what they say about community and mission. Those who especially did this were those who worked on the preparation of the Constitutions and Rules or on the promotion of an appreciation of the new Constitutions and Rules. Finally, all the Superiors General were involved in the preparation of General Chapters and especially commented the decisions and orientations of General Chapters.

I hope that the organizers of this session took all that into consideration when they suggested the present conference and that you understand that our Superiors General had much more to say about our theme than what I am offering to you here. I made a real effort to leave aside what they have to say on this subject in relationship to the Founder, the Constitutions and Rules, or the General Chapters (without always succeeding however) to focus on what I could grasp of their personal convictions - even if it was not easy to find what was specific to each one, since all of them, as I said, drew upon the same sources.

Now a word to define the limits of my subject. I am studying the writings of the Superiors General from Father Joseph Fabre to Father Femand Jetté inclusively (concerning Father Zago I will only say a very brief word), that is, nine Superiors General, and I will limit myself to their published texts. (I have not, in fact, studied the correspondence of the Superiors General on this point, even though there must be some material relevant to our theme contained therein.) The published texts are primarily and almost exclusively the Administrative Circulars of the Superiors General to the members of the Congregation published in the eight volumes from 1861 to 1972, and continued in the second section of *Acta Administrationis Generalis O.M.I.* from 1972 to our day under the title, *Litterae Circulares Superioris Generalis*. The first, that of Father Fabre as

Superior General dated December 10, 1861, bears the number 10 and the last one, that of Father Jetté dated May 24, 1986, bears the number 302. Other published sources do exist and I will indicate them as I go along.

What have our Superiors General said on the subject of apostolic community in the course of these 125 years of the life of the Congregation? As you can guess, none of the Superiors General have made a systematic study of this theme such as Father Soullier's treatment of preaching or the studies of Father Decathletes on the Oblate vocation or the spirit of renewal. However, all of them, in one way or another treated this topic or at least touched upon it according to the circumstances or the events lived by the Congregation, and each one of them - need we even mention it? - did so according to his personality, his style, his perception of the needs of the Church and of the Congregation.

It seemed to me to be simpler to proceed in chronological order and not to try to group together under various headings the different aspects of apostolic community because I would have been afraid that by doing this I would run the risk of distorting the reality of things and of sometimes making someone say something he had no intention of saying by forcing him into the mold of my preconceptions. A chronological progression will enable us to observe the evolution which took place, if not of the idea of apostolic community, at least of the formulation of the concept of apostolic community.

1. Father Joseph FABRE (1861-1892) - Esprit de corps

Father Fabre, the first successor of Mgr de Mazenod, wrote 35 circular letters to the Congregation. Most of them, and especially the first ones, as is perfectly normal, speak a great deal about the Founder, citing his words and quoting his texts:

“Let us be united in spirit and in heart and we will be strong for doing what is good; let us be united in the memory of a Father forever beloved,”¹ he says already in his first circular letter of December 10, 1861. He ends off this letter by calling to mind the injunction of our dying Founder: “Apply yourselves thoroughly to practicing charity... charity... charity... towards each other and outside, zeal for the salvation of souls.”² This first circular letter is only three pages long; it is the letter of the second Superior General taking charge. As you can well guess, this last message of our Founder will come back time and again in the writings of all the Superiors General. It is a leitmotif which from now on will characterize the Oblate community: charity among the members will create a true community, zeal outside will make of it an apostolic community. This, all the Superiors General will often bring up in one form or another³ adding as commentary, for example, “sicut fratres habitantes in unum,” or “arctissimis charitatis vinculis connexi.”

In 1862 and in 1863, Father Fabre wrote two circular letters, numbers 11 and 13, on the same theme: “Renewal in the spirit of our vocation.” For example, this is what he wrote November 21, 1863:

¹ The Superiors' General administrative circulars to the members of the Congregation of the Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate, Rome, Vol. 1, no. 10, (1861), p. 2.

² Ibid., p. 3.

³ Cf. Maurice GILBERT, La charité fraternelle chez les Oblats d'après les Circulaires Administratives des Supérieurs généraux, *Etudes Oblates*, Vol. 28 (1869), pp. 60-79.

⁴ *Circulaires Administratives*, no. 13 (1863), pp. 13-14.

Yes, my very dear Brothers, take note, it is charity which will make one heart from many, one spirit from many spirits: it is charity and charity alone which creates community... Without charity the life of the individual takes on again all its demands and cares. There is the appearance of living in community, but there are as many ways of seeing things as there are individuals. Individual interests separate them; these interests clash; and self interest takes root among them both inside and outside with all its frightening consequences. Are we living a common life? Are we working for the community? ... Yes, the community, always the community, from that point on, devotedness, abnegation, generosity."⁴

Father Fabre had just said in this paragraph what we should be: true religious, before he said what we should do: evangelize the poor. He will then explain "how our Holy Rules provide amply and abundantly for everything which is necessary to achieve these two ends of the Congregation."⁵ For the third anniversary of the death of Mgr de Mazenod, he publishes a circular letter to present three texts of the Founder: the letters of 1853 and of 1857 to all the members of the Congregation and a commentary on our Holy Rules "unfortunately unfinished" observes Father Fabre. The commentary on the first Rule which treats of the end of the Congregation speaks of the means to arrive at this end: "...the exact observance of the evangelical counsels, preaching and prayer, a congenial mixture of the active and the contemplative life of which Jesus and the Apostles have given us the example."⁶ This is a text from the Founder, but as it is presented by Father Fabre, I felt it would be good to quote it here. He shows how the apostolic community is conceived and formulated in fidelity to the Founder.

The same idea comes back in 1865 in a letter treating of the preparation of the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation. He speaks of the 650 Oblates who now make up the Congregation.

It is through them that the Congregation will conserve this living and fruitful vigour which comes to it from its Founder. They will know how to make an unbreakable rule of the law promulgated by him in his first letter as the basic foundation of the Society: "One part of the year will be used for the conversion of souls, another part of the year will be dedicated to retreat, study, our own particular sanctification." A tireless apostle during the times dedicated to evangelical works, the Oblate of Mary worthy of this name, returns happily to his cell to live there as a perfect religious and to contribute, according to his abilities, to maintain in his community the life of perfection which is its distinctive characteristic."⁷

One aspect of Oblate apostolic community that Father Fabre will develop extensively is the esprit de corps, the family spirit. For example, this is how he expresses himself in 1871 (This text was quoted by Father Jetté September 11, 1981, in an address delivered to the congress of the Vice-Province of Zaire in Ifwanzondo when he was speaking on the topic of community, cf. The Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate, Rome, p. 92-93):

Let us never lose sight of the fact that our works are never meant to be personal works. We do them as religious, and therefore, it is in the name of the community and

⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

⁶ Ibid., no. 14 (1864), p. 17.

⁷ Ibid., no. 15(1865), p. 11.

for the community that we ought to do them... Within a Congregation the greatest danger can come from too great a spirit of individualism. As a religious should not be considering himself only, so a house should not limit itself only to its interests: a house is part of a province, and a province is part of the Congregation, and within the Congregation there has to be a centre from which the activity and life of the entire corps springs forth. All the parts ought to nourish this centre so that it, in its turn, may nourish the parts with the life it is meant to communicate to them. These are the attitudes we should foster amongst ourselves. If this reciprocal give and take should ever cease, the Congregation will cease to exist. There might be individual life and activity, but there would not be that community spirit of action and interest which is proper to a Congregation.⁸

In an instruction addressed to local superiors and directors of residences in 1872, a letter some thirty pages in length, I have selected a few statements coming from Father Fabre:

We do not all live in the same house, but we are still members of the same family. Obedience alone assigns to us the community of which we must become a part... There must be among us a spirit of the Congregation, an *esprit de corps*. The local superiors can contribute a lot to the strengthening of this *esprit de corps*, just as they can do a lot to weaken it... What would one think and say about a local superior who would set forth this principle: "As long as my house functions, that I have at hand what I need to deal with every eventuality, what do I care what is going on elsewhere? Let each one do likewise, let him do as best he can; but let no demands be made of me and let none of the personnel which administer the works I have been taken away. If there is someone who is an annoyance to me, who is at odds with me, who is useless to me or who is a burden to me, I will willingly give him up. I will myself offer him. I will see to it that he is no longer a hindrance to me. Too bad if he becomes a hindrance someplace else." Alas, my very dear Fathers, let each one act like this and that is the end of the Congregation. It will exist only in name. In the light of this kind of an attitude, what becomes of the *esprit de corps*, what becomes of the family spirit?⁹

On the occasion of the expulsions of 1880, Father Fabre comes back several times on this *esprit de corps*, this solidarity. As we know, in November of that year decrees issued by the Republic of France suppressed the nonapproved religious congregations. The Oblates were forcibly expelled from seventeen of their houses. From several superb texts, I quote only this one:

We have requested the Holy See for the power to temporarily suspend the obligations related to life in common... More than ever this is the moment to draw tighter the bonds which unite us to God, to our religious family... this is the moment for us to call to mind that we have made the vow of perseverance... This dispersion will be able to affect our bodies only; nothing will be able to separate our hearts and spirits.

They are too closely united by the holy vows, by the bonds of a charity most fraternal.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., no. 22 (1871), pp. 7, 14.

⁹ Ibid., no. 24 (1872), pp. 7, 8, 9.

I conclude these reflections on Father Fabre by a short excerpt from his report to the General Chapter of 1887. With a disconcerting frankness (at times all that is lacking is the names) he emphasizes the shadow in the picture:

In the province of Canada and in that of the United States, we live with the threat of the effects of an exaggerated nationalism which is creating parties, prejudicing hearts and spirits, and altering more or less the family spirit which should especially be ours. We are not only missionaries, we form one congregation, we are religious, we are Oblates of Mary. As a Congregation, there is lacking the *esprit de corps* that is found elsewhere and which is the strength of an Institute. Individual selfishness, local selfishness, provincial selfishness, we meet it all too often... And yet we have in the family everything we need to conserve this *esprit de corps*, of obedience, of charity.¹¹

Further on with his same frankness of expression, he assails those who act in too independent a manner:

In a congregation there cannot be, there must not be any exclusively individual work... When we see how all too many of our priests operate and to hear them talk, we would say that in order to do a good job of their ministry, they can only work at it with the most complete and absolute independence.¹²

Father Fabre has no doubts. We make up one body, one apostolic community. I have perhaps spoken too much at length about the first successor of the Founder. That is due, not only to the richness of the documentation - texts which give no hint of their age because they seem to be so current - but again due to their abundance (almost 350 pages if we limit ourselves to the circular letters) and the long duration (31 years) of his term as General, the longest term served by any General other than the Founder.

2. Father Louis SOULLIER (1893-1897) The religious missionary: A Babylonian captive

Since the term of office of his successor, Father Louis Soullier, was much briefer - a matter of only four and one half years - I will give him a briefer treatment. Father Soullier wrote only nine circular letters, the most important of which are those on Preaching (number 59) and on Studies (number 61) of 1895 and 1896 respectively which I mentioned above.

10	Ibid., no. 31 (1880), pp. 2,3.
11	Ibid., Vol. II, no. 42 (1887), pp. 17, 18.
12	Ibid., pp. 35, 36.

To tell the truth, in the writings of Father Soullier, I found very little that touched on our theme. To the capitulars who elected him in 1893 he speaks of how "in the bosom of the Catholic Church, our religious family forms a kind of little church."¹³

In 1893, on the occasion of his trip to Rome, he speaks to Leon XIII of our scholasticates:

When we say that all nations are represented in our scholasticates, that we have not only Frenchmen, but Englishmen, Irish, Americans, Italians, and a large number of Germans as well: "And all of them live in harmony and concord?" asks the Pope. "Yes, Holy Father, they are of one heart and one soul." "What wonders the Church performs!" concludes Leon XIII raising his hands to heaven in a sign of admiration.¹⁴

In March of 1884, he presents to the Congregation his report to the General Chapter held the preceding year. Strangely enough, to make an evaluation of the religious situation of the Congregation he finds nothing better than to quote a few pages from the report of Father Fabre to the preceding Chapter whose words I quoted above in regard to "the individualism (which) does not constitute a peril of lesser gravity for the virtues of our state." No question of individual works among us. All work must be done according to obedience, according to poverty.¹⁵ We therefore have to believe that in the course of the last six years the situation had hardly changed.

The reading of the circular letters of Father Soullier showed me a man of eloquence. Here is how in the same report to the Chapter of 1893 he speaks to religious missionaries

on the subject of the two parts of the Oblate life. I cannot resist the temptation to share with you this quotation:

The religious missionary is a Babylonian captive, a little by nature and a little by choice. A willing captive, he shares the unfortunate lot of his brothers in order to sustain their courage and to lead them back one day to liberty in the country of their origin. The goal of their life is to rebuild the city, to raise again the walls of the Temple and to re-establish the Law. He accomplishes this in himself first of all in the forum of his private life and then in the forum of public life. He does it in the face of sudden attacks day and night, arming himself sometimes with the sword and sometimes with the hammer, and in like manner, sounding the war trumpet at times of work and at times of battle.¹⁶

And here is one last text from Father Soullier. On the occasion of the creation of the German province in 1895, he expresses himself in these terms:

We ask God to pour out his most abundant graces on all those of us who, in the present and in the future, will be part of the province that we have just founded. May the Lord always preserve there charity, unity, the family spirit

13	Ibid., no. 53 (1893), p. 2.
14	Ibid., no. 55(1894), p. 4.
15	Cf. Ibid., no. 57 (1894), p. 21.
16	Ibid., p. 46.

within the communities and outside a holy zeal for the salvation of souls.¹⁷

As you can see, the Founder’s terminology is always kept to characterize our family: charity inside and zeal outside.

3. Father Cassien AUGIER (1898-1906) The community: A shelter for the religious and apostolic virtues

Father Cassien Augier’s term as general was of a little more than seven and one half years duration. It was marred by two painful events: the civil dissolution of the Congregation in France and a severe crisis in the General Council which led him to offer his resignation as Superior General.

I found very few references to the Oblate community in the twenty circular letters that he has left us. Or rather, I found nothing original, nothing new, unless one includes his moving exhortations to fidelity on the occasion of the expulsions of 1903 and 1904.

At the end of his report to the General Chapter of 1898, he gives a resume of his idea of the Oblate vocation:

We know that it is made up of two elements which are so closely united that they could not be separated without great risk: the religious element and the apostolic element. The Oblate must be a man of zeal and of sacrifice at the same time as he is a man of zeal and of dedication.¹⁸

At the beginning of this century, 21 Oblate communities in France were evicted “manu militari” and their houses confiscated, among which houses was the General House which was transferred from Paris to Liege. These flagrantly unjust measures affected the lives of about 300 Oblates in France. In his circular of 1903, Father Augier expresses himself in the following fashion:

17	Ibid., no. 60 (1895), p. 5.
18	Ibid., no. 70(1899), p. 35.

...Ecce quam bonum et quam jucundum habitare fratres in unum! And it is we who are forced to tell all too many of our members: "Go, beloved sons, leave this home of common life, the home that sheltered your vows and your religious apostolic virtues. Go your separate ways. Live a new life, a life in that world which you rejected and which you renounced forever. We are no longer allowed to keep you gathered around our person and under the cloak of this Mother who bore you to the religious life. Face bravely the dangers, the troubles, the sadness and the isolation."¹⁹

We can overlook the lyricism of his words because of the tragedy of the situation. A little further on he continues:

You are all conscious of the grave duties that these circumstances impose upon you. The first of these duties is fidelity to our vocation... Yes, fidelity to our vocation and to the obligations which this fidelity imposes! Our Holy Rules have foreseen the circumstances in which we find ourselves and they declare that the dissolution of the Congregation by outside force cannot destroy our commitments and our oath of perseverance... Another duty: union, a union ever stronger, more personal of hearts and spirits... Let us remain united and we will be stronger, and the most violent attacks will avail nothing against us. This union exists... Shame upon the one who, seeing misfortune fall upon his family, would use this as an excuse to abandon it!²⁰

In his report to the General Chapter of 1904, on two occasions he levels an attack at faults which are affecting the community. He comes back upon nationalism, the nationalism of which Father Fabre already spoke to us in 1887, as we have seen:

There is another point, both very important and very delicate, to which I feel it is necessary to call your attention: it is the spirit of nationality. In his day already, Saint Ignatius pointed out to his religious the dangers of this spirit, which, if it was introduced into his communities, would become a principle of division and of discord. It would destroy unity and peace and would ruin the most beautiful works... We tell you (like Saint Paul told the early Christians): there are among you neither Frenchmen, nor Englishmen, nor Irish, nor Canadians, nor Germans, nor Spaniards, nor Italians, etc. There are not and there will never ever be other than Oblates, sons of the same Father, our Venerable Founder and sons of one and the same Mother, the Congregation.²¹

In "Advice and Observations" which is the concluding section of his report, we finally find this remark concerning those we might call "the unworthy sons," those who abuse in one way or other of the home that is given them:

There are those among us who do not love their family enough. They do not sufficiently love the priests who

¹⁹ Ibid., Vol. III, no. 76 (1903), p. 2.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 11, 12, 13.

²¹ Ibid., no. 84 (1905), p. 29. Curiously enough, two years later, Father Baffle as Secretary General will come back on this point in his report to the Chapter of 1906 in order to make the distinction between "nationalism" and "nationality" and to specify that, if nationalism is worthy of being condemned, the sentiment of nationality, on the other hand, is a sentiment worthy of respect (cf. *ibid.*, no. 92, pp. 47-48).

guide it, the brothers that it gives them. They become indifferent to its progress as well as to its pain; they live in the house without being of the house... They receive and exact the advantages that their Congregation obtains for them and refuse to render to the Congregation the services that she requests of them.²²

Let these texts suffice concerning this General who suffered a great deal for the Congregation and who, after his resignation, for 21 years in Naples and area was able to give an example of humility and fraternal charity.

4. Father August LAVILLARDIERE (1906-1908) Unity in order to attain the goal of our mission

Father Lavillardière held the office of General for only 16 months. Shortly after his election, he was immobilized by illness. All the same, during these few months, he published seven circular letters, all very brief, except for the 67 page letter of April 21, 1907, in which he reports on the Chapter of 1906. But, to tell the truth, there are only about three pages that really come from him because it was to the Secretary General, Father Eugene Baffle, that he entrusted the task of communicating the decisions of the Chapter. And it is the Bursar General, Father Frederick Favier, who will give us the information on the financial situation of the Congregation - which gives us only about fifteen pages in all. To look for long explanations of apostolic community in this material is of no avail. However, I will quote his thoughts on unity:

May this unity (which characterized the Chapter in spite of the discussions which were at times lively and lacking in flexibility) be always the main characteristic of our beloved Congregation! A unity of minds, a union of hearts, a union in our mutual relationships, a union in the observance of our Holy Rules, a union in our apostolic traditions!... It will enable us to attain the goal of a sublime mission: Is it not the source of strength, of peace and of holiness!²³

5. M^{gr} Augustin DONTENWILL (1908-1931) Religious first, then missionaries

MS¹ - Dontenwill held the office of General for a little over 23 years. During his term as General, he published 42 administrative circular letters which make up a total of 325 pages. I expected to find there abundant material treating of our theme, but such was not the case. However, what I did find was very revealing as to what his idea of the

²² Ibid., no. 84 (1905), p. 49.

²³ Ibid., no. 92 (1907), p. 3.

Oblate vocation was. His circular letters speak of his travels, the new Code of Canon Law and the adaptations it demands, the causes of beatification of our Oblate saints, the Constitutions and Rules that have been revised and which are to be revised, the death of some members of the General Administration, etc.

On four occasions at least, he makes his thinking known - and that in a very clear, or rather we should say in a very categorical fashion - on the subject of what we should be. In his letter of December 25, 1915, on the occasion of the first centenary of the Institute, he speaks to all the Oblates in this fashion:

We are missionaries, but we are religious as well. What shall I say? We are religious before we are missionaries, and we must be fervent religious in order to be and to remain fervent missionaries... We affirm in the name of God, of his Vicar on earth and of our venerated Founder that, in the Congregation, we are religious before being missionaries, religious in order to be supernatural missionaries, religious in order to persevere until death in the hardships of the apostolate. The day when we cease to be religious, we will still bear the title of missionaries, we will fulfill our apostolic functions, we may even be among those who bring souls to conversion, but nevertheless we will cease to be in our vocation. We will be useless to ourselves; we will become a mere shadow of the Oblates of Mary, since... we have the indispensable duty of being religious-missionaries.²⁴

And further on he continues:

Father de Mazenod was not, then, introducing something new. He was merely codifying traditions accepted from the very beginning when he wrote in his Rule: "The missionaries will consecrate the first part of their life to oraison... in the seclusion of the house of God in which they live together. They will actively employ the other part of their life in the ministry outside..."²⁵

These are Rules 307 and 309. Further on, he specifies that, although the apostolic part of our life can and should change, it is not the same for the religious part of our lives:

Religious families... should as much as possible keep clear of the ebb and flow of the profane societies which surround them. If a religious can and must, in virtue of the fact that he is an apostolic man... accept the law of progress and to endure sometimes the law of change, he should remain adamant in the practice of this part of the Constitutions which treat of the religious spirit and of the religious virtues.²⁰

However there is no opposition between these two aspects: speaking of the founders of our Congregation he will say: "...oraison and... work..."

²⁴ Ibid., no. 113(1915), p. 11.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

did not form in their life exercises alternating from one to the other, but rather one single exercise whose external acts were regulated and commanded by the internal life."²⁷ Moreover, he will say in another circular letter that "...the venerated Founder did not believe that the exigencies of the apostolate and the practice of a regular life were incompatible."²⁸

In his report to the chapter of 1920, in a paragraph aptly entitled, "Community Life," he reminds the superiors of those in the preaching ministry to see to it that the preachers are not overloaded and he calls to mind the orientation given by Father Fabre: "Let us make it our duty to spend one half of the year in the community, loving the solitude and the recollection."²⁹

When he will report to the Congregation on the Chapter of 1926, he will come back on the same ideas and almost in the same terms. He is worried, for example, about the Oblates who "find themselves isolated, outside of the Rule and the community, working in the parish ministry in churches entrusted to the Congregation." He makes the recommendation to the provincials to be concerned about reducing, as much as possible, the number of these priests: the religious outside of his community can only lose the religious spirit and the spirit of regularity. A little later, he continues: "Let us not allow... the spirit of dissipation to enter into our cells and into our houses. Let us love the life of solitude, to close our cells to the noise of the world."³⁰

Always in the same report, he comes back on the "two parts": "Perhaps we are not careful enough to see to it that our mission is not merely exterior, that the Rule wants us to divide our time in two, that we should dedicate one to the works of the ministry, but that we reserve the other to the internal work of the soul." And he quotes articles 306 and 307.³¹

Eleven years later, his convictions have not changed: the Oblate is religious and missionary, but first of all religious. Superiors should see to it that they guarantee a community life which safeguards this characteristic.

6. Theodore LABOURE (1932-1944)

Family spirit; apostolic family

²⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁸ Ibid., Vol. IV, no. 132 (1925), p. 5.

²⁹ Ibid., Vol. III, no. 128 (1921), pp. 47-48.

³⁰ Ibid., Vol. IV, no. 137 (1927), p. 19.

³¹ Ibid., p. 24.

Father Theodore Labouré governed the Congregation for exactly ten years. In 1942, for reasons of health, he named Father Hilaire Balmes General of the Congregation bestowing upon him all his powers. During these ten years, he published 17 circular letters (a little more than 200 pages), most of which treated of strictly administrative matters (much like Bishop Dontenwill). Therefore, there are few texts which touch directly upon our theme.

It is in his very first circular letter, that of 1932, that we can recognize his idea of the Oblate spirit, of the Oblate community. It is in this circular letter that he says, “I will just let my heart speak,”³² postponing to a second letter the commentary on the *Acta Capitulum*.

The Oblate spirit is not just manifested externally among us by the unity of resources and of wills in the field of the apostolate. It is manifested yet again through the need that is felt to get to know each other better and to remain very closely united in the bonds of the same charity. For the person who has travelled, it is evident everywhere that whatever their nationality may be, the Oblates are Oblates, loving and devoted sons of Bishop de Mazenod. This love of family life was one of the most striking and the most consoling characteristics of our Chapter of 1932... It is this love of family life again which raised the question of knowing how to conserve the unity of action and the union of hearts...

Then, he speaks of “the personal knowledge that we should have of each other in order that we may better understand each other and to cause to disappear through a more personal contact those difficulties which the differences of nationalities tend naturally to create as obstacles to a fusion of hearts... In the past as in the present, our family has been composed of men originating “ex omni tribu et lingua et populo et natione.” And yet the work of evangelization has always been carried out successfully because it was done “more Oblatorum.” There was no concern to channel our efforts according to our nationality: an Oblate would go anywhere where obedience called him to go, and he put his whole heart into the work of God and of the Church to evangelize the poor without asking himself if his companions originated from the same country he did. They were Oblates: That was enough, and the union of hearts effected a union of resources.”

And he gives the example of the province of Texas where he spent 24 happy years among Oblates of nine different nationalities. Then, he concludes: “There is the glorious tradition of our religious family. It is there; it is in the dedication of each one to the common task that we must seek the authentic good which will unite us all.”³³

The expressions “life of the Oblate family,” “the family of the Oblates,” “the head

³² Ibid., no. 152 (1932), p. 4.

³³ Ibid., pp. 7, 8, 9.

of the Family,” reoccur constantly under the pen of Father Labouré. In his circular letter of 1933, when he is speaking of Oblate publications, he expresses himself in this way:

All these publications have as their goal to revive and to draw into an ever closer union the members of the great Oblate family according to the prescriptions of our Holy Rules.³⁴

Therefore, if I had to put in a nutshell Father Labouré’s idea of the Oblate community, I would say that, for him, we form one “apostolic family.”

His Vicar, Father Balmes, will be animated by the same sentiments. In his letter of convocation of the General Chapter of 1947, he recalls how “the unity of the Family has been fully safeguarded in spite of the war... Oblate charity... has survived as well in all its splendour. In spite of the boundary lines of division, so many inevitable divisions notwithstanding, there is one language the sons of M⁸^r. de Mazenod have never forgotten: that of charity.”³⁵ A few months later, announcing the death of Father Pietsch and the nomination of his replacement, Father Becker, he will say: “...events or wars can bring turmoil to the face of the world. They cannot alter our Oblate sentiments”³⁶

In order to complete the treatment of Father Labouré., I will add one last text drawn from his report to the Chapter of 1938 in a paragraph dedicated to the spiritual life. Here is how he speaks of the “two parts”:

Thus then, in order to prevent the active life from infringing upon and of drying up the interior life, the Chapter enjoins the provincials and the local superiors to watch over more zealously than ever the observation of articles 287, 288, 289 of our Constitutions which lay upon all the missionaries the obligation to walk in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Apostles, and consequently to consecrate a part of their life to prayer, to interior recollection, to contemplation in the seclusion of the house of God, where they live together.³⁷

Let us remember here that this is an orientation of the Chapter which he has recalled to our attention.

7. Father Leo DESCHATELETS (1947-1972)

Apostolic religious; contemplative missionaries

³⁴ Ibid., no. 154 (1933), p. 13.

³⁵ Ibid., no. 173 (1946), p. 5.

³⁶ Ibid., no. 174 (1946), p. 3.

³⁷ Ibid., no. 164 (1939), pp. 26-27.

When we begin treating of Father Decathletes’ term of office as General, the problem is no longer one of looking for appropriate texts, but rather one of choice since there are so many of them. Father Decathletes did, in fact, write a lot. The administrative circulars which will be the principle sources we will consult take up four printed volumes (which make up exactly one half of the eight volumes of circular letters starting from the time of Father Fabre). In the course of 25 years, Father Decathletes has, in fact, written almost 70 circular letters (for a total of about 1500 pages), with an equivalent number of collective letters to the provincials. The Archives Decathletes contain copies of 32,000 of his letters. “Truly,” says Father Tourigny in his biographical sketch of Father Decathletes, “it can be said of the man that his dominant passion was writing.”³⁸

Father Decathletes has spoken abundantly on the theme of Oblate community, of apostolic community (he is the first one to use this expression) even though he does not have one individual document exclusively dedicated to this theme. In order to guide me in this part of my study, I will follow in large part two Oblates who knew him well from having been his close and diligent collaborators, Fathers Stanislas A. La, Rochelle and Irénée Tourigny. The former has left us a study on the religious animation in the circular letters of Father Deschâtelets,³⁹ a study which takes us right up to 1968; while the latter, in the previously cited monograph, treats Father Decathletes' idea of the Oblate, religious and apostle, living in apostolic community.⁴⁰

As we will see, there is an evolution in Father Decathletes' thinking concerning the Oblate community and we must not be surprised at this. Not only was Father Decathletes a man open to new ideas while still remaining profoundly attached to tradition (Let's not forget that he was, if not the chief architect, at least the main guiding light in the *aggiornamento* of the Congregation, even if we have to specify that his reflections on the renewal were slow to germinate.), but he lived through a period of intense upheaval, five General Chapters and especially the Second Vatican Council in which he participated intensely. (One remark: During the period of preparation and of the holding of the Council, that is, from September 1960 to January 1965 - a period of four and one half

³⁸ I. TOURIGNY, o.m.i., *Le Père Leo Deschâtelets, o.m.i.*, Ottawa, 1975, p. 6.

³⁹ *Études Oblates*, Vol. 28 (1969), pp. 117-134.

⁴⁰ I. TOURIGNY, op. cit., pp. 56-58, 68-70.

years -he did not write one circular letter. But he knew how to make up for lost time. Already in 1965, he published eight of them and he had no less than thirteen in 1966.)

In a first phase, that is, from 1947 to 1951, Father Decathletes' emphasis was on the observance of the Rules. His watchboard: "Rethink your Holy Rules" means especially, states Father La Rochelle: "Observe your Holy Rules"⁴¹. In circular letter 186, the Rule is presented as the soul of the Oblate, of his life, of his apostolate, the Rule is, in fact, the soul of the Congregation. The missionary ideal and the religious life are considered separately and fidelity to the Rule measures the success of the apostolate. Piety, the exercises of piety (rather than the apostolate) maintain our life of union with God.⁴²

In this regard, it is very interesting to read the reflections that Father Decathletes will write 25 years later in his *Memoires* (unedited and incomplete) as reported by Father Tourigny in the previously mentioned biographical sketch. Concerning his very first circular letter, that of June 13, 1947, where he gave his watchword "Rethink your Holy Rules," he writes:

Note well, it is the Rule which is at the heart of it all. The Rule takes first place because, in accord with the mystique of the times it substantially sums up everything. Basically, I was insisting on the qualities of a religious and on the demands of religious life rather than on apostolic demands. As I saw it, the religious apostle at the service of souls should be able to discover all that. I considered myself not so much in charge of saving all souls as in charge of saving those of my Oblate confreres, confided to me by the Lord. Perhaps today I would act differently, yet I'm not so sure of that, for the Pope in his exhortation, *Evangelica Testificatio* has not proceeded very differently from me... Actually, at that moment I was distinguishing the two elements which seemed to me to make up the Oblate: his spirituality, his life of union with and consecration to the Lord, and his life as apostle. In actual fact, the two lives made but one in my mind

and prayer... In that circular letter my preoccupation was to make sure the Oblate had a true interior life, a true religious life so he could be a true missionary.⁴³

There follows a period where the emphasis is placed on the regular life and devotion to Mary (1951-1955). In 1951, Father Decathletes published the circular letter which is the richest of his career in terms of doctrine and of spirituality: a document of 90 pages on the Oblate vocation in union with Mary Immaculate.⁴⁴ Father La Rochelle states:

⁴¹ *Etudes Oblates*, Vol. 28, 1969, p. 120.

⁴² Cf. *Administrative Circulars*, no. 181 (1947), pp. 19-20 and no. 186 (1949), pp. 262-264.

⁴³ I. TOURIGNY, op. cit., pp. 56-57.

There is an interesting comparison to be made here concerning the characteristics of the Oblate... according to the first circular letter and those explained... in the seventeenth circular letter... There (Father Decathletes) had described the Oblate in an overall way as a spiritual man, a regular religious, then as a priest, a missionary, etc. Here, he presents him as a priest religious missionary, consecrated to holiness and to the apostolate, etc. Let's note just the evolution of thought, or at least of the way of presenting that thought. Then, he becomes more definite and precise, going beyond the statements of some of his predecessors and of certain General Chapters. "Priestly charity among us," he writes, "should ...be the motive of all our actions... Even our religious mentality itself is conditioned by priestly charity."⁴⁵ That is what the Chapter of 1966 will develop," Father La Rochelle concludes.⁴⁶

From now on, the demands of the apostolate begin to dominate the regulations, the life of the community.

At this point, it is worth drawing to your attention the description that Father Decathletes gives of the Oblate community in this same circular letter:

Within our own Communities, our spirit of Oblation becomes a spirit of warmhearted *charity*. This is another characteristic of our Oblate life, wherever we are established throughout the world.

Sincere charity... is not simply comradeship, nor the team spirit so necessary in every Community. Again, it is not... a merely human thing, cheerful good fellowship...

Our Oblate charity is immeasurably greater... This common family life is the nourishment of our religious, priestly, apostolic and missionary life...⁴⁷

Further on, he will add: "...there is no Community life without *Community prayer*."⁴⁸

Then comes the period of renewal and adaptation (1955-1965). The Holy See invites us to renew ourselves and to adapt our religious life to the new conditions of modern man. In a circular letter of 1956 treating of the de Mazenod retreat, Father Decathletes states clearly: "Apostolic life

(is) inseparable in the Oblate from his spiritual and religious life..."⁴⁹ He is already in the spirit of the future Council and the General Chapter which will follow it ten years later.

⁴⁴ *Administrative Circulars*, Vol. V, no. 191 (1951).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴⁶ *Etudes Oblate*, loc. cit., p. 122.

⁴⁷ *Administrative Circulars*, Vol. V, no. 191 (1951), pp. 50-51.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

In 1958, he comes back again and simply to “(the) integral observance of the Rule, code of our Oblate Life.”⁵⁰ The following year, on the other hand, he acknowledges that religious institutes cannot improve themselves “by simply accepting what the Rule demands.”⁵¹ “It appears to be a struggle between various currents of ideas, or the perplexity of thought which is in a state of search,” comments Father La Rochelle⁵²

It is in his official report to the General Chapter of 1959, a report of 98 pages, that Father Decathletes engages in “his irreversible march on the road of renewal and necessary adaptation, but at the same time maintaining positions that the Second Vatican Council or the Chapter of 1966 will modify.”⁵³ Lets take a look at a few texts:

We are religious, living in community life, devoted to the apostolate and to the missionary life. Ours is at the same time a contemplative and an active life... In virtue of our vocation we are active-contemplatives... contemplative missionaries.⁵⁴

But in 1966 the formula will be changed to “missionary-contemplatives,” following the expression of Father Loew. He quotes Father Loew: “As missionaries, and especially as missionaries of the working classes, we all have the duty to be contemplatives.”⁵⁵ If there is a dichotomy, it is only apparent. In 1969, when he will write to the Congregation in reference to the concrete application of the instruction *Renovationis Causam*, he will write like a person making sure that he is being understood on this point: “We are neither contemplatives, nor members of a Secular Institute, but apostolic religious.”⁵⁶ Several times in this same document the expression “apostolic religious” will recur.

After Vatican II, Father Decathletes compares what is said about religious in the Constitution *De Ecclesia* to the text of our Rule and he judges that “Our religious community life and our missionary activity re-enact, in some measure and in the present age, the ideals of the Christian community of the Apostolic era.”⁵⁷ That same year, 1965, at the end of his circular letter on the evolution of religious life, a circular letter in view of the preparation being made for the General Chapter, he summarizes his thought as follows:

⁴⁹ Ibid., Vol. VI, no. 206 (1956), p. 15.

⁵⁰ Ibid., no. 207 (1958), p. 2.

⁵¹ Ibid., no. 208 (1959), p. 58.

⁵² *Etudes Oblates*, loc. cit., p. 124.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 125.

⁵⁴ *Administrative Circulars*, Vol. VI, no. 208 (1959), p. 7, 46.

⁵⁵ Ibid., Vol. VII, no. 225 (1966), p. 17.

⁵⁶ Ibid., Vol. VIII, no. 242 (1969), p. 15.

The Oblate is a religious, a priest and a missionary and as such his life cannot be partitioned. At all times and everywhere his personality must manifest this threefold characteristic of a man consecrated to God, of a priest dedicated to the sanctification of his fellowmen, of a missionary sent to preach the Gospel. The Oblates are priests, or coadjutors of the priesthood, who, in view of fulfilling more securely their obligations as apostles, have chosen the religious life as the best adapted means of becoming what the Founder has styled them: “Viri apostolici.”⁵⁸

Then come two series of important circular letters: those which come after the Chapter of 1966 with a view to the implementation of the Constitutions approved by that General Chapter, those which report on the extraordinary General Chapters, new structures set in place by these Constitutions, and on the other hand, circular letters which

prepare the Chapter of 1972. In this rich mine of documentation, I will only point out the main ones which touch on our particular subject.

When in April of 1969 he will inform the Congregation of the work done by the second Extraordinary General Council, he will give in capsule form and in order of importance, the five criteria for the Oblate vocation: we are MISSIONARIES - to EVANGELIZE - the POOR - according to the URGENT NEEDS OF THE CHURCH AND OF THE WORLD - in APOSTOLIC COMMUNITIES.⁵⁷ After this come a few recommendations concerning each of these criteria. It is worth recalling what was said about apostolic community. Unless I am mistaken, it is the first time that he speaks of it in these terms and in so explicit and systematic a way:

1. The apostolic community on every level, made up of Oblates "united by the bonds of profound charity and of obedience" (Constitutions art. 5), is the most important factor for the determination of missionary objectives and for the choice of works.

2. A clear presentation of objectives will avoid the proliferation on self-styled charisms. Those which manifest themselves will be tested by the community and integrated into its activities.

3. The construction of an apostolic community is a difficult task, one that is delicate and which is ever to be redone, which demands the participation of everyone. It should grow toward a life team animated by a review of life.

8. Father Richard HANLEY (1972-1974)

Apostolic community

⁵⁷ Ibid., Vol. VII, no. 215 (1965), p. 16.

⁵⁸ Ibid., no. 220 (1965), p. 21.

⁵⁹ Ibid., Vol. VIII, no. 241 (1969), p. 29.

Father Hanley's term of office as General was brief - two years. In his first letter to the Congregation dated June 1, 1972, he echoes the mandate that the Chapter gave him: to bring to the fore in a message to the Congregation the will to give new life to our apostolic communities. Already he speaks his mind: community life must be tied to our "missionary thrust."

When physically present to one another, we share our common vision of the Christian-life and together build the history of our Oblate community. When dispersed in apostolic service... we are in a sense not less together since the individual is thought of as the incorporation of the entire community - "he's an Oblate" - as representative of the total presence of the community in the apostolic work... The apostolic community is a response to the world's cringing search for community.⁶⁵

It is in the plenary session of October 1972 that this message on the subject of community will be drawn up. It expresses the close link between mission and community. It does not pass over in silence the difficulties and the deficiencies. It wants to speak to all Oblates whose situations are very different. Finally, it remains open in order to promote research and experimentation springing from our permanent evangelical values.⁶⁶

I quote only a portion of the conclusion of this message from Father Hanley and his team:

All renewal of community must be mission oriented. Such renewal is not a panacea for all ills but none can deny it is a powerful agent of rebirth. We must never forget that the revitalizing of our communities cannot be divorced from their apostolic function as living cells for the formation of communities on a broader front both in the Church and in the world.⁶⁷

You will have noticed how community is viewed and treated in this document. It is more closely related to the mission than it is to the religious life.

In the plenary session of May-June 1973, the terse remark is made that “In spite of the good reception accorded the document on “Community”, there are not many practical realizations in this field. Still, one notices a growing willingness to dialogue... A certain number of Oblates, however, “do their own thing” outside of community.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ *Acta Administrations Generalis O.M.I.*, Rome, 1972, p. 26.

⁶⁵ *Cf. Acta Adm.*, 1972, p. 88, and 1974, p. 124.

⁶⁷ *Community*, Letter from the General Council on the mandate of the 1972 General Chapter, Rome, 1972, pp. 25-26.

Finally, I call your attention to Father Hanley’s letter of June 21, 1974 in which he communicates to the Congregation his resignation from office. In it he reveals the personal conflict in which he is caught. He states “While fully supporting our Congregation’s missionary vision,” he no longer feels “able to subscribe to these fundamental values of traditional religious life.” However, I respect my Oblate Brothers’... expectations of community life as viable expressions of the Christian life and apostolate.”⁶⁹

9. Father Fernand JETTE (1974-1986) - The community evangelized; the community as evangelizer

During the twelve years of his term of office as General, Father Jetté published some forty official circular letters. He had the good idea of publishing the main letters along with a few others in *Letters to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate*¹®. He also published *The Missionary O.M.I.*, a collection of speeches and addresses delivered in the period from 1975 to 1985.⁷¹ We have there a selection of texts which is easy to consult. To this documentation, I would add his reports to three General Chapters over which he had the occasion to preside.

Examining these texts with the advantage of some hindsight, what struck me was the discovery of the continuity in his thought. I say I was struck by it, but since I know the man a little, I was in no way surprised. There are few ideas in the texts, three or four, which touch on our theme. They are three or four fundamental ideas, three or four points he drives home continually in one form or the other and often with the same words, the same verbal expressions. I state this with that much more confidence because Father Jetté is here and he will be able to defend his point of view or correct it as there is need.

Before Father Jetté became General, he already had some ideas concerning this theme, and, of course, very clear ideas... In 1969, in

⁶⁸ Cf. *Acts Adam...*, 1973, p. 259. Communiqué.

⁶⁹ *Acta Adm...*, 1974, p. 34 (Circular Letter no. 257).

⁷⁰ F. JETTE, o.m.i., *Letters to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate*, Rome, General House, 1984, 238 pp.

⁷¹ F. JETTE, o.m.i., *The Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate*, General House, Rome, 1985, 354 pp.

Montreal he was giving a conference in which he was explaining what one must understand by “evangelical community life.”⁷² Already one can see a main line emerging, a characteristic of the animation that Father Jetté will bring with him to the office of General: his marked insistence on the internal elements of our vocation and of our life. After five years of being General, commenting on the fact that in the province Saint-Joseph there were practically no work communities left, that is, communities dedicated to one homogeneous work (college, closed retreats, juniorate, etc.) he says:

All the same, in religious life, even the most apostolic religious life, this factor of unity (of work, of the same apostolate) is not and should not be the primary, the most fundamental one. The first factor can only be the very consecration to the Lord according to a common spiritual orientation, and that is possible, even if the apostolic activities are different and even if, sometimes according to circumstances, life together under the same roof was reduced to a minimum.⁷³

From the time of his first letter to the Congregation, that written at Aix in January of 1975, Father Jetté comes back on the same values:

Concerning our religious life, we have to work at self-evangelization... The meaning of the vows and of prayer, the meaning of community and of mission can only be strengthened and developed, if we succeed in re-evangelizing ourselves.⁷⁴

Later on, in 1979, he writes from Paramaribo: “The Oblate vocation is to proclaim the Gospel to the poor, but it is also to consecrate oneself totally to God in the community of one’s brothers.”⁷⁵

Community and evangelization reappear constantly under his pen. Here again is what he wrote one day to the Oblates of South Africa; we cannot be any clearer or more enlightening:

The more united you are among yourselves in genuine communities... the more our apostolate of evangelization will bear lasting fruit... Among yourselves you must arrive at genuinely evangelized communities which, in turn, become evangelizing communities.⁷⁶

Please remember, it was already in 1969 that Father Jetté was speaking of “evangelical community life”; I told you that there was continuity of thought in his writings! There are many other texts in this vein, texts which go immediately to the heart

⁷² F. JETTE, o.m.i., Problématique de la vie communautaire évangélique, *Études Oblates*, Vol. 29 (1970), pp. 3-15.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 9

⁷⁴ F. JETTE, o.m.i., *Utters...*, p. 18.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 200.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 221-222.

of the matter. But I believe that those I have given suffice to give a clear picture of his convictions on this point.

Another constant element in Father Jette's thinking is that of depicting the Congregation, the Oblate community, as an apostolic body, a body at the service of the mission, a body of which all the members are available for the mission according to the urgent needs and requirements indicated by the Church and its superiors. In these texts, we rediscover the accents and the expressions of Father Fabre. I will limit myself to quoting only one to you:

Fifth and final condition (to contribute to the progress and to the strengthening of the Congregation): that we develop availability and a sense of belonging to the Institute, the sense of being an apostolic corps... The Congregation is not a springboard for achieving one's own personal charism and individual projects. On the contrary, when we enter the Congregation, we must be ready to put ourselves entirely at the Congregation's disposal, to carry out the evangelizing work it will assign to us. If this attitude is not present, there is no apostolic corps: ...⁷⁷

A lot of other texts are in the same vein. Since they are easily accessible to you, I simply refer you to them and give you the references in the notes at the end of this speech.⁷⁸

One word only on the subject of unity, the integration of the religious life and of the apostolate. On several occasions Father Jetté spoke his mind on this issue. I will quote only two texts. At Iwanzondo at a congress of the vice-province of Zaire in 1981, he had this to say:

In the preceding section I said that we were not Oblates if we were not totally committed to evangelizing people, especially the poor. Now I want to complete the tableau by saying that we are not Oblates if we are not committed to community and totally consecrated to God by the vows of religion.⁷⁹

In his report to the General Chapter of 1980, he approached the problem this way:

Many are still apprehensive of dualism. Unity between prayer and action, between religious life and the apostolate is essential in a vocation such as ours. This search for unity was a major concern in the work of revising the Constitutions. Our prayer, our community life, our vows, far from taking us away from people and from activity, rather impel us thereto; and the reverse also is true: meeting people and apostolic activity become a source and nourishment for our prayer. ... This unification of our being ... is the work of an entire lifetime.⁸⁰

At the outset of 1976 about a year after his election, Father Jetté had spoken about

77 F. JETTE, o.m.i., *The Missionary...*, p. 347.

78 F. JETTE, o.m.i., *Letters...*, 125-126; *The Missionary...*, pp. 73-74; 224; 278; 287; 310-311; *Acta Adm...*, 1974, Report to the General Chapter of 1974, p. 121; 1986, Report to the General Chapter of 1986, pp. 153 and 155.

79 F. JETTE, o.m.i., *The Missionary...*, p. 82.

evangelized communities and of communities which evangelize. In his letter of May 21, 1986, a letter of farewell to the Congregation as Superior General he comes back on the same idea, driving home the same point in different words. I bring this to your attention as one last testimony. As he was thinking of the future and of the most effective means to help the Institute strengthen itself, a few realities came to his mind, such as:

Charity and unity among ourselves. We work together and mutually support each other. Sufficient trust among us allows us to speak to one another of Jesus Christ, and this enables us to speak of him quite naturally to those outside our ranks.⁸¹

10. Father Marcello ZAGO (1986 -)

Missionary community

Father Marcello Zago is at the beginning of his term as General, hence it is not my intention to make a study of his texts on apostolic community. It is too early to determine his thinking on this subject. He has already spoken to us on this subject and he will, no doubt, speak about it to us again. I simply want to indicate where and when he spoke on the subject. One preliminary remark: if Father Tourigny could say of Father Decathletes that his dominant passion was to write, I can tell you that I am already tempted to say the same thing about Father Zago.

I wish to draw to your attention two of Father Zago's articles which appeared in *Etudes Oblates*, 1971 and 1972 respectively. The first is entitled, Dimension missionnaire de la Communauté oblate. In this article, Father Zago speaks of the Oblate community then in crisis - it was at the beginning of the 70's - and he proposes as a solution the rediscovery of the bond which exists between Oblate charism and Oblate community.⁸² The second bears the title, Evaluation et perspectives de la communauté oblate. It is a study which takes as its point of origin an analysis of the apostolic exhortation, *Evangelica Testificatio* of Paul VI on the religious life and proceeds to examine the salient outlines of our Constitutions of 1966 on this point and to project what the Oblate community of the future will be like.⁸³ "But," Father Zago states wisely, "we have to admit that it is easier to write an article about community than to help build one!"⁸⁴

⁸⁰ *Acta Adm...*, 1980, Supplement: Reports of the General Administration and of the Regions to the Chapter of 1980, pp. 14-15.

⁸¹ *Acta Adm...*, 1986, p. 193.

⁸² M. ZAGO, o.m.i., Dimension missionnaire de la communauté oblate. *Etudes Oblates*, Vol. 30 (1971), pp. 9-16.

What Father Zago wants for the Congregation is missionary communities: "If the commitments of our communities were more missionary, it is almost certain that our communities would be more filled with life and outreaching..."⁸⁵ In his letter of November 1 to the Oblates of Canada, he speaks of the link between community and Oblate charism (in his case as well there is continuity!):

Community life, whether lived in the Districts or in local houses, is part of our Oblate charism. I believe that the future of our Congregation will depend, to a great extent, on the quality of our community life...⁸⁶

Then, too, we need not be surprised if the Superior General and his Council have been for several months already doing all they can to promote apostolic community life.⁸⁷ Therefore, it is something we should keep an eye on.

Conclusion:

To conclude, three brief reflections. The criticism will perhaps be made that I did not analyze the texts that I presented. First of all, I was not asked to give my opinion of what the Superiors General had said on this subject, but rather to present, to tell you what they had said... Moreover, I do not consider myself sufficiently an expert in the matter to

venture an indepth analysis. I have rather indicated several pathways open to those who may wish to further explore this area.

Principally through the means of the passages quoted from their writings, I preferred to bring out the main strengths of each one in order to remain as faithful as possible to their thought and the orientations that each one wanted to pass on to the Congregation. As you will have noticed, certain statements are dated or limited by the circumstances of each one's lived experience; such statements would, no doubt, carry less weight today. Moreover, each one of our Superiors General expressed himself according to his temperament and his perception of things. The one speaks of apostolic family; the other of a community of apostolic religious or of missionary contemplatives; another speaks of apostolic community; and still another of an evangelizing community or of a

⁸³ M. ZAGO, o.m.i., Evaluation et perspectives de la communauté oblate, Vol. 31, (1972), pp. 67-80.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

⁸⁵ M. ZAGO, o.m.i., Dimension missionnaire de la communauté oblate, *Etudes Oblates*, Vol. 30 (1971), p. 16.

⁸⁶ *Communiqué*, 48/88, November 1988, p. 12.

⁸⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 3 and 49/88, pp. 1-2.

missionary community. But, as you will have perceived, there is no clash among the varying kinds of emphasis. These are all complementary aspects of one and the same beautiful reality: the Oblate community, such as the Founder wanted it in the contemporary world of his day, in the time of Father Fabre in 1880, or in the time of Father Jetté one hundred years later.

Underlying these different aspects or differences in emphasis, however, it is easy to detect a continuity where this reality, in the course of the years, grows in richness of content through the contributions made by the different Superiors General. I would formulate this continuity in the following fashion: When the Founder was dying, he summed up everything he always wanted from his Oblates and what he expected from them after his death: Charity among ourselves and outside, zeal.

The heritage he left us inspires in us an esprit de corps, a very strong family spirit; if it is not strong enough, one or the other Superior General will, upon occasion, bring it to the fore - and sometimes in a very forceful way. At the same time as there is an insistence on charity and the family spirit, the place and the value of the religious consecration, of the vows, of the Rule are vigorously presented as well, first of all as structures, as a foundation, then as a milieu for personal and community growth. It is only later that there will be a concentration on the developing of the relationship which should exist between community and mission, in order to finally affirm very clearly that the community is itself a support and an expression of the mission.

Finally, one last observation, this study of the writings of our Superiors General made me aware that in them we have a source of inspiration which, as I see it, has not been sufficiently cultivated. Few were the studies I found dealing with their writings. There was a congress of educators held April 14 and 15 in Kansas City in 1952 on Father

⁸⁸ Maurice GILBERT, o.m.i., La charité fraternelle chez les Oblats d'après le « Circulaires Administratives des Supérieurs généraux », *Etudes Oblates*, Vol. 28 (1969), pp. 60-79; Stanislas-A. La ROCHELLE, o.m.i., L'animation religieuse dans les Circulaires du Père Deschatelets, *Etudes Oblates*, Vol. 28 (1969), pp. 117-134; Donat LEVASSEUR, o.m.i., L'évangélisation et les Supérieurs généraux de la Congrégation, *Vie Oblate Life*, Vol. 42 (1983), pp. 307-320.

Decathletes' Circular Letter 191 on our Oblate vocation. In *Etudes Oblates* and *Vie Oblate Life* I found only three articles treating directly of circular letters or of writings of our Superiors General.⁸⁸ Unless I am mistaken, Father George will soon publish in *Vie Oblate Life* a study on the Father Soullier's circular letter on preaching.

To me that seems to be too little, too little. It is possible that one of the reasons for this is that their writings, conferences, addresses are difficult to find because they are scattered all over or published in different forms and formats. The collection of administrative circulars (from 1861-1972) itself leaves a lot to be desired. Complete collections are few in number and the presentation of texts is often defective (errors or omissions in numbering, pagination incomplete, missing, etc.) One of the exceptions to this, however, is the writings of Father Jetté who had the fortunate idea of collecting and publishing his main writings in the two works mentioned above.⁸⁹ That is why I support the suggestion made by Father La Rochelle almost 20 years ago concerning a critical edition of the circular letters of the Superiors General.⁹⁰ Perhaps this is a project that the Oblate Association of Studies and Research could one day undertake...

Laurent ROY, o.m.i. Aix,-Rome, January
1989

⁸⁹ Cf. notes 70 and 71 of this study.

⁹⁰ Stanislas-A. La ROCHELLE, o.m.i., Notes sur les Circulaires des Supérieurs généraux, *Etudes Oblates*, Vol. 29 (1970), p. 75.

Panel Session

(August 10,1989,14.15 - 15.30)

The main points made during this panel session are:

1. Father Fabre spoke a great deal about the “esprit de corps” that ought to exist throughout the Congregation: this he did in his struggle against excessive individualism among the Oblates. Actually, the strong urge to individualism was not new to Father Fabre’s time: it existed already in the time of the Founder, but it could not readily manifest itself because of the Founder’s strong reactions to every manifestation of it: the Founder’s own moral authority and influence restrained it greatly. Local superiors had much to suffer under the Founder, for they often experienced not being the masters in their own communities: the Founder often intervened directly, without prior contact with them.

2. The conferences have not given consistent treatment to the topic of mission and community. Both the one we heard on the Superiors General and on the General Chapters insisted more on the community than on the mission. We have been told that individualism and excessive zeal were the great factors militating against a better community living. We are also told that nationalism was a great factor under Father Soullier. But the tensions for community that arise because of differences of persons and views were not treated.

3. It should be noted that only parts of the morning’s conferences were given orally: many sections in the written text were omitted and they should be read if we wish to criticize the studies tabled for the study-theme.

4. For the Founder, living in community like the Apostles around Jesus was a basic value. He was very intransigent about the ideal, which ideal included doing everything for God’s glory and the unity of the apostolic corps. His experience taught him that Oblates struggled to be faithful and were also weak, that they were often tempted to do their own thing. The many departures and expulsions show how difficult the ideal was for many. The Founder wanted a holy Congregation. At the same time, expulsions were always most painful to him.

5. The Oblate began as a French Congregation and now we are international. The question of rivalries and dissension stemming from nationalism, ethnic origins and “racism” remains to be studied. It is a problem that is still actual: think of Canada, Belgium, Sri Lanka, South Africa, v.g.

6. Every Superior General has had to struggle with the issue of community and how to attain it. There does seem to be a definite break in the style and approach to this

problem with Archbishop Dontenwill. With him, the “De Mazenod Dynasty” of Superiors General is at an end.

7. While the problem of esprit de corps and the virtues to be lived in community were much mentioned, nothing or little was said about very concrete things like the use of money, having all goods in common, etc. These concrete things are important for unity in the community and are often the source of difficulty.

Father Roy and Walkosz said they found little material about these things in the sources they used to prepare their conferences. It was suggested that matters like these were usually treated with the Provinces concerned and between General and Provincial Bursars, but not by General Chapters and the circular letters of Superiors General. It was also suggested that this is another topic that would need to be studied.

The role of the Oblate Sharing fund in promoting mission/community was mentioned.

8. The link between culture, mission and community can often be seen, v.g. also in our architecture: v.g. a provincial house built by USA Oblates in a mission country or one built by Oblates from Germany.

There are also different ways in which we finance mission/community: the missionary who finds his own benefactors, the mission as a responsibility of a Province, the mission financed through one centre for everyone. These depend very much on different cultures and different religious institutes. There are religious institutes where all surpluses go to their General Administration; in the Oblates, Provinces are taxed and whatever surpluses there are remain with the Province.

This, too, would need to be better studied.

Part three

Mission and Community

Some Oblate Examples

Mission and Community

Some Oblate Examples

This part consists simply of three examples or illustrations of how Oblates have lived or presently live the reality of mission and community. The conferences are to be understood as being only a partial and rapid glance, a limited glimpse at our rich Oblate experience and tradition. The conferences of this portion are more in the line of a witness than a study. Three conferences were presented in the morning of August 10, 1989:

- Father Romuald BOUCHER, Archivist of Archives Decathletes in Ottawa, spoke of Mission and Community in terms of Oblates in Eastern Canada who went westward and northward in Canada and also went outward to the United States, Haiti and some points in South America.
- Father Clement WAIDYASEKARA, Superior of the Scholasticate in Karachi, Pakistan, spoke of Mission and Community in the Delegation of Pakistan.
- Father Jerome SKHAKHANE, professor of Church History at the Scholasticate of Cedara, Natal, South Africa, spoke of Mission and Community in the life of Blessed Father Joseph Gerard.

Since conferences were intended to be but a partial illustration and not a study properly so-called, there was no panel session allotted to them.

The Oblate Mission through Apostolic Community in America

It is a basic principle accepted by all of us that the Oblate mission is carried out through the apostolic community. Recalling two important texts will suffice to establish this fact. Constitution 37 of our Constitutions and Rules reads as follows: “We fulfill our mission in and through the community to which we belong. Our communities, therefore, are apostolic in character.” A little later, we are reminded of this same fact in paragraph 109 of *Missionaries in Today’s World*: “Oblate community is an essential dimension of our vocation.... 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.”

The goal of my presentation is to show how this major principle has been lived in the Americas. It will easily be seen that this very close relationship between community and the apostolic life was maintained to a high degree, at least from the beginning of the Congregation until Vatican II. The first section of this paper will treat of that period. In the second period treated, we will witness a rather painful time of hesitation and worry during which, very painfully, a readjustment is sought in order to discover the new formulas demanded by circumstances and to recapture our missionary thrust.

A. From the Beginning of the Congregation to 1960

Since this topic is very vast, as vast as the two Americas combined, we will have to limit ourselves. I will endeavour to show how the communitarian apostolic spirit of our members manifested itself in the accepting of the great missionary projects “ad gentes.” There will be no question of treating of the works as such; they speak for themselves. Without a dynamic, persevering community, one united in heart and spirit, this gigantic apostolic work would never have been able to be brought to fruition. Nor, unfortunately, will we be able to elaborate on the great many other projects being carried on within the confines of the different Oblate provinces in the Americas such as: preaching, teaching, parishes, the apostolate of the press, chaplaincies of all kinds, etc.

Without explicitly saying so, it was taken for granted that the community was, in itself, apostolic. Had not the Founder himself imparted this burning desire for the apostolate to all the members of the Congregation? Even before the foundation of the Congregation he wrote to Fr. Tempier: “We will live together in one house ... happiness

awaits us in this holy Society which will have but one heart and soul.”¹ The members of this society will spend one part of their life in prayer and the other part will be consecrated to works of the most intense zeal outside the community. There is no dichotomy between these two phases of life. The Founder concludes: “In a word, they will endeavour to become other Jesus Christs, spreading around everywhere the good odour of his beloved virtues.”² For St. Paul, “to spread abroad the good odour of Christ” is the apostolate.

Eugene de Mazenod was ready to set off for the moon if that was the necessary condition to gain souls for Christ the Saviour.³ We read in the first edition of the Constitutions and Rules:

They - the members of the Institute - are called to be the Saviour's co-workers, the co-redeemers of mankind; and even though, because of their present small number and the more urgent needs of the people around them, they have to limit the scope of their zeal *for the time being*, to the poor of our countryside and others, their ambition should, in its holy aspirations, embrace the vast expanse of the whole earth.⁴

1. The accepting of the mission in America

Even before the approbation of the Constitutions and Rules in 1826, the Founder protests against the plan to restrict the activities of the Oblates to the narrow confines of their native soil.

Several members of the Congregation would willingly go to preach the Gospel to the infidels and, when membership will be more numerous, it is quite possible that the superiors should send them to America either to bring aid to the poor Catholics deprived of all spiritual good, or to make new conquests to the faith.⁵

The general chapter of 1831 took up the same idea, but the initiative this time is taken up by the members of the chapter. In the morning session of September 29:

A proposal was examined which would suggest that the chapter should express to Very Reverend Father General the desire which members of the Society have that a few of our members should be sent to the foreign missions as soon as he will judge that the time is opportune. Having taken cognizance of the frame of mind of a large number of the members of the Society who earnestly look forward to the moment when the opportunity will be granted them to go carry afar the knowledge and the love of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the chapter felt obliged to show their solidarity with their holy thought and to become their mouthpiece all the more since it considers the object of the proposal as being extremely important for the glory of God and the good of the Society. Consequently, the proposal was unanimously accepted and once the wish which it contains was communicated to Very Reverend Father General, he graciously accepted to reply in the course of that very session that he accepted it and he gave it his approval.⁶

¹ Mazenod to Tempier, October 9, 1815. *Oblate writings*, VI, p.6-7.

² Paul-Emile DUVAL, o.m.i., ed. *Constitutions et Règles de la Société des Missionnaires de Provence*. First French manuscript. Rome, General House, 1951, p. 55. See commentaries of Fabio CIARDI, o.m.i., *Quelques traits de la communauté à la lumière de la vie apostolique*, in *Vie Oblate Life*, 1977, p. 207.

³ Mazenod to Forbin-Janson, October 28, 1814. *Oblate writings*, VI, p. 3.

⁴ *Constitutions et Règles de la Société des Missionnaires de Provence*; an old manuscript of the Holy Rules (Ms Honorat). *Bibliographie oblate*, texte 1. Ottawa, Editions des Etudes Oblates, 1943, p. 4, Paragraphe III, art. 3. N.B.

⁵ Mazenod to Cardinal Pedecini, December 30, 1825,. In *Missions de la Congrégation des Missionnaires O.M.I.*, p. 500-503.

⁶ *Registre des chapitres généraux*, v. 1, p. 36. (General Archives O.M.I., Rome) Quoted in Gaston CARRIERE, *Histoire documentaire de la congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie-immaculée dans l'Est du Canada*, v. 1, p. 83-84.

The dynamic missionary zeal of the Founder and the members of the Institute, put on hold until that day, took on a concrete form with the accepting of the missions of Canada in 1841. It is the first mission “ad gentes” accepted by the Oblates. It will mark the beginning of a remarkable missionary epic. You know the circumstances involved. Bishop Ignace Bourget, the recently named bishop of Montreal, was seeking priests, religious congregations who would take on the responsibility of numerous apostolic projects in Montreal and in Canada as a whole. A chance, but providential encounter of bishop Bourget with the bishop of Marseilles results in the accepting of the mission and the sending of Oblate missionaries to Canada. What one must notice in our case is the fact that the missions in Canada were unanimously accepted. This is an apostolic work which is visibly communitarian. The Founder judged that it would be good to consult the members of his Institute before presenting a definitive response to the bishop of Montreal. Writing to this bishop:

I hasten to let you know the result of my overtures. As this was an extraordinary undertaking, I felt obliged to consult the Congregation. The affirmative reply is unanimous. Nothing remains but to choose amongst these dedicated men of goodwill.⁷

They (the Oblates assigned to Canada) will bring honor to our small and humble Congregation which is unfurling its banner for the first time beyond the confines of its cradle, and by their holiness and the efforts of their zeal will draw down the blessing of God, not only on the works they undertake, but on the whole Congregation in whose name they will do battle.⁸

2. The Oblates in Bytown

Even though Bytown did not belong to the diocese of Montreal - it was under the jurisdiction of Bishop Patrick Phelan of Kingston - it was at the pressing invitation of Bishop Bourget that the Oblates established themselves there. In the case of the bishop of Montreal, the boundaries of his diocese set no limitation on his zeal. People foresaw that this city, still in the embryonic stage, had a future. Bytown would become a key city. It would be the doorway to the lumber camps and the road opening to the long desired Indian missions. Bishop Bourget discussed the matter with Father Honorat, superior of the Oblates in Canada and, between the two, the affair is soon settled. “The latter, however, was not able to make any promises because he had not discussed the matter with the priests, but he firmly believed that all would see the hand of Providence in it. ... All the priests were unanimous in their agreement as to the opportunity of this mission.”⁹

But difficulties arose. Bishop Phelan was not enthusiastic about the coming of the Oblates to his diocese. Father Honorat began to hesitate: the small number of Oblates he had at his disposal, financing was precarious, the English language which not one Oblate spoke, the vastness of the task and its numerous difficulties, etc. But the apostolic boldness of the Founder, buoyed up by the wise advice of the bishop of Montreal and especially his confidence in divine Providence soon overcame the prudence of Father Honorat.

⁷ Mazenod to Bishop Ignace BOURGET, July 16, 1841. *Oblate writings*, I, p.1.

⁸ Mazenod, *Journal*. Quoted in Toussaint RAMBERT, o.m.i., *Vie de Monseigneur Charles-Joseph-Eugene de Mazenod, évêque de Marseille*, Tours, Mame, 1883, v. 2, p. 98.

⁹ Gaston CARRIERE, *Histoire documentaire ...* v. 1, p. 205. See also Edgar THIVIERGE, o.m.i., *A la naissance du diocèse d'Ottawa*, in *Revue de Université d'Ottawa*, 1937, p. 424-440 and 1938, p. 6-30.

...You certainly need to be enterprising if you are called to the conquest of souls. ... You had to go there with the firm resolve to overcome all obstacles, go there to stay, take root there! How could you hesitate? What more beautiful mission than this! Ministry in the lumber camps, missions to the Savages, establishment in a city which is wholly of the future. But it is the beautiful dream coming true and you would have let it escape! the thought makes me shiver! Take all your courage in your hands once more and establish yourself there properly. Urge each one to do his duty. It is only thus you will bring upon yourselves the blessing of God...!"

A city of the future, Bytown-become-Ottawa, was probably more than had been foreseen. It became the capital city. For the Oblates, Ottawa became the Oblate city par excellence. In 1948, there were over 425 Oblates involved in all sorts of ministries, worthy of mention among these are the works of education and teaching. In collaboration with other religious congregations, the Grey Nuns in particular, they diffused knowledge at all levels. During a symposium treating of education in the francophone region of Ottawa, this fact prompted one of the speakers to say:

The ones and the others, the Oblates and the Grey Nuns, as well as the men and women who accompanied them, belong to religious communities which are, so to speak, the *specialized teams* which the bishops use for the most difficult missions. Their religious vows, the formation that they have received, the common life they lead and their simple lifestyle permit them to dedicate themselves body and soul to the education of the children of others, children whom they adopt as if they were their very own.¹¹

3. The conquest of the West and the Great Canadian North

This is the most eloquent example of the Oblate mission which is to be accomplished by means of the apostolic community. The vast territories of the Canadian North-West had been entrusted to Bishop Norbert Provencher in 1818. In the time period of 26 years, 12 diocesan priests had lent him their aid, but never more than four at a time. After a few years of hard labour and of innumerable sacrifices they returned exhausted and disgusted to the country of their origin. This fact compelled the poor bishop to say: "I am like an oak tree left standing alone in the middle of an open plain where the storm carries before it all the other trees." "We will accomplish nothing with a diocesan clergy; omnes qui sua sunt quaerunt."¹⁰ There remains only one possible solution, to have recourse to a religious community which is ready to brave obstacles and difficulties of every kind. A religious community would bring with it unity of action, convergence of efforts and continuity in the work begun.

¹⁰ Mazenod to Father Jean-Baptiste Honorat, March 1, 1844. *Oblate Writings*, I, p. 79.

¹¹ Roger GUINDON, o.m.i., L'Université d'Ottawa et le Couvent Rideau. Lecture delivered in the context of the symposium *Religion, art et éducation dans l'Outaouais français au 20^e siècle*, Ottawa, April 21-22, 1988.

I am asking for Oblates... Diocesan priests will go slowly; there is no unity of vision among them other than that they only put their hand to the plow for a short time which they always find to be too long.¹³

In a country which does not supply any priests, it is fitting that the bishop be chosen from a body of religious. He will be superior in everything and all over, which would be better than having a superior who could not always speak as the bishop.¹⁴

¹² Bishop Norbert PROVENCHER to Ls François LAFLECHE. Quoted in Dom Paul Benoit, c.r.i.c., *Vie de Mgr Taché, archevêque de St-Boniface*, Montréal, Beauchemin, 1904, v. I, p. 53.

It will be always infinitely more advantageous that the bishop should be chosen from the Congregation; to it belongs the task of sending subjects who can fill this position.¹⁵

I see with admiration that the recent diocese of Bytown is taking an enormous forward thrust. The reason is very simple; it is due to the fact that the bishop has at his command a body of missionaries, and with them he copes with the whole works.¹⁶ The Congregation of the Oblates will find itself with the responsibility for everything. I rejoice at this; I did it deliberately; it is a necessary thing so that the missions take on a very different thrust. It has been thirty-two years that I have been in charge of these missions. Those who assisted me were for a long time young clerics in minor orders, subdeacons and deacons, without any seminary training or any theology. How is it possible to form them here? That's not all. Their arrival used to bring about the departure of the one who had become capable of giving good service. We had to fall back to where we were at the arrival of the one who was leaving.¹⁷

Even if the tiny Oblate family had exhausted itself to pitch its tents in America, Bishop de Mazenod was unable to refuse the request of the bishop of the North-West who greatly needed subjects who are ready to sacrifice everything. More than ever it was necessary to rely upon Providence. On this occasion, there was no time for consultation; he relied on the generosity of his subjects who had already proven their worth. To Father Guigues who was hesitating, he wrote:

Judging the importance of the mission proposed ... **my decision** is that you ought to undertake it with the means you have in your power. ... you cannot risk the great setback that you fear of seeing this mission taken away from you and of losing the opportunity ... of evangelizing the whole of North America... I repeat, without hesitation, respond to the wish of the Bishop of Julio polis and begin this work even if it was with only two Oblates while awaiting others from the goodness of God.¹¹

Then again the two Oblates had to be found. Father Guigues had only Father Pierre Aubert at his disposal. This priest was only thirty years old; he had just arrived from France and he was judged as not prepared to undertake such a mission. And the second one? They had no idea where to find him. It was just at that time that a volunteer stepped forward, a 22 year old novice, one of the first Oblate recruits on Canadian soil, Alexandre Taché.

He had just obtained the restoration to health of his mother by offering himself to the Saviour of the world for the evangelization of the primitive tribes of the West. As soon as he learned of Bishop Provencher's request, he went to offer himself, in spite of his youth, for these far-off missions and earnestly begged permission to consecrate all his life to them."

Thus it was that the Oblate community in Canada undertook the gigantic work of evangelizing the Canadian North-West. The religious congregation so ardently desired by the bishop of Red River was certainly not disappointed. The congregation won for itself the praise of pope Pius XI, "The Oblates, specialists of the most difficult missions."

4. The Oblates in Texas

"Montreal is perhaps only the gateway leading the family to the conquest of souls in several countries,"¹² the Founder had told Father Honorat before his departure for America. Texas was the first large-scale mission accepted by Canada outside its own borders. The acceptance of the mission in Texas takes on a very special character. It was the result of a missionary impulse of an apostle with a heart of fire, Father Adrien

¹¹ Mazenod to Father Eugene GUIGUES, o.m.i., December 5, 1844. *Oblate Writings*, I, p. III and 112.

¹² Mazenod to Father Honorat, October 9, 1841. *Oblate Writings*, I, p. 17.

Telmon. Not only did he not consult his confreres, but he even forgot to speak to his superiors about it, the Founder included.

Bishop Odin of Galveston in Texas, having received a letter from Brownsville in which the citizens of that city urgently requested the benefits of religious ministry, was in Montreal looking for some priest who might wish to take on the responsibility for caring for this neglected, but interesting part of his flock. Reverend Father Telmon met the holy bishop at the Sulpicians. It was there that he heard his burning appeal, that he read the touching invitation of the citizens of Brownsville. It was also there that, consulting only his zeal for souls, he concluded with Bishop Odin the solemn agreement which bound him and me to the diocese of Galveston.¹³

Father Telmon had, then, presumed permission. We have to add in his defense that in 1849, the year of the accepting of this mission, he had obtained authorization, in a general way, *to enter into communication* with the bishops of the United States with the object of introducing the Congregation into their dioceses, if an occasion to do so presented itself.¹⁴

He left, therefore, without delay for Texas in October of 1849. He brought with him Father Alexandre Soulerin, recently arrived from France, who had been designated for the missions of Oregon, Father Auguste Gaudet et scholastic brother Paul Gelot. You can easily imagine that Father Telmon drew down upon himself the lightning bolts of the Founder. The latter sent him a six page letter of which we have unfortunately lost all trace. We have some echoes of it in his *Journal*.

What is going on in Canada is unheard of. There is Father Telmon taking on the responsibility of the mission of Texas, relying on the faculties that I had granted him when he was at Pittsburg. He leaves and arbitrarily takes with him some Oblates, among others brother Gelot, that same brother who had made his vows without being admitted by the Council and concerning whom I had expressly forbidden the bishop of Bytown to have him ordained without my approbation. And the bishop of Bytown ... ordained him subdeacon. It is a monstrosity impossible to describe.¹⁵

The Oblate community had certainly inherited the apostolic zeal and the boldness of the Founder. He forgave them their bold undertakings. He accepted the missions of Texas which he encouraged as best he could and gave them his wholehearted sympathy in their innumerable difficulties and tribulations. Those Texas missions developed and became the flourishing province we know today. The missionary epic of the *Calvary of Christ* along the Rio Grande and even in Mexico (Matamoros) won a fame which endures to this day.¹⁶

5. They want Oblates in Haiti

We have now reached 1942. Many things have transpired among the Oblates in Canada and the United States in the course of their hundred years in North America. The Congregation has established itself everywhere in North America. It has founded hundreds of missions, set up several dioceses and apostolic vicariates. It has become involved in a host of works of every kind. Although the Oblates have grown considerably

¹³ Letter of Father Alexandre SOULERIN, o.m.i. to Father Joseph FABRE. In *Missions des O.M.I.*, 1862, p. 455.

¹⁴ Joseph BONNARD, o.m.i. *Le père Adrien Pierre Telmon*. In *Notices nécrologiques*, v. III, p. 502.

¹⁵ Mazenod, *Journal*, November 10, 1849. *Oblate Writings*, I, p. 251.

¹⁶ Bernard DOYON, o.m.i., *The Cavalry of Christ on the Rio Grande, 1849-1883*, Milwaukee, Bruce Press, Catholic Life Publication, 1956. See also *Acts of the Apostles on the Rio Grande Valley*, In *Mary Immaculate*, 1929-1931.

in number, they still can hardly supply all the needs”¹⁷ And that is not all. They are being asked to do more. There is a pressing demand for them to go to Haiti.

The acceptance of these missions was preceded by prolonged negotiations involving a great many important people: the president, Elie Lescot, Bishop Ready, secretary of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, Archbishop LeGouache of Port-au-Prince, the Apostolic Nuncio of Haiti, Fathers Theodore Labouré, superior general and Anthime Desnoyers, vicar general, Father McDermott, provincial of the First Oblate Province of the United States and Father Bachand, provincial of the Franco-American province of Lowell, Summer Wells (a Protestant), under-secretary of State of the United States.

The Oblates of Lowell spoke both French and English. They were American citizens. They were ready to accept this task if the superior general gave his consent. They fulfilled in ideal fashion all the conditions required for a new foundation. Here are the reasons presented by the provincial council to accept this mission: 1) To preserve the Church in a Catholic country. 2) To foster the development of our province. 3) This acceptance will offer no obstacles to our other missions. 4) To develop the missionary spirit among us and thus favour vocations. 5) The province of Canada (East) will help out.¹⁸

The project, approved unanimously by the provincial council, was referred to the general administration. The latter agreed fully that the missions of Haiti were perfectly in accord with the spirit of our Congregation. It was a question of the poorest among the poor and, if the Oblates did not go, nobody would.

But to accept missions does not mean for us simply an act of blind faith in Divine Providence, but rather to positively provoke Providence casting aside all the reasonings of human prudence which advise us - compel us even - not to accept.¹⁹

But he hastens to add:

If the Holy Father expresses, I do not say the command, but the simple desire that we should accept the mission of Haiti, Your Eminence can consider the thing done: My council and I accept without the least hesitation the new foundation proposed confident in the Providence of God which will not then abandon us.²⁰

As far as the Holy Father was concerned, this was a question of a very urgent need and he asked the Oblates to send missionaries to Haiti as soon as possible. The Oblates are known for being men of the bishops and the response was immediate, unquestioning.

The Holy Father has spoken. All hesitation ceases. The question is settled... Never was the foundation of Oblate missions more auspiciously presented since it is based on filial obedience to the Holy Father alone and a blind confidence in the Providence of the Good God - the human side of things offering only difficulties and incertitudes.²¹

¹⁷ It has been pointed out that in 1962 the first six Oblates sent to Canada in 1841 had increased to 2000 in number.

¹⁸ *Rapport du conseil provincial de la province Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Lowell à l'administration générale des O.M.I. concernant l'établissement des maisons oblates franco-américaines dans la République d'Haïti*, Lowell, July 17, 1940, p. 22-23.

¹⁹ Theodore LABOURE, o.m.i., sup. gen. to Cardinal MAGLIONE, March 24, 1942. In *Etudes Oblates*, v. 1, 1942, p. 251.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 252.

²¹ Th. LABOURE, to Card. MAGLIONE, April 17, 1942. Ibidem, p. 254.

Upon learning the news of the acceptance of the missions of Haiti, “The Oblates of Lowell are overjoyed. No one speaks of anything but Haiti. Everyone offers his own predictions as to who will be named director of this important mission. The majority of the scholastics are eager to go to this promised land of evangelization.”²²

It was St. John the Baptist province which was God’s instrument in this holy undertaking. Twenty years after the foundation, here is what Father Leo Decathletes, superior general, had to say about it: “This province gave a response whose generosity perfectly corresponded to the demands of the situation, the needs of the mission, the demands of the ministry, the apostolic ambitions of the missionaries themselves.”²³

As foreseen, at the outset, St. John the Baptist province received help from Europe and from Canada. Father Decathletes does not fail to emphasize this: “What has been accomplished these last twenty years in Haiti, thanks to the generosity of the St. John the Baptist province, is an example which shows the great fruitfulness of our system, the great generosity of our Oblate spirit and all the good that results from it.”²⁴

6. The Oblates go to Latin America: Chile and Bolivia

Long and laborious negotiations preceded the sending of the Oblates to the republic of Chile. It all began in 1945 on the occasion of the first interamerican meeting of Catholic Action in Santiago where Father Pierre-Paul Asselin was representing the Young Catholic Workers. The Canadian effort in pastoral work among the laboring class had stimulated a good deal of interest. Cardinal Maria Caro, the archbishop of Santiago, asked the Canadians for help in organizing the Young Catholic Workers and the League of Christian Women Workers in his archdiocese. Not long after, the bishop of Iquique asked for some priests for the saltpeter mines of the Chilean pampas. The timing was not good. Canada had many obligations in regards to numerous missions which had been entrusted to it, especially in regards to Basutoland which was deprived of all reinforcement all during the war. The provincial house of the Oblates in Montreal could not possibly accept, but Father Leo Decathletes, the provincial, passed the request on to the general administration in Rome urging that “such mission appeals went straight to his heart.”

Father Albert Sanchagrin was given the responsibility of making preparations in view of accepting the missions in Chile. In 1947, he was sent there with a double mandate: 1) the bishops of Canada and of Chile were asking him to help the priests and the laity of Chile to set up the Young Catholic Workers there. 2) the province of Canada (East) was asking him to study the possibility of responding to the request from Rome and the bishop of Iquique asking for Oblates to work in the saltpeter mines in the pampas of Chile.

²² Louis-Marie PARENT, o.m.i., *Un coeur sous la main, Jean-Louis Collignon, o.m.i., évêque des Cayes*, p. 107. The director will be Bishop Collignon; he will be consecrated bishop in Lowell by Cardinal Villeneuve.

²³ Leo DESCHATELETS, o.m.i., *Acte de visite canonique générale du district vicarial d’Haïti*, January-February 1962, p. 7.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 7.

Father Sanschagrin wrote a long report in which he strongly advised an establishment of the Oblates in Chile. His report was well received at the provincial house in Montreal. After two and a half days of deliberations the provincial council approved the foundation of the mission in Chile. The decision was then confirmed by Rome and on the 8 of September, 1948, Very Reverend Father Leo Decathletes, superior general since May of 1947, announced to the whole Congregation "the canonical establishment of the Oblate missions of Chile, attached to the province of Canada (East)." Father Sanschagrin was named superior of the mission with the title of vicar provincial. He is justly considered to be the founder of the Oblate mission in Chile.²⁵

The first missionaries to make their way to Chile were Fathers Robert Voyer, Maurice Veillette and Rene Ferragne. Once the whole affair was settled, Father Leo Decathletes confided to Father Sanschagrin: "Never was a mission founded out of motives so supernatural and so pure as this. I will dare to say as well it is rare that a mission was started with such great personal sacrifice as those endured by its first missionaries."²⁶

The Oblates certainly had an idea that once they were installed on Chilean soil the neighbouring countries would be making requests of them. Therefore, Father Decathletes passed the message on to Father Sanschagrin: "Tell everybody who asks you for Canadian Oblates that it is out of the question. They are already overwhelmed by their missionary obligations all over the world and cannot accept any more."²⁷

In October of 1951, Father Sanschagrin presided over the first Bolivian National Congress for Catholic Action. The congress had not even begun when Archbishop Sergio Pignedoli, the newly appointed nuncio in Bolivia, asked for Oblates to take care of the miners in the tin mines. He was not very worried about the firm decisions of Father Decathletes not to accept any more new missions. He called on the most influential bodies in the Church. How could one resist the pressing appeals of the Apostolic Nuncio, the Vatican Secretary of State (Msgr. Tardini), the consistorial, of Msgr. Cardijn, of Msgr. Montini, and of the Pope himself?

February 19, 1952, the general council accepted to send priests into the mining region of Catavi in Bolivia. The first two Oblates to make their way there were Fathers Valérien Gaudet and Alexandre Gaze. Thus the Oblates remained faithful to the orientation adopted at the general chapter of 1947: "In order to consolidate the existing missions, not to accept any new ones *unless we receive a formal order from the Pope.*"[^]

7. The Oblates of the province of St. Peter's go to Peru

The missions of Peru, entrusted to St. Peter's province in 1963, are another beautiful example of the communitarian apostolic spirit. After having been requested to do so by several Latin American bishops, they chose to go to Peru where a few of the Oblates from Chile were already working. As early as 1960, the Oblates of the province wanted a mission in South America.

²⁵ See *L'Apostolat*, v. 49, no. 2, March-April 1978. Special issue dedicated to Chile after thirty years of apostolate.

²⁶ Leo DESCHATELETS, o.m.i., to Albert SANSCHAGRIN, o.m.i. Quoted in *Codex historicus*, mission of Chile, v. 1, p. 10.

²⁷ Albert SANSCHAGRIN, o.m.i., *Mgr Sergio Pignedoli et la venue des Oblats en Bolivie*, p. 1.

I fervently desire to establish in South America a mission which would stem from our province. Eventually, I hope to have several missions there because I know that we will not have any difficulty in obtaining young priests who would offer themselves for South America.²⁸

The situation was a little delicate because of the fact that the Oblate province from Chile had every intention of continuing its apostolic work in Peru. All difficulties were swiftly overcome in an atmosphere of the greatest charity and of a remarkable supernatural spirit, which drew from Father Decathletes this comment made to Father G. Cousineau:

Your cooperation was splendid ... All the stages through which this affair had to travel bore the stamp of your breadth of vision, your perfect gentlemanly conduct and your very catholic Oblate spirit... Oblate charity is not an empty word.²⁹

It is, therefore, with a supernatural spirit, with enthusiasm and a wholly apostolic dynamism that St. Peter's province undertook this mission in Peru. "Among the young priests in the scholasticate, 80% want to go to South America and some of the old fathers are volunteering for the same cause."³⁰ The entire province gave its total support to its missionaries, financially and morally. We must especially mention the untiring work of Father Joseph Birch, provincial director of the Missionary Association of Mary Immaculate.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 1-7.

At this point, we leave off giving examples. It would have been interesting to pursue the topic in relation to the missions of Basutoland, Mexico, Brazil, Japan, the Philippines, etc. All of them were accepted with generosity in order to help and assist peoples in distress and in view of maintaining brightly burning the apostolic flame of the Oblate community.

In the course of this presentation, we have not brought up the term "Oblate mission through the apostolic community." I have not come across it as such in the numerous documents consulted. It was taken for granted that is the way it should be. There was very little talk, but much done. Accepting vast missionary projects was done in different ways. In the beginning, we sought out opportunities to exercise our zeal in regard to peoples who were poor and deprived of religious care; later on, "in order not to tempt Providence," we awaited an order from the Holy Father. Likewise, the agent of acceptance differed: the Founder himself with or without consulting the members of the Congregation, through the provincial councils referring their recommendations to the general administration, through an official representative of the Oblates given the task of offering advice after having examined the situation, through one of the members who presumes permission, etc. The constant factor is that the Oblate community always takes on the responsibility of the commitments made, and one in heart and soul, the individuals involved generously accept the work of evangelization assigned to them along with all the sacrifices and self-denial inherent in this task. In all their bold accepting of

²⁸ Lawrence POUPORE, o.m.i. to Bishop Julie M. Gonzalez Ruis of Puno, Peru, September 5, 1960.

²⁹ Leo DESCHATELETS, o.m.i. to Father Gerald COUSINEAU, o.m.i., provincial, March 16, 1963.

³⁰ Gerald COUSINEAU, o.m.i. to Father Leo DESCHATELETS, March 8, 1963.

missionary projects one important principle always guided them: "If you want to live and grow, you will need to establish new missions."

B. From the Second Vatican Council to our day³¹

In America, in the early 60's, the era of the vast missionary projects was of necessity put on hold. Gale winds came to shake up the entire Church - and especially the American church - without sparing our Congregation. Father Zago summarized the consequences of this upheaval in the Oblate community.

The Oblate community is put into question. We could even say that it is in crisis. In many places, we tend to organize ourselves the best way we know how. ... Sometimes the community is considered as a means of being effective in one's work or in personal growth; sometimes it is reduced to a boarding house. Some people feel lost because the community offers no structures for prayer, for human contact, for mutual assistance; others feel that even though they are living in a community it contributes nothing to their lives. ... We can truly speak of disarray, if not of crisis, not only in practice, but on the intellectual level as well. It is a crisis of values and not only of structures. There is no discernment of the *why* of community, and consequently, there is an inability to find the *how*.^{4*}

One of the major consequences of this state of affairs is the departure from the Congregation of a good number of its members. In a survey done for the Oblates of Quebec mention is made that in the space of five years (1971-1975) the number of individuals who had left the three provinces (Notre-Dame du Rosaire, Saint-Joseph and Saint Francois-Xavier) was almost double the number of those asking to join. More than half of these departures is due to abandoning of the religious life, that is, 70 out of 128.³² The projections for the next ten years (1975-1985) are hardly any more reassuring:

What must be foreseen is a decrease in personnel available to fill actual positions, an increase in the social burden of the people actively working, that is to say, each person has more retired people to support, and a decrease in the attraction the community might have for young people by the very fact that it is aging.³³

In fact, the statistics of 1979 to 1984 for the province of Saint-Joseph only show a decrease of 74 members. In order to give an idea of the atmosphere that prevailed at that time I have made an inventory of the vocabulary used to describe the situation: insecurity, anxiety, hesitation, unrest, disarray, gropings, agitation, nervousness, tension, impatience, upheaval, we feel lost, disconcerted, structural crisis, of values, of faith, of the priesthood, of the religious life, of the dissolution of the Congregation, an institution on the decline which is seeking a comfortable death, etc.

From 1966 on, the general chapters tried to give a new impetus to the movement of a renewed apostolic communitarian life. In order to prepare the general chapter of 1972, the superior general wrote:

Since the General Chapter of 1966, the main effort of the Congregation has been directed toward adapting its response to the present needs of the Church and the World.

⁴¹ Marcello ZAGO, o.m.i. *Dimensions missionnaires de la communauté oblate, Vie Oblate Life*, 1971, p. 9.

³¹ To get a good idea of what transpired at that period in time one could usefully consult the publication *Vie Oblate Life* from 1966 to our day. This publication carries many articles that are very pertinent to the topic which interests us.

³² Elizabeth GERMAIN-BRODEUR, *Rapport de recherche sur trois provinces oblates francophones du Canada*, Québec, 1975, p. 20-21.

This effort has been influenced by the spirit of Bishop de Mazenod and the directives of the Second Vatican Council.

Throughout the Provinces and Vice-provinces, there has been a determination to experiment, to seek ways of renovation and renewal. The basic units of this experimentation are the local communities. These communities which have a common involvement in religious and apostolic life.³⁴

The general chapter of 1974 treats this question again and invites us to once again put our faith in the apostolic religious life.

So that we can be authentic witnesses, our consecration to Jesus Christ commits us in solidary fashion to an ideal of life which our constitutions propose to us, into which the preface infuses the spirit and urges us on to a concrete application which is always abreast of the times. That is why we reaffirm our faith in the religious apostolic life.³⁵

In Canada, the province of Saint-Joseph in particular made every effort to effectively cope with the situation. In response to a request made by several of its members, there was first of all a call to dialogue, a dialogue which proved to be rather vague, misunderstood, badly defined, and in which the most enthusiastic often wanted to be the only ones to be heard. All of this was far from corresponding to the real character of dialogue as described by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* and commented by one of our fellow Oblates:

Dialogue is not democratization, a standardization, a concession, a bringing everything down to the same level, but rather that action of a considerate charity which respects dignity, freedom, the psychological and moral character of one's neighbour in the light of the truth. It is the form of preaching and announcing the word of God which is recommended in our day.³⁶

They even supplied a forum for those who wanted to air their opinion and to discuss problems of the day. They founded the review, *Au Rythme de l'Eglise; bulletin d'échange et d'information*. It appeared from 1965 to 1977.

The newsletter *Au Rythme de l'Eglise* was born of the need for dialogue and democratization... In the wake of the stormy meetings of the provincial and the *young Fathers* in 1964, the wish had been expressed to found a vehicle of free expression which would encourage all the Oblates in the way of a renewal which was judged to be urgent.³⁷

Convinced of the principle expressed by the vicar provincial that "if we do not succeed in making of our houses authentic communities of evangelical life, we have no future,"³⁸ no stone was left unturned in an effort to find solutions to the crisis and to give a renewed impetus to the apostolic spirit through the community: *Oblate days* especially for the study of the *missionary thrust* as it was conceived by the chapter of 1966 and which wished to emphasize innovation and creativity in apostolic action,³⁹ *a commission on community life* through which we wanted to see our apostolic religious life provide its maximum output in missionary terms, *a special provincial council*, a great many *meetings* for different groups according to age, ministry, special interests, mini-

³³ Ibidem, p. 24a.

³⁴ Leo DESCHATELETS, o.m.i., *Circular Letter 245*, January 15, 1971, p. 1.

³⁵ *Actes du chapitre général de 1974*, p. 13-14.

³⁶ Donat LEVASSEUR, o.m.i., *Constitutions et Règles d la lumière de Vatican II*; paragraphe VII, *Le dialogue*. In *Vie Oblate Life*, v. 26, 1967, p. 151-152.

³⁷ *Au rythme de l'Eglise*, no. 17, May 22, 1967, p. 172.

³⁸ Fernand JETTE, o.m.i. *Problématique de la vie communautaire évangélique*, *Vie Oblate Life*, 1970, p. 3.

³⁹ *Directives administratives de la province St-Joseph*, 1972, p. Bl. In *Vie Oblate Life*, 1972, p. 326.

“councils”, *congresses* on every level, among which the Oblate Conference of Canada held at Saint Norbert in 1977 was a noteworthy event.⁴⁰

In spite of all the efforts of this kind, Father Zago draws to our attention the fact that:

All of this can and should be a help for renewal; it could launch it, but cannot make it a reality. In itself, it can be ambiguous and can remain in the order of structures, plans, paperwork. The role they have will be effective if we put ourselves at the service of the community, for the community is the focus point of renewal.⁴¹

Father Fernand Jetté, the vicar provincial, ties everything together by explaining in four points the conditions required for renewal of the province:

1. For the renewal of the province there will have to be an earnest renewal within the local communities and a renewal in the full sense of the Gospel life.

2. For this renewal to take place on the level of the local communities, a renewal must also take place on the personal level, a renewal which, for certain people, should take the form of an *authentic* conversion to the Gospel values.

3. This renewal should come from the whole province, the local communities and the members of the Institute, even more perhaps than from the provincial administration. It is a reality which cannot be imposed. It must flow from the interior, from the very heart of the men who make up a religious family.

4. In carrying this out, this renewal must accept a certain pluralism and know how to be patient in the face of certain gropings and false steps.⁴²

In fact, it was noticed that all these practices and efforts on the part of the province to “domesticate the renewal” did not have all the hoped for success. They did have the advantage of going beyond the stage of mere lamentation. The Oblate days and especially *Au Rythme de l'Eglise* hashed over a lot of ideas, but they were judged by a few to be ventures in destruction.⁴³

At the risk of being repetitive, here is a text from the general chapter of 1972 which seems to be the only real response to our search:

All community renewal includes a missionary orientation. This renewal, even though it is not the remedy for all difficulties, remains a privileged means for a new departure. ... a true community is a living cell capable of forming in turn communities on a wider front in the Church as well as in the world.⁴⁴

That is what brings us back to the major principle mentioned in the first part of our work when there was a question of accepting new fields of apostolate: “If you want to live and grow, you will need to establish new missions.”

It must be admitted that the preceding pages have a rather pessimistic tone to them. However, the apostolic flame has never gone out in America. The reports from the last five chapters show this. To give a detailed description of all the works being

⁴⁰ *Orientations oblates au Canada*. Joint Session of the O.C.C., May 23-29 mai 1977, St. Norbert. *La Conférence Oblate du Canada* was established in 1967. Since that time, it has always shown a great deal of vitality.

⁴¹ Marcello ZAGO, o.m.i., *Evolution et perspectives de la communauté oblate*. *Vie Oblate Life*, 1972, p. 79.

⁴² Fernand JETTE, o.m.i. *Problématique de la vie communautaire évangélique*. *Vie Oblate Life*, 1970, p. 13-14.

⁴³ *Au rythme de l'Eglise*, no. 7, May 25, 1970, p. 28.

⁴⁴ The central team of the general chapter of 1972, *La Communauté*, paragraph 23, p. 29-30.

accomplished is impossible within the limits of this study. I will limit myself to a random selection of certain commitments made by different provinces in America. Please excuse the bibliographical tone.

The Central Province of the United States informs us of the studies they have made of the problems encountered in South America and their reactions to these problem.⁴⁵ The Eastern Province of the United States tells us of its efforts at renewal as a province.⁴⁶ Also we can read with interest the comments of Father James FitzPatrick, o.m.i., in *On the Role a community such as the Oblates of Mary can play in evangelization in the*

USA.⁵¹ The Southern Province of the United States has published a *Mission Statement* of remarkable dynamism.⁴⁷ St. Peter's province puts itself in the context of its apostolic commitments in its report for the general chapter of 1980. As for the Saint-Joseph province, as a kind of project, in 1970, it published a *manifeste des Oblats de la province*.⁴⁸ The provincial of that same province evaluated in laudatory manner his province as an apostolic religious community.⁴⁸ The Oblate provinces of the West and the far North have undertaken some important restructuration. On numerous occasions they have studied the work of evangelization of the Amerindians and the Inuit.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *O.M.I. Documentation*, October 1984.

⁴⁶ *O.M.I. Documentation*, December 1, 1978.

⁴⁷ Mary TRAVERS, *Oblate Prison Chaplains in Texas*, 1911-1986.

⁴⁸ Henri GOUDREAU, o.m.i. *Rapport moral sur l'état de la Province en préparation du Congrès de mise en candidature pour la nomination du provincial et de son conseil*, 1984, p. 15-16.

⁴⁹ *Le rapport des évêques oblats du Nord du Canada pour la visite ad limina en 1988* gives us an excellent idea of the Oblate pastoral scene among the indigenous peoples.

As to what the present situation is and the future of the Oblates in Canada, one could usefully consult the presentations made by Fathers Edward M. MacNeil, John Mazur and Gilles Cazabon at the inter-capitular meeting of the general council with the provincials, Rome, April 3-21, 1978.

As for the provinces of the United States, an excellent article would be that of Father Maurice Laliberté prepared for the inter-capitular meeting held in Rome in 1984: *Oblate Mission — U.S. Region Part 5, The work of the Oblates*, p. 11-14⁴⁹ In *Missionnaires dans l'aujourd'hui du monde*, p. 61-65.

E160

The conclusion of this paper? It has already been stated beforehand. I refer you to two recent texts of capital importance: the *Allocution of John-Paul II to the members of the XXXI general chapter*, October 2, 1969⁵⁰ and the *Letter to the Oblates of Canada* of November 1, 1988, from the superior general.⁵¹ It is not easy to summarize these two texts; they are so rich and packed with content. They must be attentively read and meditated.

Romuald BOUCHER, o.m.i.

⁵⁷ *Mission Unity*, 198, p. 8.

⁵⁹ *Au rythme de l'Église*, v. 2, no. 4, Octobre 23, 1970, p. 23.

⁴⁹ In *O.M.I. Communiqué* November 1988, p. 10-12.

⁴⁹ In *Missionnaires dans l'aujourd'hui du monde*, p. 61-65.

⁴⁹ In *O.M.I. Communiqué* November 1988, p. 10-12.

⁵⁰ In *Missionnaires dans l'aujourd'hui du monde*, p. 61-65.

⁵¹ In *O.M.I. Communiqué* November 1988, p. 10-12.

Mission through an apostolic community - Pakistan

Part One

Introduction

If Blessed Eugene de Mazenod were to return to us today, what would he expect of us? That is the question that we as a whole Congregation are pondering at this moment; and that is why we are here today in Ottawa.

As our Founder saw it, to be a genuine Oblate two realities become urgently and necessarily inseparable and indispensable, namely, religious life and apostolic commitment.

This poses the concrete question: as an Oblate, what does it basically mean to evangelize the poor in today's world? Basically there are two things: to be capable of "hearing" the appeals of the poor of today and, secondly, to respond to these appeals as an authentic witness to Jesus Christ in their midst. This is what I am about to share with you today.

As our Pakistan MISSION VISION (PMV) statement mentions:

We realize that we have been chosen and sent to Pakistan by the Lord of History and we believe that God's Kingdom is rich in diversity and its portals open to all men and women of good will (63).

With vision and creativity, we will be steadfast in our commitment even when we foresee that we cannot have the satisfaction of immediate results (64).

Therefore, as to how Oblates are building up their apostolic community life in Pakistan depends on how far they are sensitive to the Pakistan reality. For this reason it is necessary, first of all, to place briefly before you Pakistan's geography, history, political, economic, socio-cultural and religious realities as the background to our missionary journey.

Background

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan (in Urdu: Islami-Jamuriya-e-Pakistan) came to birth as an independent state on August 14, 1947, at the time of the partition of British India, in order to create a separate homeland for India's muslims in response to the demands of Muslim nationals.⁵²

Pakistan covers a total area of 307,374 sq. miles (796,095 sq. km.) with 25% cultivated land, 6% pastureland, 4% forest land. The country comprises four traditional administrative provinces of Sind (capital: Karachi), Punjab (capital: Lahore), the North West Frontier (capital: Peshawar) and Balukhistan (capital: Quetta). The country has a developing mixed economy largely based on agriculture. The per capita income GNP for 1985 is \$380 (US).

According to the latest statistic available, there are 106.187 million people (this includes Afghan refugees and residents of Pakistan). This population will double at an annual rate of 2.7% within 24 years. A high percentage of the population, that is, 45.2% is younger than 15 years of age; 4% of the population are over 64 years of age. Life expectancy is 50 years.⁵³ Of the 106.187 million people, 98% are Muslims. Among the remaining minorities the Christians form the biggest part, comprising about 1.05% of the population.⁵⁴

The population is a complex mixture of indigenous people, belonging to different ethnic groups, having their own specific language, particular culture and traditions of folklore inheritance. The only common factor in all is Islam, more than being Pakistani. The predominant linguistic group are the Punjabis.⁵⁵ Most of our Christians, who come from the Punjabi ethnic group, inhabit mainly the Punjab province and are also scattered in small pockets throughout the country.

As an independent nation, the people of Pakistan have had in all about 33 years of martial law. There has existed a military and civil apparatus that was closely linked to the multi-nationals. There are about 45 families who own the rights to 70% to 80% of the total land of Pakistan. The last general election in November 1988 has undoubtedly restored the atmosphere of democracy, which Pakistan has experienced only intermittently for a total of not more than a decade of its forty-one years of existence.

⁵² From the time of independence in 1947 until 1971, Pakistan *de facto et de iure* consisted of two regions: West Pakistan (the present Pakistan), and East Pakistan (the present Bangladesh). In response to grave internal political problems in East Pakistan, however, an independent state of Bangladesh was proclaimed in East Pakistan in 1971.

⁵³ According to the 1981 statistics, the literacy standards of the total population: age 15 and over 25.6%; male 36%, female 15.2%.

⁵⁴ In the Asia/Oceania Region, Christians are 3% of the population and Catholics are 2%; and, if the nearly 90% Catholic Philippines were excluded, the Church would represent about 1% of Asia. Only in Asia (apart from the Philippines) is Christianity an infinitesimal fraction, a stranger in the land. Why? Practically speaking, only in Asia has the Church encountered established religions: Africa, Latin America and Oceania were largely animistic societies that presented fewer difficulties. Even in Asia most of the limited success has usually been achieved among animistic societies. Authentic Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, etc., have so literally possessed the souls of men and women and so taken root in their daily culture that any other religion is seen as foreign and as an intruder. This is all the more true of Islam, a post-Christian religion. In such a situation, we in Pakistan are truly a diaspora Church, a collection of small isolated communities dispersed throughout the length and breadth of Pakistan.

⁵⁵ Others include Pashtto 13%, Sindhi 12%, Saraki 9.8%, Urdu 7.6%, and Baluchi 3%. Urdu is the official language. Cf. "Pakistan", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1988 Year Book.

It would be difficult to speak in the singular of a culture of Pakistan because there are specific cultures of various regions of Pakistan that present a picture of rich diversity. Family organization is strongly patriarchal, as in most agrarian societies, and most people live in large extended families. A woman's place in society is low, and she is restricted to the performance of domestic chores and to fulfilling the role of a dutiful wife and mother. Rich peasants and landowners and members of the urban middle class keep their women in "seclusion" (PARDAH): on the rare occasions on which they set foot outside their houses, they must be veiled. Among poor peasants, women have duties on the farm as well as in the house and do not observe PARDAH. Among the rich, Western education and modes of living have eliminated PARDAH, but, in general, even among this group, attitudes towards women in society and family are akin to those of Victorian England.⁵⁶

Social organization revolves around kinship rather than caste. BARADAR (patrilineage) is the most important social institution. Marriage arrangements are preferably done within the BARADARI. The lineage elders constitute a council that adjudicates disputes within the lineage and acts on behalf of the lineage with the outside world, e.g. in determining electoral allegiances.

Pakistan claims a cultural heritage that dates back to more than 5000 years, to the Indus civilization. The emphasis on Islamic ideology, however, has brought about a strong romantic identification with Islamic culture - not only with that of the Indian sub-continent but with that of the Islamic world at large.

The role of Islam in contemporary Pakistan politics has been described as the process of Islamization, i.e. creating a more Islamic system of government (Nizam-i-Islam). Islam is an all-encompassing factor. Religion serves the state to the extent that we can also say that religion is the state. Politics, ideologies, educational programs, even the economical set-up are all tinged with a deep religious character. We could even say that religion has gone public.

People speak easily about God. This ease is combined with a type of religious formalism: form is essential to a Pakistani Muslim's self-image and to the sense of duty.⁵⁷

Part Two

History

⁵⁶ Change is coming about most rapidly among the urban lower middle class income group, in which women are forced to seek employment under the pressure of economic necessity; PARDAH is then cast off and the education of women is encouraged. In consequence, some women have gained distinction in a profession, e.g. our Prime Minister, Ms. Benazir Bhutto.

⁵⁷ The basic picture which portrays the mass of Muslims here is faith (IMAN) in the Word of God and submission (ISLAM) to Him. IMAN and ISLAM are the two poles of their religious life. These two poles go together and also overlap in many ways. Accordingly, some insist more on the purity and intensity of faith, while others on the religious observance of the Law. From this different emphasis arise two different ways of spirituality. Those who stress faith (IMAN) have developed a spirituality which has God for its object as transcending everything created and everything that is possible, one which we could call a *spirituality of transcendence*; for others, loving fidelity to the Law has led to a *spirituality of the Law*. Both ways include the search for God.

The Church in Pakistan is a young Church. Although there are some historical traditions that go back to the 2nd century, with some developments in the 16th and 19th centuries, the real mission work started in the second half of the 19th century. The Church as local, specifically in the case of Catholics, is only 40 years of age. The Pakistan Church is a minority Church, growing and struggling to find its identity as a Pakistani Church. The majority of Christians are poor, belong to the lower class and caste, are landless and do menial jobs; they live in poverty, misery, suffer from social discrimination and from an inferiority and minority complex.⁵⁸ They are considered as second-class citizens by the majority, for they are non-Muslims.⁵⁹ The largest portion of the Christian population (one million: four fifths of the total Christian population in the entire country), come from the Punjab and belong to that ethnic group.⁶⁰

Activities

If we try to look at the Church history of Pakistan, the activities of the young Church could be categorized into three phases according to the related happenings in the country.

Charity and almsgiving (1947-1960): In March 1947, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan stated that the future constitution of Pakistan would be Islamic, democratic and federal, and that this would enable the Muslims to lead their lives in accordance with the teaching of the QURAN and SUNNAH. As a result of this position, the minorities were considered second-class citizens. The Christian missionaries sympathized with these poor minorities. Thus charity and relief work, mostly in forms of almsgiving (food and clothing) reached the poor. This attracted the poor and occasioned many conversions or rather “entries” into the Church, and filled the baptismal registers. The poor found some good news in what the missionaries were preaching and giving out freely. It was a twofold good news: on the one hand, they received what they needed in terms of food and clothing, and, on the other hand, they received social “status” by being accepted and loved, a boon for which they had hungered and thirsted for so long. In short, though not knowing fully what it meant to be Christians, they were happy to be Christianized.

Development projects: After 1960 came the military rule of Field-Marshal Ayub Khan. He became a reformer and initiated some progressive reforms, especially in the field of agriculture and economic development; he encouraged private enterprise. The Church, too, made a shift from charity and almsgiving to focusing its funds on community development projects. Caritas Pakistan, Missio, Misereor, Catholic Relief Services and other funding agencies fostered such initiatives. There were many housing

⁵⁸ Conversions to Christianity were almost exclusively from the outcasts who were considered “untouchable” by the majority. These Christians are known and branded as KAMMI, which means any low job or the one who does it. It also means “the powerlessness and namelessness”. Though they are present in the society, they are considered as a nonentity. In the biblical term, this group of people could easily be named ANAWIM YAHWEH. The KAMMI is burdened by the YOKE OF OPPRESSION. That remains a slur, a stigma on his life even when the lowly job has been given up - Jesus, the carpenter's son!!!

⁵⁹ Islam was the cause for the Partition - India/Pakistan - and thereafter Pakistanis themselves became two classes of citizens: the Muslim and the non-Muslim. All non-Muslims were classed as DHIMMIS, i.e. “protected minority”, even though they are Pakistanis. Cf. Provincial Constitution Order, Pakistan, March 29, 1981, nos. a,b,c.

⁶⁰ There are small groups of Anglo-Indians, originally from inter-marriage between the British and the local women. The Goans are immigrants or descendants of Christians from the former Portuguese colony of Goa. Both of these groups live a life-style patterned on the Western world.

schemes, building projects, loan plans encouraging small industrial and economic projects. In the parishes, one saw all kinds of buildings going up for formal and non-formal educational purposes, for health needs and the special care that must be given to the physically handicapped, mentally retarded, and lepers.

Conscientization: In 1968 there arose a charismatic leader of the masses, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. He brought social awareness and political consciousness to the masses of the people, especially among the poor, peasants and workers, as well as among the minority. The minorities began to feel part and parcel of the nation.⁶¹ Within the Church's life, this was the time when Vatican II had been concluded and its teachings were being published and promulgated. The number of clergy and leaders in the Church increased. Many Pakistani priests were ordained, a goodly number of Pakistani joined religious Congregations and Orders, and Bishops, too, were being consecrated. By November 1984, all the bishops were Pakistanis. The Pakistani Church, too, shifted from development projects to awareness and conscientization programs, to training community leaders, forming animators and undertaking other leadership training programs. (In this regard the Oblates have been the leaven in the dough). Time does not permit me to list all the existing programs, but I must mention that in 1978 there was a Priests Renewal (PRC) which lasted one month and included Bishops and religious. This was a historical breakthrough for the local Church: all the parishes were left to lay leadership for one month.⁶²

Dialogue: Because of the overthrow of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and the emergence of the Islamization process, the Church at present feels the need to communicate and enter into dialogue with Muslims. Inter-faith dialogue groups exist and function in all big cities, though only intellectually and on a high level. This effort marks a new chapter in the history of the local Church and the understanding of "salvation" is broadening. Earlier, the Christian's faith structure - ECCLESIA - was limited to the idea of being "secure in the Upper Room" where, because one was not being treated as an equal by the Muslims (the majority), it was better to belong to "this structure" (inter-ecclesial). For the last ten years or so, however, through the help of the conscientization process, the idea of "discipleship" - witness - awareness is taking root among the Christians, and this is more than merely belonging to a structure. If we read the "signs of the times", we realize that there is a strong bent to more lay participation. In other words, the local Church is gradually moving in line with the process of de-clericalization (in the good sense), i.e. not "going away", but "going out" to reach the "other" (Pentecost, extra-ecclesial)

Part Three

Oblate missionary involvement

⁶¹ Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, chairperson of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), a secular party with a socialist program that promised bread, clothing and shelter to the poor, won the election in West Pakistan.

⁶² In 1974 Social Awareness and Leadership Training (SALT) programs were conducted under the auspices of Caritas. In 1976 there was a national seminar on ministries; and in 1981 the Catholic Bishops Conference and the Major Religious Superiors founded the National Commission for Justice and Peace.

In the history of the Congregation, we find that the Oblates, inspired by the same zeal as that of our Founder, volunteer themselves to go to very difficult areas in order to work for Christ. Thus, at the invitation of the late Bishop Benedict Cialeo, O.P., of Faisalbad (Lyallpur, in the province of Punjab), three Sri Lankan Oblates (from a country that was once a mission) arrived in Pakistan as missionaries in February 1971. They were accompanied by the then Provincial of Sri Lanka, Father Lucien Schmitt, O.M.I.¹²

After having completed four months of studies in the Urdu language, the pioneering Oblates were assigned to different parishes in the diocese: Gojra, Chak-jumra, Okara. They worked under a parish priest in a diocesan setting. Thus, when the Oblates arrived in Pakistan, their missionary dimension meant, in practice, to help the diocese fulfill its needs - to be parish priests.

Most of the Christians in the diocese were in villages, working as serfs in big fields. Their annual income is never more than \$180 (US) and they are often paid at harvest time

¹² The Sri Lanka Province opened missions in Malaysia in the 1960s, in India in 1968, Pakistan in 1971, and in Bangladesh in 1975.

in the form of food and clothing. The townspeople are street sweepers, cleaning trenches, canals and latrines. Because of this, they are considered “untouchables”. The normal work of the priest is to look after some 60 to 150 villages scattered over a wide area. Every priest has from four to five catechists to help him; this makes the work much easier. The work consists of the priest visiting the villages once or twice a year to administer the sacraments. At the main station, however, the priest conducts regular services. The catechists are in charge of about 15 villages each, which they visit regularly, instructing the people and collecting annual contributions. They are often delegated to baptize and to solemnize marriages.

While working as co-pastors, the Oblates often reflected upon and evaluated their work. They even made a few experiments to discover the weight and impact of their apostolate upon the Christians. Because of the master/serf relationship that is so deep-rooted in the people, the same servile attitude was transferred towards priests. Very often priests were assessed according to this expectation. The result is that the people have become dependent upon the priest and have lost all self-confidence. This fact is very evident in places where the priest resides. In such places the priests are considered LAMBARDARS (village headmen) who decide all disputes.

After having worked for four years in the diocese and doing what other missionaries had done, the Oblates concluded that neither the Christian faith we profess nor the missionary work we were doing was an authentic liberation to the oppressed Christians in Pakistan. The Church personnel lived up to expectations by scrounging aid from the generous West and continuing the “paternalistic” attitude towards the Christians in Pakistan. Thus, generously doling out money without having a specific aim in view actually was hindering people’s human development and spiritual growth. As St. Thomas says: “Magnanimity without justice would not even be a virtue.”⁶³

¹³ Summa Theologica, II-II, q.58, a.12, obj. 2.

In regards to the Oblates, it was Blessed de Mazenod's vision that each Oblate as an apostolic man should "preach" to the poor - the cherished portion of God's inheritance - in such a way that the poor maybe brought to "full consciousness of their dignity as human beings and sons and daughters of God" (C.8)⁶⁴

As an apostolic community, we remain open to be evangelized by the deepest needs of the people whom we serve, but at the same time, we are relentless in weeding out false hopes and needs of the people which make them more and more dependent, weaken their generosity and degrade their dignity. (PMV.78)

The Oblates felt that they had to discern the particular existing situation.⁶⁵ Four Oblates in 1974, with the consent of the Bishop of the diocese, decided to concentrate on Christian Community Development (CCD) as the primary goal of their apostolate.

This program was based on the human development philosophy popularized by Paulo Freire, which minimizes relief and social work but maximizes the self-responsibility of the people through conscientization, through reflection and action. The CCD was not initiated and solely based on the merely human developmental philosophy of Paulo Freire. This philosophy was integrated into the already existing cultural community structure - the BARADARI (patrilineage, brotherhood) system.⁶⁶ Therefore: the theory of conscientization in social development whose aim is to awaken the responsibility of the communities, based on the BARADARI system.

In the meantime, the Holy Family Sisters of Bordeaux arrived in Pakistan in 1975 as missionaries from the Sri Lanka and Anglo-Irish Provinces. These Sisters were assigned to the parishes where the Oblates were already working and, with their cooperation, CCD progressed. After a year of CCD's inception in the 266 villages belonging to the program area, there were 100 basic communities responding to the conscientization program. Time will not permit me to go into the animation structure, evaluation and responses of the people, the risks involved for these communities. But what I would like to share with this assembly is our growing conviction that, if the development of these communities is to be integral, the religious and social celebrations too have to be the responsibility of the people. Hence these communities are encouraged to celebrate the failures and successes of their liberation efforts according to their own culture.

The major target of the Oblate mission - CCD - is to conscientize people that every development, whether it be spiritual, material, educational, is self-development through a community process. By spiritual development we mean that "the religiosity of the people of Pakistan, their awareness of the presence of God in their lives and the way they accept the will of God bear witness to the fact that the kingdom of God is *among* and *within* them" (PMV.38). Thus, "our idea of evangelization" is not the traditional idea of bringing

⁶⁴ Cf. also "Instructions familiares en provençal", quoted by Herménégilde Charbonneau, O.M.I., *Mon nom est Eugene de Mazenod*, pp. 42-47.

⁶⁵ As Oblates we are convinced that authentic faith should become a liberation response. Faith as liberation embraces all fields (political, social, economical, cultural, religious) and theories of liberation; unless it is a specific response to a particular need, it remains watered-down and non-operational. On the other hand, to omit one or other aspect of the human being is to ignore the need for integral liberation in our faith response. In this dilemma, that is, to be specific and at the same time to be integral, the best solution seems to be the formation of small responsible communities.

⁶⁶ For further details about the BARADARI system, see my thesis: Clement A. Waidyasekara, *Encounter of Meanings: "Baradari" in Punjabi Culture as compared with Brotherly Love in the Gospel message*, Rome, 1988.

Christ and his Kingdom to the poor in Pakistan, but of discovering the Kingdom that is already present *in* and *among* the people. We will help them to discover Christ (C.7) (PMV.37). In terms of material and education development, we organize projects (housing, farming, adult education centres, child-care centres, sewing centres and so on) with the full participation and cooperation (money and time) of the people and stress that every help is self-help. Self-help humanizes and liberates itself, and liberation itself is a kingdom value.

By conscientizing first the “inner community” - the Oblate Delegation - it becomes a sign to the bigger community, i.e. the parish and the local Church at large. This is what we mean by being an apostolic community. In this process of missionary endeavour, the Oblates consider themselves not as “social workers” or “leaders” of the people but as ANIMATORS who promote integral growth and holistic well-being among the people.

As Oblates, we have a call to be animators. By animation, we mean to be available for service, and to be fully present to the local Church in fulfilling its hopes « and aspirations demanded by the Gospel. (PMV.49)

The Rule (R.6) reminds us and encourages us to support the local Churches in the discernment and development of their own talents and charisms, encouraging them to undertake ministries and apostolic commitments and thus to shoulder the responsibilities which are properly theirs in their local existing communities. (PMV.55)

In this form of the apostolate, the role of the missionary is twofold: instilling in the people the kingdom values taught by Christ and helping the people to organize themselves.⁶⁷

A successful working of CCD requires periodic meetings of leaders, periodic reflection and sharing, periodic evaluation of different areas of operation. These the Oblates have with their co-workers: Sisters, catechists, community leaders. Apart from this, the Oblates themselves meet locally in their respective mission stations, every two months at a regional level (both with the missionaries and formation personnel) and twice a year - February and September (annual retreat) - as a Delegation, to evaluate, reflect, study, pray, on mission, formation, administration and community.

Response

What has been the people's response? At first the people did not give it much importance, because our understanding of “service” was not in terms of relief work, but conscientization and struggle for social justice and efforts to become aware of the dignity of the human person. The biggest and the only obstacle to the formation of responsible communities had been our “paternalistic” attitude. This sort of “attitude” a good number of the local clergy and some local Bishops (who succeeded to the Western Bishops) wish to maintain. Why? Because people want the Church to give alms to them. Thus, it is a big task to change such attitudes, but as our attitudes change, people also become more and more responsible. Some further main difficulties that are encountered are: leaders are

⁶⁷ As a matter of Oblate policy, once a place is developed the Oblates move on to other remote areas to work. This we have done twice, once in Okara and again in Khanawal.

few; some lack motivation and are not able to bear responsibilities, and some, though leaders themselves, are not accepted by their own communities.

. How does the local Church view the work of the Oblates? The Oblate missionary presence has been a sign and leaven to the local Church. Due to the Oblates' special missionary approach, the diocesan major seminarians and other religious candidates are being sent regularly to the Oblate mission centres for their pastoral experience program for six months (a part of the major seminary curriculum). Once a diocesan priest remarked: "The Oblates have touched the people at the grass-root levels. They conscientize, and institutionalize less." A Bishop mentioned: "Minorities are threatened in so many ways in Pakistan, yet in the task of the minorities, Oblates are the instruments of *hope*." Father Marcello Zago, our Superior General, wrote to the Oblates after his visit to the Pakistan Delegation in December 1988:

Everywhere I went I was impressed by your *dedication to your work* in the parishes and in the houses of formation. This is the image you project in the Pakistan Church. For example, the bishops I met said that they admire your work, your

Rules. This last minute intervention saved us from the dualism and was able to integrate mission and apostolic religious life.⁶⁸

We take religious life as being at the service of the people. The purpose of religious life is to contribute to the growth of humanity. Its particular contribution to the world depends on a special charism and on the needs of the times. Religious live in the midst of the world and are rooted in Christ, bear witness to him. We develop a way of praying that is suited to the needs of the situation. "As an apostolic community we remain open to be evangelized by the deepest needs of the people whom we serve" (PMV.78). When we try to adjust the apostolate to suit the traditional prayer life, in most cases either the apostolate suffers or the dynamism of faith is deprived of its full flowering in prayer experience.

There is still too much separation between ministry and prayer. Prayer is not sufficiently nourished by missionary life, and mission is not adequately lived as a praise of God. This dualism impoverishes both prayer and ministry; for many this is a source of frustration. (1986 General Chapter, MTW.III)

There should be a close link between lifestyle and the experience of prayer. Here the locus of living theology begins, here is where life experience and the reality of faith are constantly reflected. If life is person-oriented, there is a felt need to pray and prayer life becomes person-oriented. If our communities are work-oriented, then prayer becomes an observance and we have the "heresy" of action where work is considered prayer.

In this sense prayer is apostolic, vows are apostolic. Personal sanctification is through apostolic opportunities and is in view of the apostolate. In this particular understanding of religious life, religious are within the Church, yet their apostolic witness is not simply directed to the visible Church but to the world towards which the "sign Church" is pointing. We believe that community life depends on the quality of prayer life and that the quality of prayer life depends on the quality of community life. In this way we try to avoid the dichotomy between mission and apostolic religious life.

w Cf. *ibid.*, 71-85.

Community structures are at the service of the mission. Therefore the community must adopt a program of life best suited to the apostolate, while always keeping in mind that community life and mission are not opposed to one another (cf. C. 38b; R.23).⁶⁹

Formation

I take this opportunity to share with you also how apostolic life is lived in our formation houses. From the very beginning the Oblates had in mind the idea of recruiting local vocations for the Congregation. But it was only in 1979 that we formally started our formation work with one student attending the major seminary in Karachi. Karachi was the only formation house that existed until the opening of the Oblate junior seminary in the diocese of Multan in 1986. Prior to 1986, between the years 1980 and 1986, our juniors went to the Franciscan minor seminary in Lahore, where they were under the direct care of the Franciscans. The students attended classes at the diocesan minor seminary.

Since we have not had sufficient personnel and required facilities from the beginning until now, our candidates have been going to the Mother Province of Sri Lanka for their novitiate: this after completing two years of philosophy in the major seminary of Karachi. After 15 years of missionary work in this land, the first local Oblate was ordained on December 5, 1986, and the second one on September 9, 1988. Presently we have 10 juniors and 2 scholastics.

What we envisage as our “ideal” in our formation programs both spiritual and intellectual is to fall in line with our basic vision: the service of the poor. This means that our spiritual and intellectual formation should take as a point of departure the “situation”: it must be context-oriented. This will help our candidates to know and understand what people seek and suffer in their daily lives. The process of maturing in the spiritual life - vows, prayers, human relationships and community life - must integrate apostolic experience. It is the poor who can teach us the difference between an unlimited quest for self-fulfillment and the joy of suffering for the survival of others. In this sense the vow of chastity has special relevance in terms of our preferential love and option for the poor.

We will let our lives be enriched by the poor and the marginalized as we work with them for they can make us hear in new ways the Gospel we proclaim. (R.8)

⁶⁹ Cf. Marcello Zago, “Community”, *Vie Oblate Life*, 47(1988), p. 8.

But in “reality”, what is taking place in our formation houses is that we practice the customary spiritual exercises: morning prayers, meditation, eucharist, particular examen, evening prayers and so on. We have weekly house meetings to take stock of the quality of our life in community. We try to find new ways of formation mechanics based on the context we live in. But often new models tend basically to communicate the old values in a novel way, because the vision and determining factor have not changed. The intellectual formation of our seminaries is more geared to standards set by western seminaries.⁷⁰ We have programs of periodic exposure to the outside world - which happily are becoming more and more frequent - yet formation can still preserve an elitist value system. Therefore conflict arises between the monastic type of prayer learned in the houses of formation and the needs of the apostolate in the field. There is a need to create conditions during the period of formation whereby young religious could be introduced to the experience of apostolic prayer.

The Oblates are aware that we need current issue-oriented theological thinking to help our students to integrate new forms of apostolate in their prayer life. But, here, in Pakistan we lack formation personnel. Due to this fact - lack of a team of formators in a religious house - formators are most of the time over-burdened with so many other needs which, at times, are inevitable.

Community life

Christianity is essentially a communitarian phenomenon which is called upon to incarnate in this world the Trinitarian life of God in the community of God which Jesus founded. Therefore, isolation is not an option for Christians, nor for the Oblates. Community life we do not equate with “common life” where members are held together by the ties of blood, power or wealth. Thus, we do not inculcate a paternalistic attitude towards the members of the Delegation. Religious life, with its celibate commitment, offers primary witness to the character of Christianity as “eschatological community”: this means not so much leading to the future but rather focuses on *hope*. We are together because we love inclusively and commit all the resources of our lives to extending that hope, transforming this world into the reign of God, where there will be the brotherhood of all believers. This is our ideal of apostolic community life in Pakistan.

We wish to grow as a community at the Delegation, regional and local levels. We have worked out structures for meeting and prayer: we meet locally every week, every two months at the regional level, and twice a year as a Delegation.

We take much time⁷¹ during our bi-annual meetings to evaluate, reflect on how we try to communicate at different levels (an Oblate to an Oblate, an Oblate to the outer circle: the diocese, co-workers, clergy, laity and to the local Church at large), which is important in building up our lives as an apostolic community.

⁷⁰ The major seminary of Karachi has started to re-orientate the seminary syllabus with the vision of *community as the focus and locus of our theology* and on the meaning of *God for community*; an issue-oriented theology. I, too, am a member of the core-group of four.

⁷¹ When we get together, we take much time to talk to one another informally, because we are not able to meet often as a Delegation because of our long distances. It sometimes takes a 26-hour train journey to meet the next Oblate in certain mission stations.

Because the mission is entrusted to the community, it is a community task before being a personal one (cf. R.I; C.38a).

We challenge one another and allow ourselves to be challenged to grow out of fear and lethargy. Shared prayers and dialogue and frank meetings are veritable sources for such a growth. (PMV.76)

We are a young group of Oblates (13 priests: 2 locals, and 3 Oblate Brothers). Our average age is 41.88. Thus, there is a lot of energy and vitality in the group. Every member works very actively and this causes a certain amount of slackness in community prayer life.

We do not say that our mission work has always been one hundred percent successful, for example the CCD programs. We have our drawbacks due to our differences of character, individual limitations, different outlook, different theological training, various personal needs and aspirations. These may have occasioned communication gaps, and thus at times we do not have the required full communion. Yet, so many problems, imperfections have been absorbed by the high degree of "good will" and sense of service that exist among the members of the Delegation.

As the mission grows and gains in strength, the individual Oblate, too, grows not only in age but in maturity - and there arise certain "needs" according to time and space. At times a member feels the need for a "break" or a sabbatical, a program of ongoing formation. But such ongoing formation is very much delayed due to lack of personnel and financial resources. This is detrimental both to the mission and to the individual Oblate. Every Oblate has the good will to sacrifice an ongoing formation program for the sake of the Delegation's progress. But in the process, due to unfulfilled psychological needs and lack of spiritual renewal, relationships suffer and when relationships suffer, mission too is handicapped.

The Oblate team working within the Oblate "inner circle" is very much appreciated by the "outer circle", i.e. the diocese and the local Church. Though we have many differences among ourselves, we have nevertheless given the example of a closely knit, united and friendly group.

Just as we ourselves cherish the values of our community life, we will nurture the same values among the people we serve, especially through our visible mutual support. "See how they love one another". (PMV.79)

What outsiders marvel at is the great sense of hospitality that the Oblates maintain in so many ways. Thus Oblate mission centres and houses of formation are known as "open houses". Moreover there exists in the country a tension between the religious and the diocesans - an anti-religious feeling. Thus, our houses so far have been "meeting places" for both diocesans and religious. This is an important role Oblates play in regard to relationships. This is what we mean by being an apostolic community in Pakistan. This is our missionary presence in this land.

Finally, I wish to bring to your notice that the task of contemporary religious is not to find the definitive form of community and set it in concrete for the next several hundred years, but to cherish the value of Christian community and to seek with ongoing flexibility and find appropriate ways of achieving it in ever changing situations.

Part Four

The future vision

Though the Oblates in Pakistan were actively engaged in their work, time and again they kept on evaluating the meaning and depth of their missionary presence in Pakistan.

In February 1984, during the bi-annual meeting, the Oblates prayed, deeply studied, reflected, evaluated their “present vision” of their ministry in Pakistan. To facilitate the session, some Oblates themselves gave talks (input) on various topics concerning “missionary involvements”. During the process of study and reflection, the Oblates came to an awareness that the much appreciated CCD is no longer as active as it was meant to be at its inception. Those missionaries who initiated CCD had a definite vision which was carried into effect through CCD programs. But, as time went on, the arrival of fresh missionaries, most of whom came immediately after their ordination in Sri Lanka (with different theological outlooks, different formation background, and also a lack of missionary experiences), the continuity of the CCD did not take place and, as a result, the missionaries went back to the old parish setup, vaguely retaining the CCD in the back of their minds.

This awareness created an urgency, as an apostolic community, to rethink, revitalize our missionary charism - “*Evangelizare pauperibus misit me*” - in the light of the particular historical and cultural context in Pakistan. As a result, after much study, reflection and also prayer, both individual and collective and prolonged, the Oblates of the Pakistan Delegation issued a MISSION VISION statement on February 17, 1988. Let me place before you the basic thrust of the statement:

WE, THE MISSIONARY OBLATES OF MARY IMMACULATE IN PAKISTAN, ARE CALLED TO PARTICIPATE IN GOD'S PLAN, BY CONTINUING THE MISSION OF JESUS CHRIST. WE DO THIS BY ASSISTING THE POOR TO DISCOVER THE KINGDOM AMONG THEMSELVES AND THUS WE ANIMATE THE LOCAL CHURCH. INSPIRED BY THE ZEAL OF OUR FOUNDER, BLESSED EUGENE DE MAZENOD, WE SPARE NO EFFORTS IN SEARCHING FOR AND SERVING THE DEEPEST NEEDS OF THE PAKISTAN CHURCH. AS AN APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY, WE ARE SELF-EVANGELIZING WHILE WE BRING AND BECOME THE GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR. TO DO THIS, WE ACCEPT THE NECESSITY OF BEING INCULTURATED, MEN OF PRAYER, HOSPITABLE AND OPEN TO DIALOGUE. WE CHOOSE TO LIVE AND WORK AMONG THOSE WHO ARE ABANDONED IN NEGLECTED AREAS. BASED ON OUR EXPERIENCE AND STUDY, WE OPT FOR NURTURING OF BASIC CULTURAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES AS A PRIORITY DURING THE NEXT FIVE YEARS. WE ALSO AIM TO PROMOTE MANDATED LEADERS SUCH AS LOCAL OBLATES, PRIESTS, RELIGIOUS AND LAY MINISTERS.

Our basic priority is to nurture Basic Cultural Christian Communities.⁷² To achieve this, two aspects have to be taken into serious consideration, i.e. culture and inter-faith dialogue. The basic issue the local Church of Pakistan is working on is to bring about the interrelationship between faith and culture. Certainly, one of the aspects in mission involves respect for the culture and looking for expressions of God in that culture. In our situation, to respect culture equally means respecting the other faiths, because in Asian cultures in general, religion and culture are closely inter-mingled. To find out where culture ends and religion begins is almost an impossible task. Therefore, to find expressions of God in culture also means, at the same time, having inter-faith dialogue, which ultimately leads to the brotherhood of all believers.

Therefore, in order to achieve this task of nurturing Basic Cultural Christian Communities, our starting point should be to discern particular situations and to respect the cultural sensibility of the people; instead of serving them according to our preconceived ideas, we should be humble enough to learn from them, which is an important aspect in our endeavour for inculturation and a way of respecting them (PMV.43).

At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, she should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which men/women ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other. We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and often dramatic features of the world in which we live. (GS.4)

It is the people who will teach us the meaning of solidarity, it is they who will also show us what to do to help them help themselves.

Conclusion

Pakistan is a country in South Asia and Asia's seventh largest country. The authenticity or the integral development of the Pakistan local Church as a community of faith depends on the depth of her integration with the Asian reality or "Asian consciousness". To meet person-in-situation means being sensitive to Asian realities such as:

- the pluralism of faith
- the socio-economic problems
- rich cultural elements and values of Asian traditions.

⁷² **Basic:** We opt for basic groups because a well-established basic group could be a living witness to the first Christian communities. These basic groups could be initial groups which by their exemplary lives initiate and conscientize others around them (PMV. 111).

Cultural: We call them cultural groups because, while being Christians in Pakistan, they should be deeply rooted in their own cultures (PMV. 112).

Christian: We make it a point to recognize the Pakistani culture and BARADARI system, where we find Christian values prevailing make every effort to make ourselves aware of these values and to maintain them in Christian communities with special fervor (PMV. 113).

Five years: This period seems neither too long nor too short as our contracts with the Bishops are made for five years at a time. Therefore, once the contract ends, we can evaluate our apostolate and future priorities can be chosen (PMV. 114).

On the other hand the Oblates, too, are not working as an isolated group in Pakistan. They belong to the internationality of the Congregation as well as more particularly to their Asia/Oceania Region. We enrich our missionary presence here in Pakistan by being closely united to "Oblate consciousness" in our Asia/Oceania Region. The present Oblate reality in the Region is clearly spelled out in the more recently concluded Asia/Oceania Regional Conference held in Bangalore, India, February 13-17, 1989. I wish to place before you the Oblate regional consciousness, spelled out in the Assembly's statements:

a) to clarify and deepen our understanding of inculturation in the context of our option for the poor.

b) to become rooted in our religious and cultural traditions.

c) to meet people of other religious and cultural traditions.

d) to be aware in all this of the impact of modernity and secularization.

e) to draw out and carry out the practical implementations of inculturation understood as "in-religionization" for initial and ongoing formation.⁷³

Finally, what is evident in the reading the "signs" is that the local Church in Pakistan has to reconstruct her christologies, ecclesiologies and missiologies through a process of dialogue with the political, social, cultural, economic, religious needs and demands of the country. Dialogue has always been one of the main stimuli for theology. By dialogue we do not mean to create better conditions for the Christians in Pakistan as a minority, but rather to move from the idea of minority Church and enter more deeply into God's mystery and discover the Kingdom at work. Lastly, in this country - the Islamic Republic of Pakistan - it is the Muslim who will teach us what it means to be Christian.

Clement WAIDYASEKARA, o.m.i.

⁷³ Cf. also "Plenary Session of the General Council: Bangalore", *OMI Communiqué*, no. 49/89, March 1989.

Mission through an Apostolic Community:

A Case study of Fr. Joseph Gerard

Introduction

In Maritzburg, your former house is now occupied by the nuns. Each time I enter there I am full of some holy respect; I recall the privilege of enjoying your guidance. These are the walls which I built with love. There was holy silence and the Holy Rules inspired us and directed us everywhere in this holy house.⁷⁴

These words of Fr. Gerard addressed to Bishop Allard in 1876 give us in a nutshell Fr. Gerard's entire attitude and appreciation of an apostolic community. However, I have no intention of letting this quotation take the place of my talk. I have chosen as my task to trace from its early stages his relationship to community life. Also, in accord with the theme of this Congress, I will examine how apostolic community, or the lack of it, influenced his mission.

The early beginnings

It is evident that Fr. Gerard had the above-mentioned dispositions towards community life quite early in his life. His own home village community left a deep impression on him as Gerard O'Hara quite correctly points out, quoting the following words of Fr. Gerard; "And, I very clearly remember the fine men of Bouxières, our fathers, our uncles, and those other sturdy relatives who searched the woods to get timber for our altars in the streets. I have not forgotten a thing, you see, and I always think of my dear village."⁷⁵

Later, in the minor seminary, the young Gerard seemed to gravitate naturally toward teamwork. For example, when they formed a group to inform themselves about foreign missions, he chose to be a part of that group. Remembering those days, Fr. Gerard speaks of the minor seminary as "that dear sanctuary of my youth where I had saints as formators, where I associated with colleagues in my studies who were models of virtue."⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Joseph Gerard to Mgr. J.F. Allard, April 10, 1876.

⁷⁵ G. O'Hara, o.m.i.. Father Joseph Gerard, Mariannhill, 1988. p. 10.

⁷⁶ Aime Roche, *Clariés Australes*, Lyon, éditions Chalet, 1951, p. 51.

While the young Gerard was at the noviciate, his Novice Master spoke of him as a perfect “model of the noviciate, always happy and ready to serve his confreres.”⁷⁷

If we take all these things into consideration — and especially the quotation given at the beginning of this paper — we could say that right from the time of his minor seminary and on throughout his training, Fr. Gerard saw those around him as people from whom to draw inspiration. For him, Fathers Dassy and Barret and Bishop Allard all constituted, as it were, an edifice built with love. With typical Gerard humility he made no mention of his own contribution in this regard.

Community instrumental to mission

A person who, no doubt, played a major role in Fr. Gerard’s understanding and appreciation of community life was Bishop Allard. Community life was one of the Bishop’s great concerns. A report sent from Canada by the then Father Allard drew this remark from the Founder:

“What Father Allard tells me about the Red River leaves me no choice but to be alarmed. Our two Fathers, he tells me, are going to be separated for a year. ... I cannot consent that our Fathers go alone into any kind of mission. Any kind of good (envisaged) should be dependent on that (policy). Explain this, I beg you, to their Lordships the Bishops and take this to be the rule of your administration.”⁷⁸

Hardly had Bishop Allard arrived in Natal that he took community life to be “the rule of his administration.”⁷⁹ He was so intent on community that in the beginning, he even resisted the petitions for a priest addressed to him by the Catholics of Durban.

The community at St. Michael’s seemed to know no boundaries. Fidelity to the community exercises was not restricted to the residence there. When two or more were gathered, they felt it constituted sufficient reason to practice community life. Whether in a hut provided for the missionaries by a Zulu host during their travels or camping somewhere in the open, they would continue their spiritual exercises.

In spite of the shortage of personnel, Bishop Allard succeeded in establishing apostolic communities both at St. Michael’s and at “Motse oa ‘M’a Jesu.” Both in Natal and Lesotho, Fr. Gerard was the one most closely associated with Bishop Allard as the leader of these communities.

From the very beginning, their motivation for community came from two sources: the community was considered a must because of the Rule and the community had also to be instrumental to mission. Hence it is that great emphasis was laid on the observance of poverty. Again and again Fr. Gerard mentions how the exercises of the community, especially the retreat, helped him to improve his methods of evangelization.

It did not take long for Fr. Gerard to realize the necessity of forming accessory apostolic communities among the laity. Unfortunately, at St. Michael’s, the idea of

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

⁷⁸ Yenneux, I, 125. Quoted in “Selected Texts Related to the O.M.I. Constitutions and Rules,” No. 307, pp. 360-361.

⁷⁹ Yenneux, I, 125. Quoted in “Selected Texts Related to the O.M.I. Constitutions and Rules,” No. 307, pp. 360-361.

incorporating black men from Mozambique into the community did not last for long. In Lesotho, on the other hand, the community of some of his promising neophytes was certainly responsible for a number of conversions and the defense of the Catholic faith.

It has already been pointed out that the community was characterized by two things: it acted as an oasis and as a cocoon. Wittingly or unwittingly, living in community was regarded as a protection from the dangers of the environment and life-style of the people who were being evangelized.

Of course, not all members agreed with this attitude. At one stage, Fr. Sabon considered this precaution blown out of proportion to the detriment of the mission. He says:

"I know that for such a mission one should have great virtue; I know that a priest living among men and women who are almost entirely nude cannot but be exposed; but ultimately, we either want their conversion or not. In the first instance, we ought to take drastic measures and the sooner the better, otherwise we are liable to spend entire years fooling ourselves in wasting time and in being good for nothing."⁸⁰

It is important to note that, because mission was given priority, the tendency to avail themselves of community as a refuge from "the evil world" did not last long. Frs. Gerard and Barret were immediately exposed to this danger in order to prepare them for the mission.

On the other hand, when I speak of community as an oasis, I am referring to the fact that the community was rightly judged as being a source of reinforcement. This it fulfilled in two ways: first, by means of the observance of the rule, which was and remained the sole guarantee of such replenishment; and secondly, by mutual trust, sharing, respect and love among the individuals of the community.

I have already pointed out that Fr. Gerard respected and loved the members of the community. All the same, without being repetitive, I think it is worthwhile to quote two examples: Fr. Barret, his first companion in the difficult mission of St. Michael's, was to remain always close to his heart. In Lesotho, Fr. Gerard worked in close association with Fr. Hidien, making sure that his companion was given ample space to use his talents for the benefit of the mission.

Nec plus ultra

If there is any person who believed in Thomas Aquinas' principle which states that no one can give that which he or she does not have, it was Fr. Gerard. Actually, in his case, it was not just a matter of enriching himself only for the sake of the mission. His goal was seen in the light of the Constitutions and Rules' exhortation: "to reach the very summit of perfection."

As a leader of the apostolic community, this could only have positive results for both the community and the mission. Fr. Gerard offered a constant challenge to the

⁸⁰ J.B. Sabon to F.P. Tempier, April 12, 1852. See also. Z.J. Skhakhane, O.M.I., "The Catholic Pioneer Attempt to Evangelize the Zulu," Manuscript, Rome, 1974, p. 113.

community and his Christians. Perhaps the unfortunate thing is that, at the time, the organization and practice of community life made little allowance for the members to share their lived faith and prayer life. More often than not, they shared only with each other their individual identity, spiritual exercises and brotherly love.

In the long run, the end result of this style of community life was that teamwork was not fostered, but rather the members looked to the leader to take initiative. Where there was disagreement between the leadership and the rest of the community, or between the leadership and a single member's view, efforts to establish a dialogue were minimal. The emphasis was placed on following the orders of the leadership. At one time, this even posed a threat to the mission itself.

It is common practice for any person involved in a task to review and reassess the methods used and the progress made. Fr. Gerard applied this to himself and his work. He would constantly ask himself if his methods did achieve the one and only important thing for him, namely, a better understanding of what the Catholic faith involved in the day to day life of his Christians.

He discovered that two things were important: 1) proper and thorough instruction, 2) using language which was down-to-earth.

Here are two of his famous expressions in regard to these two points:

Evidently, the language of charity is more convincing than words of the mouth. We are always ready to give them medicaments for their ailments. That goes straight to the heart.⁸¹

And he goes on to say:

I am more enlightened regarding the importance and the necessity to instruct in a sound way which is not superficial. Having given way to devotion, I did not insist on doctrine, taking it for granted that they knew it. I was deceiving myself. ... We should not treat this (matter) lightly, but explain thoroughly, slowly, the doctrine of the catechism, turn it over in various ways and have them repeat afterwards so as to make sure they have really understood.⁸²

He certainly could not have done better.

In retrospect

Although it was possible to create an apostolic community in the initial stages, it did not take long before the demands of mission and the shortage of personnel put limitations on apostolic communities. To date, this seems to be the case. It is unfortunate that, to a large extent, it seems difficult to remedy the situation.

Nevertheless, one ought to acknowledge the fact that improvement of the means of communication are, to a certain extent, a saving factor. There are, all the same, some cases where, with a little bit of goodwill and effort, it would have been possible to establish apostolic communities, especially in areas where the faithful are within easy

⁸¹ "The Diary of Father Gerard at Roma Mission," March 29, 1865, Manuscript, Roma (Lesotho), 1978, p. 24.

⁸² Ibid., July 1867, p. 59.

reach. I am inclined to think that in such cases what is involved is not only the success of the mission, but also a better use of the personnel.

What could be more challenging to us to revive the apostolic community than the directives of the 31st General Chapter which states 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.”⁸³

I have indicated that, even during the time of Fr. Gerard, there were certain obstacles to community life resulting from individual differences. It seems to me, however, that by now we ought to have learned from past experiences. As an African, I find it regrettable that, coming from a background of a community that practices communal life, we, who by profession have committed ourselves to community life, have up to now been unable to create strong community cells.

So F. Gerard does indeed present us with a serious challenge.

In the context of the mission in South Africa, there is one other aspect in which Fr. Gerard is a model of mission activity. We find ourselves in a situation where indeed, as Fr. Gerard said, there is need of a good catechesis. As he said, this matter should not be taken lightly — all the more so because the present generation lacks the privilege of Catholic schools and is, in fact, going through a crisis in education. It is also my conviction that the success of Fr. Gerard’s mission was not only due to the apostolic community, but also to the human touch that was characteristic of his mission. That too speaks strongly to the present social crisis in Southern Africa.

Jerome Z. SKHAKHANE, o.m.i.

⁸³ *Missionaries in Today's World*, No. 109.

The Association for Oblate Studies and Research - present status, internal matters and practical resolutions

Proposal to Amend the 1982 AOSR Charter

On behalf of the Executive Committee, AOSR Secretary Father Aloysius Kedl made the following presentation concerning the AOSR Charter and the need for amending the same:

The present AOSR Charter was drawn up and voted at the 1982 Congress on “The Oblates and Evangelization” held in Rome. It was subsequently approved by the General Council in its plenary session held in Catobato, Philippines, Nov. 21-Dec. 10, 1982.

The Executive’s experience of working with and within the Charter as it now stands suggests that it might be best to amend certain parts of it. According to the present Charter, “a general congress of the membership” is empowered to amend the Charter. The 1989 Ottawa Convention qualifies as such a “general congress”. The parts of the Charter that may need to be amended are:

1. Membership

After the Convention has discussed the matters regarding membership it may be necessary to amend this section of the Charter.

2. Executive Committee:

a. Number of members

The present Charter provides for a President, a Secretary-Treasurer, and three members (an Executive Committee of 5). In view of the fact that it is not always easy to arrange a time when so many people can meet, that the AOSR membership is not all that large, that the travel expenses for Executive meetings (the present Charter asks for one per year) are considerable, **would two members not be sufficient?**

b. *Term of office*

At present, the Executive Committee is elected for a three-year term. This has been found to be unrealistic: AOSR history since 1983, which records several recourses to the General Council because of this. **Would it not be better to elect the Executive Committee at each AOSR membership convention, and provide that there be such a convention once every 5 to 7 years?**

c. *Replacement of Oblates in the Executive Committee*

At present, the only way in which an Oblate who is part of the Executive Committee can be replaced is by elections. Elections take place either at AOSR membership conventions or by mail: the former are costly and need the approval of the Superior General in Council, and the latter method means lots of work, postal expenses and is a drawn-out process. AOSR history to date records the following. The AOSR and its charter were approved by the General Council in its No. 21 - Dec. 10, 1982 plenary session. Father Paul Sion, elected first AOSR President the previous September at the 1982 Congress which had founded the AOSR, written its Charter and elected its first Executive, died on March 19, 1983. At that time, the AOSR membership itself was not yet definite and so elections even by mail were not possible. The AOSR Executive therefore had recourse to the Superior General and his Council, and the latter on June 4, 1983, appointed Father Robrecht Boudens, already an elected Executive member, to the position of AOSR President; and on June 10, 1983, the Superior General in Council appointed Father Clarence Menard to assume the Executive member position vacated by the promotion of Father Boudens. After Father Gilles Cazabon, another 1982 elected member of the AOSR Executive, became Vicar General at the 1986 General Chapter, the Superior General in Council appointed Father Joseph Blatz to succeed him as a member of the AOSR Executive. On July 4, 1988, Father Blatz formally resigned both from the AOSR Executive and from the AOSR membership. Since this was only about 1 year prior to the 1989 AOSR membership Convention, no effort was made to have the vacancy on the Executive Committee filled. In view of all this, would it not be better to add to the Charter the following: **“Should an Oblate belonging to the AOSR Executive Committee need to be replaced prior to the holding of the next AOSR membership convention, the AOSR Executive Committee itself will recruit a suitable replacement from among the AOSR members.”?**

d. *Frequency of Executive Committee meetings*

At present, the Charter provides that the Executive Committee should meet at least once a year. If there is nothing exceptional (v.g. preparing for a membership Convention) and communications between the Executive members is normal, there may be no special need to meet annually. Would it not be better to have the Charter say: **“The Executive Committee will meet when it deems it necessary or useful for promoting the AOSR’s purposes.”?**

Draft of an Amended Charter

An “ad hoc” committee, consisting of Fathers James FitzPatrick, Francis George and William Woestman, was mandated to study the above proposals and to draw up a draft amended Charter which the plenary assembly could debate, amend, and vote. The committee presented the following draft of the amended Charter:

Draft amended charter

1. Name

The official name of this Association is: *Association for Oblate Studies and Research*.

2. Nature and purpose

The Association for Oblates Studies and Research is a free association of Oblates actively interested in undertaking, promoting and coordinating research, study and exchange on the history, spirituality, mission and present life of the Congregation of the Missionary Oblate*s of Mary Immaculate.

3. Activities

3.1 The Association will promote:

- a) projects of study and research;
- b) the publication/translation of relevant materials;
- c) the organization and upkeep of Oblate archives;
- d) meetings furthering its aims.

3.2 A General Meeting of the Association will be held every three to five years.

4. Membership

4.1 Membership of the Association is open to all professed Oblates of the Congregation. To qualify for membership the following conditions must be fulfilled:

- a) serious interest and activity in the purpose of the Association;
- b) approval of membership by the Oblate’s major superior;
- c) acceptance of application for membership by the Executive Committee of the Association.

4.2 Associate membership in the Association is open to non-Oblates. To qualify for associate membership the following conditions must be fulfilled:

- a) serious interest and activity in the purpose of the Association;
- b) approval by an Oblate major superior;
- c) acceptance of application for membership by the Executive Committee of the Association.

Association members are not eligible to be members of the Executive Committee, nor may they vote.

4.3 All members are asked to submit to the Executive Committee annually a report of their activities relating to the nature and purpose of the Association.

5. Executive committee

5.1 The Association of Oblate Studies and Research has an Executive Committee consisting of a President, Secretary-Treasurer and two other members.

5.2 The Executive Committee is elected by a relative majority of votes cast at a General Meeting of the Association. Their term of office continues until the next General Meeting, and they are eligible for reelection.

5.3 The Executive Committee should be convened as required -usually once a year.

5.4 Replacement of members of the Executive Committee will be made by its remaining members.

5.5 The Executive Committee is competent to determine the job-description of each of its members.

5.6 The Executive Committee will make an annual report of its activities to the Superior General and to the members of the Association.

6. Relationship to the Superior General

The approval of the Superior General is required for:

- a) the Charter of the Association and proposed amendments to it;
- b) convocation of General Meetings of the Association's membership.

7. Finances

7.1 The Association for Oblate Studies and Research is responsible for its ordinary expenses.

7.2 The Executive Committee may seek funds from:

- a) foundations and donor agencies within and outside the Congregation;
- b) Individual and corporate donors;
- c) Oblate provinces, with the permission of the Superior General.

7.3 A financial statement will be part of the Annual Report for the Superior General and members.

8. Amending the charter

This Charter, approved by the Superior General in Council, may be amended at a General Meeting of the Association. A simple majority of the votes cast is required.

The committee explained that it had tried to keep as much of the 1982 Charter as possible; that it sees its draft as clear, workable, flexible, including what was necessary and omitting details that could only hinder the AOSR's functioning.

The Amended Charter

After discussion and amending in plenary assembly, the Convention unanimously accepted the following as the AOSR's new or amended Charter:

1. Name

The official name of this Association is: **Association for Oblate Studies and Research.**

2. Nature and purpose

The Association for Oblates Studies and Research is a free association of Oblates actively interested in undertaking, promoting and coordinating research, study and exchange on the history, spirituality, mission and present life of the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

3. Activities

3.1 The Association will promote:

- a) projects of study and research;
- b) the publication/translation of relevant materials;
- c) the organization and upkeep of Oblate archives;
- d) meetings furthering its aims.

3.2 A General Meeting of the Association will be held every three to five years.

4. Membership

4.1 Membership of the Association is open to all professed Oblates of the Congregation. To qualify for membership the following conditions must be fulfilled:

- a) serious interest and activity in the purpose of the Association;
- b) approval of membership by the Oblate's major superior;
- c) acceptance of application for membership by the Executive Committee of the Association.

4.2 All members are asked to submit to the Executive Committee annually a report of their activities relating to the nature and purpose of the Association.

5. Executive Committee

5.1 The Association of Oblate Studies and Research has an Executive Committee consisting of a President, Secretary-Treasurer and two other members.

5.2 The Executive Committee is elected by a relative majority of votes cast at a General Meeting of the Association. Their term of office continues until the next General Meeting, and they are eligible for reelection.

5.3 The Executive Committee should be convened as required -usually once a year.

5.4 Replacement of members of the Executive Committee will be made by its remaining members.

5.5 The Executive Committee is competent to determine the job-description of each of its members.

5.6 The Executive Committee may invite non-members to participate in the work of the Association, and to attend General Meetings of the Association.

5.7 The Executive Committee will make an annual report of the activities of the Association to the Superior General and to the members of the Association.

6. Relationship to the Superior General

The approval of the Superior General is required for:

- a) the Charter of the Association and proposed amendments to it;
- b) convocation of General Meetings of the Association's membership.

7. Finances

7.1 The Association for Oblate Studies and Research is responsible for its ordinary expenses.

7.2 The Executive Committee may seek funds from:

- a) foundations and donor agencies within and outside the Congregation;
- b) Individual and corporate donors;

7.3 A financial statement will be part of the Annual Report for the Superior General and members.

8. Amending the Charter

This Charter, approved by the Superior General in Council, may be amended at a General Meeting of the Association. A simple majority of the votes cast is required.

Note: The Superior General in Council approved the above amended Charter during the plenary session of May-June 1990.

The AOSR Membership

On behalf of the AOSR Executive Committee, AOSR Secretary Father Aloysius Kedl presented the following concerning the AOSR membership:

At present, the following 77 Oblates are AOSR members:

BEAUDOIN Yvon
BISSETT Anthony
BOUCHER Romuald
BOUDENS Robrecht

GENERAL HOUSE
ANGLO-IRISH
ST. JOSEPH
BELGIQUE-NORD

BRADY John Eugene
 BYRNE Paul
 CAROLAN Edward
 CASSIDY Thomas Michael
 CAZABON Gilles
 CHAMPAGNE Claude
 CHARBONNEAU Herménégilde
 CHOQUE Charles
 CIARDI Fabio
 CONCARDI Mauro
 COOPER Austin
 COTE Richard
 D'ADDIO Angelo
 DA ROS Luigi
 DE JESUS Benjamin D
 DEEGAN James D
 DENNY Vincent
 DOYON Bernard
 DROUART Jean
 FAUTRAY Leon
 FAVERO Bruno
 FERNANDO Edmund Joseph
 FERRAGNE Rene
 FERRARA Niccola
 FITZPATRICK James
 GAUDREAU Guy
 GEORGE Francis E
 HALL Anthony
 HARRER Ronald R
 HAYERS Thomas
 HUGUES Donald
 HUGUES Michael
 IWELE KOUBETE Gode
 JETTE Fernand
 KEDL Aloysius
 KELLY Richard
 KING Arthur
 KRASENBRINK Josef
 KUREK Antoni
 LABAGLAY Frederico P
 LALONDE Albert
 LASCELLES Thomas A
 LAWRENCE Joseph Claude
 LEVASSEUR Donat
 LUBOWICKI Kasimierz
 MAIROT Francois
 MARIYANAYAGAM Rayappu
 MENARD Clarence C

TRANSVAAL
 ANGLO-IRISH
 GENERAL HOUSE
 ST. PETER'S
 GENERAL HOUSE
 ST. JOSEPH
 ST. JOSEPH
 HUDSON BAY
 ITALY
 ITALY
 AUSTRALIA
 ST. JOHN BAPT
 ITALY
 ZAIRE
 PHILIPPINES
 CENTRAL
 ANGLO-IRISH
 SOUTHERN
 GENERAL HOUSE
 BELGIQUE-SUD
 ITALY
 SRI LANKA
 CHILE
 GENERAL HOUSE
 GENERAL HOUSE
 LESOTHO
 CENTRAL
 ST. PETER'S
 CENTRAL
 CENTRAL
 AUSTRALIA
 ANGLO-IRISH
 ZAIRE
 ST. JOSEPH
 GENERAL HOUSE
 ST. PETER'S
 EASTERN
 GERMANY
 POLAND
 PHILIPPINES
 GENERAL HOUSE
 ST. PAUL'S
 SRI LANKA
 ST. JOSEPH
 POLAND
 LESOTHO
 SKI LANKA
 ST. JOHN BAPT

MOOSBRUGGER Robert	CENTRAL
MOTTE Rene	GENERAL HOUSE
McMAHON Maurice	GRANDIN
NEMECK Francis Kelly	SOUTHERN
PAVILUPILLAI Mariampillai	JAFFNA
PEPIN Lucien	N.D. DU ROSAIRE
PHILIPPE Victor	GRANDIN
PIELORZ Jozef	FRANCE-BENELUX
PILLAR James	CENTRAL
RATNASEKARA Leopold	SRI LANKA
REARDON Robert Francis	SAO PAULO
SANTOLINI Giovanni	ZAIRE
SKHAKHANE Jerome	LESOTHO
STEFFANUS Adophe	FRANCE EST
SULLIVAN Jaime	SAO PAULO
TACHE Alexandre	ST. JOSEPH
TARDIF Luc	ST. JOSEPH
WAIDKYASEKARA Clement	PAKISTAN
WALROSZ Wladislaw	GENERAL HOUSE
WATSON William W	SOUTHERN
WOESTMANN William H.	ST. JOSEPH
WRIGHT Robert	SOUTHERN
ZAGO Marcello	GENERAL HOUSE
ZIMMER Ronald	ST. MARY'S
PLOMPEN, Cor	HOLLAND

The present membership consists of Oblates

- who had participated in the 1982 Congress on the Oblates and Evangelization - which Congress founded the AOSR - and afterwards joined the AOSR;
- who were invited to join by the AOSR Executive after the latter had consulted all the Major Superiors of the Congregation;
- who have on their own initiative joined since.

The issue of AOSR membership poses a number of questions that should be considered in Convention: this in order to assure a better and more active Association. It should be noted that Oblates who are NOT members have, in fact, contributed most usefully to the AOSR's work-projects and also to the study theme of this Convention. Indeed, some of these valuable contributors have explicitly stated that they are willing to contribute to the purpose of the AOSR but do not wish to be members.

Hence, in considering the questions concerning AOSR membership, we should make the distinction between AOSR members and those (Oblates or non-Oblates) who contribute to AOSR purposes and projects.

Experience has shown that furthering the AOSR aims and objectives is not directly proportionate to and dependent on the quantity of its membership. Furthermore, the larger the membership, the more work there is for the AOSR Executive and the costs for communications rise: v.g. if an item has to be mailed out to 50 or to a 100 does make a difference in terms of work, costs of photocopying (or printing) and mailing - and the costs are the same for a member who is truly active and one who is not. Likewise, a given Province with several members is not necessarily in a position to pay the travel and living expenses of all these members for future AOSR Conventions.

Nor should membership in the AOSR be related to the factor of "representativity". Unlike General Chapters and other structures like the General Finance Committee, General Formation Committee and the like, the AOSR is a professional study and reflection entity, not a governmental or an administratively consultative body. There is thus no need *per se* that all Provinces/Delegations/Missions or Oblate Regions have a proportionate representation in the AOSR membership. There are Provinces which may have several Oblates who are well-qualified for AOSR membership, and all may wish to join the AOSR; and there are other administrative units which may not have such an Oblate at all and thus have no one on the AOSR membership: this is a quite normal feature of the diversity that exists across the Congregation.

Hence, the question: **Should we limit AOSR membership, or not? And, if we do, according to what principles?**

The AOSR wants a membership that is active in furthering the purposes of the AOSR: Oblates are AOSR members in order to contribute and not simply "to learn and to receive". When we think of how AOSR members can be active, contributing members, we have to consider both the AOSR work-projects and the aims and objectives of the AOSR as such: these latter are broader than the former. Thus, v.g., it would be quite unfair to assess a member's "productivity" by simply verifying whether or not he has written some articles for the Oblate "lexicon" and "dictionary"; it is quite possible that a member who has himself not written an article is active in other ways, such as organizing archives, locating sources, finding authors for articles, drawing up lists of names and places which should have articles in the "lexicon", etc.

Since the AOSR is really quite new and needs to acquire an initial experience - and this holds true also for the AOSR Executive and the Directors of the two AOSR work-projects - some of the apparent "inactivity" among some of the present AOSR membership is definitively due to the fact that so many members were not asked to do anything or were themselves at a loss as to what they could possibly do. The AOSR files contain a few letters in this sense. Hence we need to draw up **a list of concrete activities by which AOSR members can further the aims and objectives of the AOSR and contribute to the AOSR work-projects.**

Regarding acceptance procedures, the present procedure is quite simple. An Oblate who wishes to be a member requests a membership application form from the AOSR

Secretary. He obtains authorization from his Major Superior to join the AOSR, then fills out the form, and sends it to the AOSR Secretary. The latter then informs the AOSR President who writes the applicant a letter welcoming him into the AOSR. As one can see, acceptance is pretty well “automatic” upon application: the only concrete “restraining” element is the Major Superior’s authorization. Hence, the question: **Is this procedure sufficient? Or should we have a procedure which provides for some “discernment” on the part of the AOSR itself? If the latter, what should such a procedure be?**

As result of the exchange in the plenary assembly, it was decided that:

1. The present acceptance procedures, as formulated in the AOSR Charter, were quite adequate and are to be followed by the Executive Committee when an Oblate applies for AOSR membership.
2. The Executive Committee should draw up a concrete list of activities through which AOSR members can further the aims and objectives of the AOSR.
3. Each AOSR member is to submit to the Executive Committee an annual report of his activities as an AOSR member.

The AOSR Finances

AOSR Treasurer Father Aloysius Kedl reported as follows to the plenary assembly:

1. Since its official existence (December 1982), the AOSR has received but one monetary gift, \$100.00 contributed by AOSR member Father Thomas Cassidy. All other financial needs of the AOSR have been covered by the General Administration.
2. The AOSR expenses are of the following kind:
 - a) *Executive Committee:*
 - Travel for meetings (to date held at the General House where room and board was given free).
 - Communications (by mail and occasional phone calls).
 - b) *Work Projects:*
 - Copious correspondence.
 - Printing.
 - Distribution of printed items.

N.B. As the work-projects advance, the printing and distribution costs will now continue to rise.

c) *Conventions:*

- The Provinces/Delegations pay the travel, room and board expenses of AOSR members who attend an AOSR Convention.
- The General Administration, however, pays the same expenses for the AOSR Executive Committee members and for the Oblates (AOSR members and others) who have prepared a requested conference-paper for the Convention theme.
- All other Convention expenses (translation, printing and distribution of documents, meeting facilities, photocopying, file folders, paper, pens, etc., correspondence) are being paid for by the General Administration.

3. *The AOSR may not be able to finance all of its needs for some time to come; nevertheless, it should try to find some moneys so that it is less of a burden to the General Administration. Have you any concrete suggestions as to how it could do so?*

The Convention encouraged AOSR members to search for funds and also asked that all AOSR members pay regular membership dues. The amount and frequency of these dues is not fixed and the same for each AOSR member, but it is to be determined according to the concrete possibility of the Oblate Provinces/Delegations concerned. The Executive Committee is to work out the concrete modalities and then communicate the same to all AOSR members.

The AOSR Work Projects

Father Robrecht Boudens, Director of the AOSR's *Oblate Lexicon* project, reported that, as of August 1, 1989:

167 articles had been received. A list of these articles and their authors was distributed to all the participants. Thirty of these articles were ready for preliminary publication in English and in French. Fifty other articles have been checked and thus the definitive French and English texts of the same can now be established for preliminary publication. A good start has been made. It will be many years before one can realistically foresee the conclusion of this project and its definitive publication.

The Convention urgently requests all AOSR members to draw up and send to Father Boudens a list of the names of Oblate persons, places, houses, works and events, especially those relating to their own Provinces, which they consider as qualifying for an article in the Oblate Lexicon.

Father Fabio Ciardi, director of the *Dictionary of Oblate Spirituality and Values* project, reported to the Convention that this project includes 65 headings, each requiring a major article: 50 of these headings deal with key Oblate values and 15 are of Oblates who have lived these values in a remarkable way. As of August 1, 1989:

PRESENT STATUS, INTERNAL MATTERS AND PRACTICAL RESOLUTIONS E 193

- 28 articles have been received.
- of these, two are presently ready for preliminary publication in French and English.
- Some 10 other articles have been checked and thus the French and English texts can now be established for preliminary publication.

One can reasonably foresee the completion of this project and its preliminary publication within three years.

For both projects, the definitive English text is prepared by Father Aloysius Kedl at the General House and the definitive French text by Father Maurice Lesage in Montreal. Preliminary publication will be done offset at the General House.

The Convention recommended that a scientific edition of the administrative circulars and equivalent writings of the Superiors General with an analytical index of the same be considered as *a possible new work project* of the AOSR.

The AOSR and *Vie Oblate Life*

The Convention heard a report from Father Romuald Boucher, Editor of VIE OBLATE LIFE, about the nature, aims, content, financial situation and editorial needs of this unique Oblate publication. VIE OBLATE LIFE regularly carries the AOSR's news and information bulletins in both French and English. A vote of thanks was expressed in this regard.

The Convention requested all AOSR members to subscribe to VIE OBLATE LIFE, to promote it in the main communities of their respective Provinces, and to contribute articles for publication in its pages.

The AOSR and Archives in the Congregation

At the Convention, there was a wide-ranging exchange on the question of archives in the Congregation and what the AOSR could do to promote the establishing, developing and maintaining of archives at various levels. While many considerations were made, no practical resolution was adopted: the Convention did stress the importance of archives and also called for all AOSR members to be actively concerned in this field.

The AOSR and the promotion of Oblate Research

In order to train Oblate researchers and to familiarize them with primary Oblate sources, the Convention urged the AOSR to explore the possibility of sponsoring annually a young Oblate for a period of study at the General and Postulation Archives in the General House in Rome.

Election of the AOSR executive committee

Fathers Francis George, Rene Motte and Yvon Beaudoin had been appointed to serve the Convention as a nominations committee that would find eligible candidates and ascertain that the same were willing to be candidates. Each position would be voted for separately. The candidates presented by the committee were selected because of their interest, competence and willingness to serve. The assembly could add other candidates by a motion from the floor that is also seconded. The elections would be held according to the Charter as amended at this Convention.

Election of the AOSR President:

The nominations committee presented two names: Fathers Robrecht BOUDENS and Michael HUGHES. Though the latter was not present at the Convention, he had by letter to the AOSR Secretary indicated that he would be willing to serve in this capacity.

It was moved by Father Alexandre Taché and seconded by Father William Woestman that nominations be closed. The motion was carried.

Thirty-four ballots were cast: BOUDENS: 25 votes.

M. HUGHES; 9 votes.

Father Robrecht BOUDENS was therefore re-elected to the post of AOSR President.

Election of the AOSR Secretary-Treasurer:

The nominations committee presented two names: Fathers Aloysius KEDL and Father Albert LALONDE.

It was moved by Father Richard Cote and seconded by Father Thomas Lascelles that nominations be closed. The motion was carried.

Thirty two ballots were cast: KEDL: 28 votes

LALONDE: 4 votes.

Father Aloysius KEDL was therefore re-elected to the post of AOSR Secretary-Treasurer.

Election of First Executive Committee Member:

The nominations committee presented four names: Fathers Kasimierz LUBOWICKI, Giovanni SANTOLINI, Adolphe STEFFANUS and Jaime SULLIVAN.

PRESENT STATUS, INTERNAL MATTERS AND PRACTICAL RESOLUTIONS E 195

It was moved by Father Richard Cote and seconded by Father James FitzPatrick that Father Wladyslaw WALKOSZ be added to this list of candidates. The motion was carried.

It was moved by Father Alexandre Taché and seconded by Father Francis Kelly Nemeck that nominations be closed. The motion was carried.

Thirty two ballots were cast:

LUBOWICKI:	2 votes
SANTOLINI:	9 votes.
STEFFANUS:	5 votes.
SULLIVAN:	4 votes.
WALKOSZ:	12 votes.

Father Wladyslaw WALKOSZ was therefore elected as Member of the AOSR Executive Committee.

Election of Second Executive Committee Member:

The candidates were the remaining four names on the above mentioned list.

Thirty two ballots were cast:

LUBOWICKI:	2 votes
SANTOLINI:	19 votes.
STEFFANUS:	9 votes.
SULLIVAN:	2 votes.

Father Giovanni SANTOLINI was therefore elected as Member of the AOSR Executive Committee.

The Convention expressed a vote of thanks to Fathers Fabio CIARDI and Clarence Menard who were leaving the AOSR Executive Committee. The former continues to be the Director of the Dictionary of Oblate Spirituality and Values work project.

Closing of the convention

Father Gilles CAZABON, Vicar General and liaison person between the General Council and the AOSR, a co-founder of what is today the AOSR, addressed the Convention. He began by referring to the AOSR's remote beginnings: Father Jette's call in 1978 for an investment in reflection which resulted in founding the AOSR in 1982.

Next he referred to Superior General Father Marcello Zago's message to this Convention and especially underlined the Superior General's recommendation that the AOSR be open to a new generation of Oblates, to recruit younger Oblates to its membership. In fact, the Executive Committee just elected at this Convention already reflects this reality. He also underlined the Superior General's concern that research prosper in the Congregation at every level: not only in a general level but also on the level of Provinces and Delegations.

The topic that this Convention has studied is one that is central to the 1986 Chapter document. The General Council has been reflecting on the same topic and it will also figure in the exchange that will take place at the coming Inter-Chapter Meeting.

The Superior General and Father Cazabon himself are greatly interested in the AOSR and its activities, and so is every member of the General Council. The Acts of this Convention as well as the synthesis of the study-theme that will appear in a number of OMI DOCUMENTATION can benefit the entire Congregation.

A special wish that he has is that the AOSR find a way to reflect also on the actual living reality of the Congregation. The studies made to date are based on historical sources. The Congregation not only has a past reality but is also a present living reality, and so is the AOSR. He would like to see the AOSR to ponder this. To date, we have reflected mostly on history and less on actuality. As an example, the Congregation could benefit greatly if the AOSR would reflect on such issues as district community.

Father Cazabon expressed thanks, in the name of the Superior General and his own, to the entire AOSR, to its Executive Committee, including those who were leaving it, to the Administrative Assistants in Rome who helped to prepare this Convention, to Father Maurice Lesage of Montreal, to the new Executive Committee which will serve the AOSR and, through it, the entire Congregation. He is also grateful that the AOSR chose to meet in Ottawa, a fact that shows esteem and appreciation for a major centre of Oblate studies and reflection, where many great Oblates (he made a special mention of Father Maurice Gilbert) have served and still serve. He also voiced thanks on behalf of Saint Paul University and the University Seminary for their services as host to the Convention.

Father Robrecht BOUDENS, AOSR President, then expressed warm thanks: to all AOSR members and to the Executive Committee in a special way, to Fathers Albert Lalonde and Maurice Lesage, to the authors of articles for the AOSR's two work projects and of conferences for this Convention, to Father Rene Motte who has helped in the Convention's liturgical celebrations, to Father Romuald Boucher and VIE OBLATE

LIFE, to the Provincial of St. Joseph Province, to the Rectors of Saint Paul University and the University Seminary, to the Ottawa team (Fathers Alexandre Taché, William Woestman, Jacques L'Heureux, Brother Henri Gagnon), to the General Administration (Father Cazabon is to tell the Superior General how much the AOSR appreciates his support), to Father Gilles Cazabon who is always so available, serviceable and wise, to all the Convention participants for their presence, interventions and collaboration. He also thanks all for their confidence in him and promised to do his best to promote the AOSR's purposes.

The Convention closed with the celebration of the Eucharist presided by Father Gilles Cazabon.

Evaluation

Evaluation of AOSR Convention Synthesis of evaluation sheets

Thirty-three (33) evaluation sheets were handed in to the AOSR Secretary; eight (8) of these bore the signatures of the AOSR members who had filled them out.

All of them are most positive. A goodly number also express their appreciation and thanks for the Convention; many also express some reservations on one or several points and make concrete suggestions as to how this or future Conventions could be even better.

The following is a summary of the replies made according to the headings that were on the evaluation sheet.

Preparation

32 replied to this heading. *All are most positive*: the replies rate the preparation from OK to Good (9 replies) to very good (14 replies) to excellent (8 replies).

Specific elements that were particularly appreciated are: the preparatory work done in Rome and in Ottawa and the good collaboration between the two teams; the communication to the AOSR members prior to the Convention; the seriousness with which the speakers prepared their conferences; making the French and English texts of these conferences available to all.

Two suggestions to improve future Conventions were made:

1) at the opening of the Convention, have each participant introduce himself to all the rest;

2) when a Convention is held in a place like Ottawa, a prior invitation should be extended to all the Oblates of the area to attend - if this is done, the manner in which the Convention is communicated beforehand would have to change accordingly.

Conferences

32 replied to this heading, commenting on the quality of both the content and the oral presentation of the 10 conferences given at the Convention.

Re: the Content of the Conferences

All replies are quite positive. They vary from good (11 replies) to very good (19 replies) to excellent (3 replies). Particularly appreciated was the scientific research and character of the content.

There are also *a number of reservations and suggestions for improving the content:*

1) The conferences treated the topic only from the historical and ideal perspective, leaving aside the context of the past and even more so that of the present situation. Thus:

"...good research, but very dry..... Gave ideal of community life, but how this ideal is lived according to the present day time, this sort of reflection was lacking -therefore it remained dry. We have nothing to take back home. There is nothing that appealed to the heart. But we have with us good research (historical) of the history of community life."

"More contextualization (historical) of talks would have been helpful."

"...we treated only one aspect of community. It would be advisable to continue other aspects..."

"...The context of the spirituality of the times and other contextual questions remain untouched."

There should have been "more theology on the community and more of today's situation in the Congregation."

The topic was too large: a more restricted topic would have made it possible to dig more deeply.

"A lack of critical reflection on the material given."

Two replies soften the above reservations:

- "A fine ensemble of studies - not all aspects were covered, but that was not expected."

- "Very well done, even if there are at times certain limitations, which is quite normal."

2) One reply found that the conferences on Pakistan and Father Gerard did not fit the "logic" of the other conferences.

3) One reply suggested that, in the future, a topic should be chosen that speaks also to the Oblates in Latin America.

Re: The Presentation of the Conferences:

Most found the presentation to be good.

There were also *some reservations and several suggestions for improvement.* Thus:

- "Why read the text when we have it in front of us? A 10 minute commentary on what we have already read."

- The text of the conferences should have been shortened and given as a whole, not in bits and pieces.
- There was "too little time for some of them: a little rushed, especially the first

day."

Several appreciated the fact that the full text was readily available both in French and in English.

Panels

32 replied to this heading. The replies rate the panel sessions from good (18) to very good (7) to excellent (2); 5 are somewhat negative.

Particularly appreciated was the seriousness of the exchange and the fact that there was never a "dead moment" during the panel sessions. Some new, complementary ideas surfaced during the panels sessions and it became clear that many participants knew the Founder and the Congregation very well. The translation made of interventions was also appreciated.

The *negative elements and suggestions for improvement* are:

- panel sessions should have been preceded and prepared for by work in small groups.
- The panels should have been instructed to reflect on the theological dimensions of mission and community, as well as upon the present-day situation of both in the Congregation; and thus the panel sessions would have been a good complement to the content of the conferences.
- The conferences on Canada, Pakistan and Father G6rard (i.e. the ones given in the morning of August 9th) should also have been allotted a panel session.

Matters internal to the association

28 replied to this heading. 20 rated this portion of the Convention program to be good, and 8 very good.

There were *a number of remarks* also. Thus:

- The time allotted to the internal affairs of the AOSR was brief and so some things were treated rather rapidly.
- No firm, clearly formulated decisions were taken.
- The concrete work proposals were presented too late and in too general a form.
- The elections were well-conducted; however, the next Convention should amend the Charter so that all the members of the Executive Committee will be elected with a simple majority.
- What is really important now is the concrete follow-up that is given to the orientations given by the Convention.

The convention time-table and program

30 replied to this heading. 21 rated this item good, 4 very good and 5 excellent.

There were also a number of *observations*:

- There were no small groups.
- The time allotted for personal study and reflection was too brief.
- Translations during the panel sessions made things heavy.
- No organized celebrations (parties).
- Morning should have been given to the conferences and all other matters scheduled for the afternoons.
- More time should have been given for the Eucharist.

Prayer

33 replied to this heading. 5 rated this weak, minimal and mediocre, 23 said it was good, and 6 felt it was very good.

The following *remarks and observations* were made:

- There should have been more prayer (15 replies).
- Some of the Liturgy of the Hours (Lauds, Vespers) should have been said in common (7 replies).
- OBLATE PRAYER should have been used more.
- Prayer at the beginning of sessions could have been longer and all sessions should have ended with a prayer.
- Time allotted for the Eucharist was too brief.
- The Eucharist was not linked to the Convention's study theme.
- A liturgical or prayer committee should have been appointed.
- Participants should have been invited to prepare a prayer for the beginning of each day.

Fraternity

32 replied to this heading. 3 rated this good, 17 very good, and 12 excellent. Comments added stressed the joy and peace that reigned despite some language barriers, the “at home” atmosphere that prevailed throughout, the atmosphere that was so much like the Founder’s desire. One suggested that there should have been more organized visits for those who were in Ottawa for the first time.

Other comments and observations

Only 16 replied to this heading. Besides some favorable comments (the Convention theme’s usefulness for the Congregation, the high caliber of the participants, excellent

hospitality, congratulations for a good Convention), there were also some *remarks and suggestions for improvement*:

- The AOSR should consider returning to Ottawa the next time.
- How can the AOSR become more active locally, provincially and in the regions?
- Extra 15 minutes for the celebration of the Eucharist.
- 5 minutes prayer before and after sessions.
- The Congress date and program should be communicated 18 months in advance to allow time for personal studies.
- The Congress should have been one day longer: this would have allowed reflection on the theological dimensions of missions and community and on the current situation of both in the Church and the Congregation.
- The Executive Committee had constituted itself as the steering committee of the Convention. This was too much for it. It would have been better for it to delegate and involve the participants more in running the Convention. There should have been 2 moderators other than the Executive, a prayer committee, a nomination committee, a resolutions committee, and so forth.
- Conventions are good to keep the AOSR alive and active: so let us not wait for 5 years before the next Convention.
- Annual reporting is a good thing.

General House, O.M.I.

Rome, Italy August 15, 1989