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Præfatio

LA RÉUNION INTERCAPITULAIRE DE BANGKOK

PAOLO ARCHIATI, OMI

La réunion intercapitulaire est une rencontre des Provinciaux avec le Gouvernement central, ayant un triple but : évaluer l'application des décisions du Chapitre précédent, encourager la poursuite de cette mise en œuvre et mettre en route la préparation lointaine du prochain Chapitre (cf. C. 128e). En 2013, un des événements significatifs, pour notre famille oblata, a certainement été la rencontre de Bangkok à laquelle ont participé, en plus des Provinciaux, les Supérieurs de toutes nos Délégations et les Supérieurs des Missions de la Région d'Asie-Océanie.

La rencontre a duré deux semaines (22 avril - 3 mai 2013) : la première semaine a commencé par une évocation des martyrs Oblats d'Espagne et du Laos et par une intervention du P. Firth, qui a traité le thème : « Missionnaire Oblat : quel type d'homme ? ». Nous sommes ensuite entrés dans le vif des travaux, en écoutant les rapports des cinq Régions, suivis d'échanges en groupes. Le rapport présenté par l'économiste général, faisant appel à une solidarité renouvelée, non seulement avec les pauvres mais également entre nous, a précédé une journée de retraite, animée par le P. Nallappan. Cette retraite s'est terminée par une liturgie colorée, dont l'objectif principal était la remise des nouvelles Constitutions et Règles à tous les Oblats présents. Le texte du P. Firth se trouve dans ce numéro.

De l'écoute des rapports des cinq Régions et de l'échange des divers groupes, sont sorties plusieurs thématiques se rapportant principalement à l'identité oblata et à la mission.

Cette première partie de la rencontre intercapitulaire a été caractéri-

sée par l'écoute et le dialogue. Les choses entendues et dites tournaient toutes autour du thème central : comment répondre adéquatement à la situation dans laquelle nous vivons, en ce qui concerne l'appel à la conversion du dernier Chapitre. Certains rapports mentionnaient l'échange d'expériences vécues en ce sens.

Nous avons parlé des divers domaines de conversion : la vie communautaire, la pauvreté, la guérison et la réconciliation dans nos relations. Nous avons parlé de conversion en relation à la mission, de la vie qui doit précéder la mission, de l'être avant le faire. Nous avons parlé de l'Eglise et du Règne de Dieu, de l'Eglise orientée au Règne, de la conversion au Christ crucifié. Nous avons parlé du partage comme aspect de la conversion : partage de l'argent, du personnel, afin d'avoir tout en commun.

Invité à imiter l'exemple de Jésus qui s'est vidé de son être-Dieu pour se faire semblable aux hommes, l'Oblat est appelé à parcourir le même chemin, à travers une métanoïa permanente, un dépouillement quotidien, qui lui permette de dépasser les frontières et de devenir ainsi l'homme de la rencontre humaine, l'homme de l'Avent, l'homme de la croix, sel et lumière du monde.

Les rapports provenant des Régions ont souligné certains aspects comme la communauté – spécialement en relation avec l'individualisme, le narcissisme – l'autosuffisance à divers niveaux, la vie religieuse en relation au sacerdoce diocésain, les laïcs qui s'engagent dans notre mission, de façons les plus diverses, le leadership et l'autorité comme service, la transparence dans la façon de rendre compte, le dialogue inter-religieux, autre nom de la mission dans un monde où le christianisme est minoritaire.

Nous avons parlé d'espérance et de réconciliation, du passage du moi au nous. Nous avons parlé de communication pour faire communauté, nous avons souligné l'urgence de redéfinir notre mission. Nous avons parlé de formation, spécialement de formation en vue de la communauté ; si nous mettons souvent en relation la formation et la mission, la mise en relation de la formation et de la communauté n'est pas moins importante : une communauté appelée à se faire formatrice.

Dès le premier jour nous avons fait preuve d'un bon niveau de vie de famille, qui est allé croissant du premier au dernier jour. C'est en de telles expériences que les liens de famille sont vécus en réalité. Nous

avons parlé de partage, non seulement par rapport aux ressources matérielles, mais également dans nos soucis et notre vie. Nous avons parlé de communauté comme d'une tâche qui est encore devant nous.

L'importance d'avoir un projet commun a été particulièrement soulignée. Le Supérieur général, parlant aux Supérieurs majeurs de la Région d'Asie-Océanie, la semaine précédente, avait mis en valeur l'importance de trouver un dénominateur commun sur lequel faire l'expérience d'être une famille, une Congrégation, d'être des frères engagés à vivre la même mission.

Nous avons parlé de l'importance de créer une nouvelle mentalité. Quelqu'un a ajouté : moins idéologique, plus évangélique. Voilà encore un appel à la conversion. Un nouveau style de leadership, une relation plus vraie entre communauté et mission, formation permanente, l'identité oblate comme cœur de notre mission. Et encore : justice, paix et intégrité de la création, la restructuration comme défi positif pour remplir la mission, gardant à l'horizon, la Congrégation tout entière.

A diverses reprises nous avons touché le thème difficile de la sécularisation. Nous avons vu ce phénomène comme un facteur extérieur : nous vivons dans une société sécularisée ; nous nous sommes dit que nous devrions prendre un moment pour considérer comment et jusqu'à quel point cette réalité a pénétré même nos maisons religieuses, notre mentalité, notre façon de penser en bien et en mal. C'est un thème qui mérite de plus amples approfondissements.

Le thème de la formation a plusieurs fois fait surface lui aussi. De même que pour les ressources matérielles, nous pouvons dire que nos candidats appartiennent aussi à la Congrégation et aux pauvres. Nous vivons dans un monde blessé, nous nous demandons si la formation que nous donnons à nos candidats les prépare à guérir ces blessures. Notre formation est-elle en mesure de transformer nos jeunes blessés en missionnaires courageux pour la mission qui vient de leur être confiée ? Un devoir énorme, difficile, délicat.

Quelqu'un a dit un jour que suivre Jésus est un risque, et ce l'est vraiment. Quand nous prenons ce chemin, en nous faisant ses disciples, nous nous rendons compte que nous devons accepter aussi nos faiblesses, notre vulnérabilité. Le Chapitre de 1998 avait traité ce thème, en nous invitant à développer une culture qui mette l'accent sur le fait d'être une Congrégation qui apprend, une famille qui apprend, un corps

apostolique qui apprend.

Le jubilé que nous sommes en train de préparer sera pour nous l'année du Seigneur, l'année sainte, une année de grâce. Nous avons le privilège de pouvoir célébrer et vivre ce grand événement ; ce sera un *kairos* que nous ne pouvons ni ne devons laisser passer ; le *kairos*, il faut le « cueillir » comme un don qui pourrait ne plus être disponible si nous ne le saisissons pas quand l'occasion se présente...

Nous avons parlé d'une part de l'unité entre Oblats en lien avec l'individualisme, et d'autre part de la communion pour la mission. Passer de l'individualisme à la communion et de la communion à la mission, c'est un chemin lent et parfois fatigant. C'est un chemin à reprendre chaque jour : chaque jour nous devons laisser derrière nous notre moi, afin de construire la communauté avec les frères et l'envoi en mission. La communion peut être considérée comme le nouveau nom de l'interdépendance.

Le thème de l'identité oblate a été certainement un thème récurrent. Quand nous nous demandons qui nous sommes, nous répondons avec une certaine facilité et d'un commun accord : nous sommes les missionnaires des pauvres ; nous trouvons cette définition appropriée : nous sommes appelés à évangéliser les pauvres, tel est le cœur de notre charisme, de notre identité. La difficulté naît quand nous nous demandons : que signifie être missionnaires des pauvres ? Qui sont les pauvres ? Que signifie évangéliser ? Une question à laquelle on peut répondre, et de fait on le fait, de mille façons, avec le risque de perdre l'unité et la communion à l'intérieur de la famille.

Nous avons parlé de l'importance d'avoir des racines, de revenir à nos racines, aux sources. Ceci nous paraît particulièrement important en ce temps de fractures dans lequel nous nous préparons à célébrer les 200 ans de notre histoire. Parler de racines nous fait penser spontanément à l'image de l'arbre. L'arbre vit de ses racines, il ne bouge pas et ne marche pas, il reste simplement enraciné ; la sève vitale le traverse, venant des racines, passant à travers le tronc et arrivant aux branches et aux feuilles, pour porter la vie. Croître n'est pas changer de nature, mais mûrir à l'intérieur de la même nature. En voulant revenir à nos racines comme Oblats, nous comprendrons mieux quelle est notre nature, ce que l'Esprit nous appelle à être, dans l'Eglise, après deux siècles d'histoire comme au temps d'Eugène.

Nos racines c'est Jésus-Christ et saint Eugène. C'est là que toute vraie conversion doit nous ramener. C'est là que nous trouverons inspiration et réponse à nos demandes. La question initiale pour un chemin de conversion devrait donc être celle-ci : suis-je encore enraciné en Jésus-Christ et en saint Eugène ? Ai-je vraiment rencontré Jésus-Christ et saint Eugène ? Ai-je un rapport vrai et vivant avec eux ? De quel type ? La réponse à ces demandes peut être, à mon avis, le début de quelque chose de neuf. Quelqu'un a parlé de refondation, de revitalisation, d'un nouveau départ. Toute ce que nous voulons entreprendre devra toujours partir de là : un arbre vit de ses racines, c'est de là que vient la sève.

Pendant la journée de retraite qui a précédé la conclusion de la première semaine, le P. Nallappan nous a rappelé que pour guérir d'une maladie – nous avons souvent parlé de blessures, de guérison – il ne suffit pas d'avoir l'ordonnance, il faut encore prendre les remèdes ! Telle pourrait être, pour prendre un exemple, la parole de Dieu dont nous sommes les annonciateurs. Évangéliser signifie dire aux gens, spécialement aux pauvres, qui est le Christ ; mais quel est le meilleur moyen pour atteindre cet objectif, si ce n'est celui d'utiliser sa Parole elle-même ? Nous sommes appelés à faire de la Parole, le centre de notre vie. Au début de son expérience, Eugène voulait que ses hommes passent de longs moments en communauté, entre une mission et l'autre, pour méditer, approfondir et partager la Parole qu'ensuite ils annonceraient aux gens, pendant les missions populaires. Nous, Oblats d'aujourd'hui, nous sommes encore appelés à dire qui est le Christ, à un monde complexe et dans des contextes multiples, mais la mission est la même.

L'identité c'est l'appartenance. La rencontre intercapitulaire a commencé par une évocation de nos martyrs : ils ont été capables de donner leur vie pour le Christ et pour l'Église, parce que leur sens d'appartenance était plus fort que toute autre influence. Ce que Tertulien disait du sang des martyrs par rapport à l'Église, nous pouvons le dire aussi de nos saints martyrs : que leur sang soit semence de nouveaux Oblats. Sur cette semence, sur ce sang répandu, nous aussi nous avons grandi, pour être ce que nous sommes aujourd'hui ; ceci fait aussi partie de notre retour aux racines, aux sources.

Oblation, vie donnée. Je crois que c'est vraiment un chemin de conversion. A chaque étape nous sommes appelés à une nouvelle rencontre

personnelle avec Eugène et, avec lui, avec le Christ crucifié, parce que c'est là que tout a commencé. De cela dépend la qualité de notre être, de notre vie, de notre mission, de notre formation, de notre capacité à partager ce que nous sommes et ce que nous avons.

La deuxième semaine de la rencontre intercapitulaire s'est ouverte par la présentation du Supérieur général qui a abordé divers points de notre vie et de notre mission : nous vivons – a-t-il dit entre autres – des situations très diverses d'une Unité à l'autre. Certaines Unités comptent beaucoup de jeunes Oblats et doivent affronter les problèmes propres au domaine de la formation ; d'autres se trouvent aux prises avec des difficultés considérables au plan financier ; certaines Unités aimeraient avoir la présence d'Oblats plus anciens qui les aident dans leur chemin, simplement par leur sagesse, leur assurance et leur lumière. Il y a des Unités qui souffrent des effets du manque de vocations et du vieillissement de la grande majorité de leurs membres. Quelques Unités ont été frappées de manière pesante par les scandales provoqués par les abus culturels, physiques et sexuels, ou elles vivent dans un contexte où l'Eglise elle-même a été frappée par ces événements. En certaines Unités, les Oblats luttent pour découvrir ou redécouvrir le sens de leur vocation missionnaire, alors qu'ailleurs ils sont submergés par des défis missionnaires sans nombre. Nous vivons dans une réalité très diverse ; il est donc important pour nous de découvrir quels sont les défis communs que nous sommes appelés à affronter ensemble, dans le monde d'aujourd'hui.

Le reste de l'apport du P. Général est publié dans ce numéro.

Les travaux de la deuxième semaine se sont poursuivis par les interventions des autres membres du Gouvernement central sur des questions diverses, parmi lesquelles la présentation de la nouvelle communauté d'Aix-en-Provence, avec les membres qui la composent et les activités qui reprennent, après les travaux de remise à neuf de la maison.

Les derniers jours de la rencontre ont été consacrés à la préparation lointaine du prochain Chapitre général. Après avoir suivi avec attention le développement des travaux, le secrétaire de la réunion a préparé un compte-rendu synthétique, sous forme de message final des participants à tous leurs frères Oblats et à toute la famille oblate. Dans ce message, dont l'intention première était de partager ce qui a été vécu à Bangkok, on souligne comment l'expérience intercapitulaire a été un moment fort

et joyeux de vie fraternelle, de prière et de réflexion, un moment dans lequel nous avons expérimenté la richesse de la Congrégation, sa vie et son engagement missionnaire dans le monde.

L'écoute a été la dominante de toute la réunion: écoute du Seigneur et de sa Parole, écoute des frères, écoute de ce qui se vit dans la Congrégation en réponse aux appels à la conversion du dernier Chapitre général. Cette écoute nous a conduits à découvrir les divers contextes de la mission d'aujourd'hui et les exigences qui lui sont liées : sociétés sécularisées dans lesquelles les chrétiens ne représentent qu'une voix parmi tant d'autres, situations d'injustice et de violence, de misère et de désespoir, mais aussi un monde où l'on sent une soif d'amour et de vérité. C'est précisément en partant de ces contextes qu'est née en nous la question : nous Oblats, quel type d'hommes sommes-nous appelés à être pour vivre notre mission en ce monde ? Trois domaines nous ont semblé prioritaires dans notre chemin de conversion, en vue de la mission, domaines traversés et animés par la spiritualité oblate : la vie de communauté, la formation et la mission.

Regardant vers l'avenir et nous demandant quel thème nous pourrions privilégier pour notre prochain Chapitre général, il nous a semblé que, de l'ensemble de la rencontre de Bangkok, se dégageaient deux tendances : la première souligne l'urgence de réaffirmer notre identité religieuse oblate, avec une référence particulière au vœu de pauvreté, comme choix de vie au service du Royaume ; la seconde met en relief l'urgence de préciser une orientation commune pour l'action missionnaire de la Congrégation, dans le monde et l'Eglise en mutation rapide. Nous retrouvons ici, à mon avis, les deux aspects les plus importants de notre vie, qui sont revenus d'une façon ou d'une autre, dans les derniers Chapitres généraux : un regard sur notre vie "interne", en des thèmes tels que l'identité oblate, la consécration religieuse, la communauté, vue comme un cœur et une âme. C'est ce qui est repris dans la première partie du testament de saint Eugène : "parmi vous la charité". Le second aspect regarde notre engagement dans le contexte de l'Eglise, du monde, des pauvres en particulier, que l'on retrouve dans la réalité de la mission, de l'évangélisation, de l'annonce de l'Évangile, de la communauté, inspirée du modèle des Douze, formés et envoyés par Jésus. C'est ce qui est résumé dans la deuxième partie du testament de saint Eugène : "au dehors, le zèle pour le salut des âmes". Nous ne

pouvons pas vivre l'un de ces aspects sans l'autre, ils sont comme deux moments de la même respiration, les deux sont essentiels à la vie. Saint Eugène nous indique le chemin à suivre : qu'il nous aide également à le parcourir !

THE INTERCAPITULAR MEETING OF 2013

The Intercapitular Meeting is a gathering of provincials with the Central Government; it has a threefold scope: evaluate the implementation of the decisions of the previous Chapter, encourage further implementation and assure the remote preparation of the next Chapter. (cf. C. 128e)

One of the most important events for our Oblate family during 2013 was undoubtedly the meeting in Bangkok which was attended by the provincials, the superiors of all our delegations and the superiors of the Missions of the Asia-Oceania Region.

The meeting took two weeks (22 April - 3 May): the first began with a remembrance of the Spanish and Laotian Oblate martyrs and with a talk by Father Firth who spoke on the theme: "*The Oblate missionary: what kind of man?*" Then we got into the substance of our work by listening to reports from the five Regions, each followed by a time for group discussion. The report of the General Treasurer, including an appeal for a renewed solidarity with the poor but also among ourselves, preceded a day of retreat animated by Father Nallappan. At its conclusion, there was a colorful liturgy whose principal goal was the distribution of the new Constitutions and Rules to all the Oblates who were present. Father's Firth's text is found in this edition.

From listening to the reports of the five Regions and from the exchange in the various groups, many themes emerged relative especially to Oblate identity and mission.

This first part of the Intercapitular Meeting was characterized by listening and by dialog. The many things heard and said had as a central theme the question of how to respond adequately to the situation in which we live and, related to that, to the call of the Chapter to conversion. In some reports, there was a sharing of experiences in this regard.

We spoke about various areas of conversion: community life, poverty, healing and reconciliation in our relationships. We spoke

about conversion in relation to the mission, about the kind of life that should precede the mission, about being before doing. We spoke about the Church and the Kingdom of God, about the Church in relation to the Kingdom, about conversion to Christ crucified. We spoke about sharing as an aspect of conversion: sharing money and personnel, so as to have everything in common.

Invited to imitate the example of Jesus, who emptied himself of his being God to become similar to humans, the Oblate is called to walk the same path toward a continual metanoia, a daily emptying that allows him to bypass frontiers and thus become a man of human encounter, the Advent man, the man with the cross, salt and light for the world.

The reports from the Regions emphasized such aspects as the community – especially in relation to individualism and narcissism – self-sufficiency at various levels, religious life related to diocesan priesthood, the laity who become involved in our mission in so many different ways, leadership and authority as service, transparency in accountability, inter-religious dialogue as a name for the mission, in a world where Christianity is a minority.

We spoke about hope and reconciliation, about the transition from the “I” to the “we.” We spoke about the communication needed for community; we emphasized the urgency to redefine our mission. We spoke about formation, especially about formation for community; if we often speak of the relationship of formation and mission, the relationship between formation and community is no less important, a community called to be formational.

From the very first day, we experienced a good degree of family life. It is something that grows, from the first to the last day, in experiences like this where family ties are really experienced. We spoke about sharing, not only of our material resources but also in relation to our concerns and our lives. We spoke about community which is a task that remains to be accomplished.

Particular attention was given to the importance of having a common project. The Superior General, speaking to the Major Superiors of the Asia-Oceania Region the week before, had underscored the importance of finding a common denominator, a common basis so as to experience being one family, one Congregation, brothers committed to living the same mission.

We talked about the importance of creating a new mindset. Someone added: less ideological, more evangelical. This too is a call to conversion. A new style of leadership, a more real relationship between community and mission, lifelong learning, Oblate identity as the heart of our mission. And again: justice, peace and integrity of creation, restructuring as a positive challenge to accomplish the mission, having the entire Congregation on one's horizon.

The difficult issue of secularization was touched upon several times. We saw this phenomenon as an external factor: we live in a secularized society. We said that we should consider for a moment in what manner and to what extent this reality has penetrated even our religious houses, our mentality, our way of thinking, for the good and bad. It is a topic that deserves further exploration.

Also the issue of formation came up several times. As for our material resources, so too for our candidates, we can say that they belong to the Congregation and to the poor. We live in a broken world; we wonder if the formation we give our candidates prepares them to heal these wounds. Is our formation able to transform these, our injured young people, into courageous missionaries for the mission that is entrusted to them? A huge task, difficult, delicate.

Someone once said that to follow Jesus Christ is a risk, and it truly is. When we begin this journey, making ourselves his disciples, we realize that we must also accept our weaknesses, our vulnerabilities. The Chapter dealt with this issue in 1998, inviting us to develop a culture of being a Congregation that learns, a family that learns, an apostolic corps that learns.

The jubilee that we are preparing will be for us the year of the Lord, the Holy Year, a year of grace. We are privileged to be able to celebrate and enjoy this great event; it will be a *kairos* that we cannot and we must not let pass us by. So the *kairos* must be "received" as a gift that could end up not being very useful if we don't take advantage of it...

We talked about unity among the Oblates, in relation to individualism on the one hand and communion for the mission on the other. It is a journey, slow and sometimes laborious, from individualism to communion, to mission. It is a daily journey: every day we have to leave our ego behind us to build the community with our brothers and to be sent out as missionaries. Communion could be considered the new name for interdependence.

The theme of Oblate identity was certainly a recurring theme. When we ask ourselves who we are, we respond with a certain ease and by mutual agreement: we are the missionaries of the poor. We find this an apt definition: we are called to evangelize the poor; this is the heart of our charism, our identity. The difficulty arises when we ask what it means to be missionaries of the poor. Who are the poor; what does it mean to evangelize? A question that can be answered, and in fact is answered in a thousand ways, with the risk of losing the unity and communion within the family.

We talked about the importance of having roots, going back to our roots, to the sources. This seems particularly important at this juncture in which we are preparing to celebrate the 200 years of our history. Speaking of roots makes us think spontaneously of the image of a tree. A tree lives from its roots, not moving and not walking. It just remains rooted; its lifeblood runs through it, coming from the roots, passing through the trunk and the branches and the leaves, so as to bring life. Growing is not changing nature, but maturing within the same nature. Desiring to return to our roots as Oblates, we will better understand what our nature is, what the Spirit calls us to be in the Church, at the time of Eugene as well as after two centuries of history.

Our roots are Jesus Christ and St. Eugene. Every true conversion must bring us back there. There we will find our inspiration and the answer to our questions. The first question for a journey of conversion should therefore be this: am I still rooted in Jesus Christ and in Eugene? Have I really met Jesus Christ and St. Eugene? Do I have a real, living relationship with them? What kind? The answer to these questions may be, in my opinion, the beginning of something new. Someone talked about refounding, about revitalization, about a new beginning. Whatever we want to do, it should always start from there: a tree lives from its roots; the energy always comes from there.

During the retreat day that preceded the conclusion of the first week, Father Nallappan reminded us that to recover from an illness – we have often spoken of wounds, healing – it is not enough to have a prescription: you need to take the medicine! This could be, just to take one example, the word of God that we proclaim. To evangelize is to tell the people, especially the poor, who Christ is, and what better way to achieve this than to use his own Word? We are called to make the

Word the center of our lives. At the beginning of his experience, Eugene wanted his men to spend, between one mission and another, long periods in their own community, meditating, studying, sharing the Word which they would then proclaim during the popular missions. We, the Oblates of today, are still called to tell who Christ is, in a different world, in a different context, but the mission is the same.

Identity is belonging. The Intercapitular Meeting began with a reminder of our martyrs: they were able to give their lives for Christ and for the Church because their sense of belonging was stronger than any other attraction. What Tertullian had to say about the blood of the martyrs in relation to the Church, we too can say about our martyrs: that their blood is the seed of new Oblates. From that seed, from the bloodshed, we have grown to be what we are now, and this too is part of our return to the roots, to the sources. Oblation, a life given. I think it's really a journey of conversion. On every level we are called to another encounter, a personal one, with Eugene, and together with him, with Christ crucified, because that is where it all began. On this depends the quality of our being, of our life, of our mission, of our formation, of our ability to share what we are and what we have.

The second week of the Intercapitular Meeting opened with a presentation of the Superior General that touched on various points about our lives and our mission: we live – he said among other things - very different situations from one Unit to another. Some Units have many young Oblates and face challenges in the field of formation; other Units are facing overwhelming challenges in the field of finance; some Units would like to have the presence of older Oblates to help them in their journey or simply with their wisdom, self-confidence and clarity. There are Units that are suffering the effects of a lack of vocations and the aging of the majority of their members. Some Units have been heavily affected by the scandals caused by cultural abuse, physical and sexual abuse, or they live in a context where the Church itself has been affected by these events. In some Units, the Oblates are struggling to discover or rediscover the sense of their missionary vocation while others are immersed in countless missionary challenges. We live in a widely diverse reality and it is important for us to find out what are the common challenges we face in today's world.

The rest of Father General's talk is published in this edition.

The work of the second week continued with interventions by other members of the Central Government on matters of various kinds, including the presentation of the new community of Aix-en-Provence with its members and the activities that are resuming after the renovation of the house. The last days of the meeting were devoted to a remote preparation for the next General Chapter. Having closely followed what was happening, the secretary of the meeting prepared a synthesis in the form of a final message of the participants to all their brother Oblates and the whole Oblate family. In this message, whose main intention was to share what was lived in Bangkok, it is emphasized that the Intercapitular experience was a powerful and joyful time of fraternal life, of prayer and reflection; a time when together we experienced the richness of the Congregation, its life and its missionary efforts in the world.

Listening was the foundation of the whole meeting: listening to the Lord and His Word, listening to the brothers, listening to how we live in the Congregation as a response to the calls to conversion of the last General Chapter. This listening has led us to discover the various contexts of the mission of today and the concomitant demands: secularized societies in which Christians are only one voice among many others; situations of injustice and violence, poverty and despair; but also a world where one senses a thirst for love and truth. And starting from these contexts there is born in us the question: we Oblates, what kind of men are we called to be so as to live our mission in this world? There seemed to us to be three priority areas in our journey of conversion in view of the mission, fields navigated and animated by Oblate spirituality: community life, formation and mission.

Looking to the future and wondering what theme should have priority at our next General Chapter, it seemed that from the meeting in Bangkok, two trends emerged: the first emphasizes the urgent need to reaffirm our Oblate religious identity with particular reference to the vow of poverty as a way of life in service of the Kingdom; and the second highlights the urgent need to define a common approach for the missionary activity of the Congregation and the Church in a world that is rapidly changing. We find here, in my opinion, the two most important aspects of our lives that were gradually taken up in the last General Chapters: one concerns our “internal” life and includes issues such as Oblate identity, religious consecration, the community viewed

as one heart and one soul, a reality summarized in the first part of the testament of St. Eugene “charity among yourselves.” The second is our commitment to the Church, to the world, and particularly to the poor. It extends to the reality of the mission of evangelization, to the preaching of the Gospel, to the community as inspired by the model of the Twelve formed and sent forth by Jesus, as summarized in the second part of the testament of St. Eugene, “and outside, zeal for the salvation of souls.” We cannot live one of these aspects without the other. They are like the two moments of a breath, both essential for life. Eugene, who shows us the path to follow, help us to follow it too!

INTERCAPÍTULO 2013

La reunión intercapitular es un encuentro de los Provinciales con el Gobierno Central con un triple propósito: evaluar cómo se han llevado a cabo las decisiones del Capítulo precedente, estimular la ulterior puesta en práctica de estas decisiones y asegurar la preparación del Capítulo siguiente (cf. C. 128e).

Uno de los eventos más importantes para nuestra familia Oblata durante el año 2013 fue sin duda alguna la reunión de Bangkok (del 22 de abril al 3 de mayo de 2013) a la que asistieron, además de los Provinciales, los Superiores de todas nuestras Delegaciones y los Superiores de las Misiones de la Región de Asia-Oceanía.

La reunión se dividió en dos semanas: la primera comenzó con la conmemoración de los mártires Oblatos españoles y laosianos y con una intervención del Padre Firth que trató el tema “*El misionero Oblato: ¿qué clase de hombre es?*”. Luego entramos en el corazón de la obra al escuchar los informes de las cinco Regiones, a los que después de cada uno siguieron oportunidades de intercambio de opiniones en grupos. El informe presentado por el Tesorero General, apelando a una renovada solidaridad no sólo con los pobres sino también entre nosotros, precedió a una jornada de retiro animada por el Padre Nallappan, después de la cual se llevó a cabo una alegre liturgia que tenía como objetivo principal la entrega de las nuevas Constituciones y Reglas a todos los Oblatos presentes. El texto del Padre Firth se encuentra en este número.

Al escuchar los informes de las cinco Regiones y gracias al intercambio de opiniones en los distintos grupos, surgieron numerosas cuestiones

relacionadas principalmente con la identidad Oblata y con la misión.

Esta primera parte de la reunión intercapitular se caracterizó por la escucha y el diálogo. Todo lo que se escuchó y dijo tuvo como tema central la cuestión de cómo responder adecuadamente a la situación en que vivimos y, con relación a la misma, la llamada del Capítulo a la conversión. En algunos informes se compartieron experiencias vividas en este sentido.

En nuestros informes hablamos de varias áreas de conversión: vida comunitaria, pobreza, curación y reconciliación. Hablamos de conversión con relación a la misión, de la vida que debe preceder a la misión, del ser antes de hacer. Hablamos de la Iglesia y del Reino de Dios, de la Iglesia orientada al Reino, de la conversión a Cristo crucificado. Hablamos del compartir como un aspecto de la conversión: el intercambio de dinero, personal, con el fin de tener todo en común.

Invitado a imitar el ejemplo de Jesús que se despojó del ser Dios para asemejarse a los hombres, el Oblato está llamado a seguir el mismo camino a través de una continua metanoia, un vacío diario que le permite atravesar fronteras, y así convertirse en el hombre del encuentro humano, el hombre del Adviento, el hombre con la cruz, la sal y la luz del mundo.

Los informes de las Regiones han hecho hincapié en aspectos tales como la comunidad – especialmente en relación con el individualismo, el narcisismo – la autosuficiencia en los distintos niveles, la vida religiosa en relación con el sacerdocio diocesano, los laicos que participan en las formas más diversas en nuestra misión, el liderazgo y la autoridad como servicio, la transparencia en la comunicación, el diálogo interreligioso en nombre de la misión, en un mundo donde el cristianismo es una minoría.

Hemos hablado de esperanza y de reconciliación, de la transición del ‘yo’ al ‘nosotros’. Hemos hablado de comunicación para formar la comunidad, hemos hecho hincapié en la necesidad urgente de redefinir nuestra misión. Hemos hablado de formación, especialmente de formación con vistas a la comunidad; si a menudo relacionamos la formación con la misión, no significa que sea menos importante la relación que la formación tiene con la comunidad, una comunidad llamada a ser formadora.

Desde el primer día hemos demostrado un buen nivel de vida familiar. Es un aspecto que crece, desde el primer hasta el último día,

con experiencias como ésta donde las relaciones familiares se vuelven reales. Hemos hablado de compartir no sólo con relación a los recursos materiales sino también con relación a nuestras preocupaciones, nuestras vidas. Hemos hablado de comunidad como si fuera una tarea que aún queda por hacer.

Se hace especial hincapié en la importancia de tener un proyecto común. El Superior General, al hablar la semana anterior a los Superiores mayores de la Región de Asia-Oceanía, había puesto de relieve la importancia de encontrar un denominador común, una base común sobre la cual experimentar ser una familia, una Congregación, hermanos comprometidos en vivir la misma misión.

Hemos hablado de la importancia de crear una nueva mentalidad. Alguien añadió: menos ideológica, más evangélica. Ésta también es una llamada a la conversión. Un nuevo estilo de liderazgo, una relación más real entre comunidad y misión, formación permanente, identidad Oblata como corazón de nuestra misión. Y nuevamente: la justicia, la paz y la integridad de la creación, la reestructuración como reto positivo para cumplir con la misión, que tiene en su propio horizonte a toda la Congregación.

La difícil cuestión de la secularización se ha tocado varias veces. Hemos visto este fenómeno como un factor externo: vivimos en una sociedad secularizada; nos hemos dicho que por un momento deberíamos tener en cuenta de qué manera y hasta qué punto este hecho ha penetrado también dentro de nuestras casas religiosas, nuestra mentalidad, nuestra forma de pensar para bien y para mal. Es un tema que merece ser profundizado.

Incluso el tema de la formación ha surgido en varias ocasiones. Como con los recursos materiales, también podemos decir que nuestros aspirantes pertenecen a la Congregación y a los pobres. Vivimos en un mundo herido, nos preguntamos si la formación que les damos a nuestros aspirantes les prepara para sanar estas heridas. ¿Es capaz nuestra formación de transformar a nuestros jóvenes heridos en valientes misioneros para la misión que se les confía? Una enorme, difícil y delicada tarea.

Alguien dijo una vez que seguir a Jesucristo es un riesgo y en realidad lo es. Cuando comenzamos este camino, como sus discípulos, nos damos cuenta que también debemos aceptar nuestras debilidades, nuestras vulnerabilidades. El capítulo del año 1998 ha tratado este tema,

invitándonos a desarrollar una cultura para ser una Congregación que aprende, una familia que aprende, un cuerpo apostólico que aprende.

El jubileo que estamos preparando será para nosotros el año del Señor, el año Santo, un año de gracia. Tenemos el privilegio de poder celebrar y disfrutar de este gran evento; será un *kairos* que no podemos y no debemos dejar pasar, de forma tal que el *kairos* debe ser “acogido” como un regalo que podría no volverse a encontrar disponible si se deja pasar la ocasión.

Hemos hablado de unidad entre Oblatos, en relación con el individualismo por un lado y con la comunión para la misión por el otro. Es un camino lento y a veces laborioso, pasar del individualismo a la comunión, a la misión. Es un viaje diario: todos los días debemos dejar nuestro ego detrás nuestro para construir la comunidad con los hermanos y para ser enviados como misioneros. La comunión puede ser considerada como el nuevo nombre de la interdependencia.

La cuestión de la identidad Oblata ha sido sin duda un tema recurrente. Cuando nos preguntamos quiénes somos, respondemos con una cierta facilidad y de mutuo acuerdo: somos los misioneros de los pobres; encontramos esta definición apropiada: estamos llamados a evangelizar a los pobres, este es el corazón de nuestro carisma, de nuestra identidad. El problema surge cuando nos preguntamos: ¿Qué significa ser misioneros de los pobres? ¿Quiénes son los pobres? ¿Qué significa evangelizar? Una pregunta que se puede contestar, y de hecho se contesta, de mil maneras, con el riesgo de perder la unidad y la comunión dentro de la familia.

Hemos hablado de la importancia de tener raíces, de volver a nuestras raíces, a los orígenes. Nos parece muy importante en esta circunstancia en la que nos preparamos para celebrar los 200 años de nuestra historia. Hablar de raíces nos hace pensar espontáneamente a la imagen del árbol. El árbol vive de las raíces, no se mueve y no se puede ir, sólo queda enraizado, la savia vital lo atraviesa llegando desde las raíces, pasando a través del tronco y llegando a las ramas y a las hojas para llevarles vida. Crecer no es cambiar la naturaleza, sino madurar dentro de la misma naturaleza. Al querer volver a nuestras raíces como Oblatos, entenderemos mejor cuál es nuestra naturaleza, lo que el Espíritu nos llama a ser, en la Iglesia, en los tiempos de Eugenio así como después de dos siglos de historia.

Nuestras raíces están en Jesucristo y en San Eugenio. Toda conversión verdadera debe llevarnos nuevamente allí. Allí encontraremos inspiración y respuesta a nuestras preguntas. La pregunta inicial para un camino de conversión debería, por lo tanto, ser la siguiente: ¿Estoy aún enraizado en Jesucristo y en San Eugenio? ¿He encontrado verdaderamente a Jesucristo y a San Eugenio? ¿Tengo una relación verdadera y real con ellos? ¿De qué tipo? La respuesta a estas preguntas puede ser, en mi opinión, el comienzo de algo nuevo. Alguien habló de refundación, de revitalización, de un nuevo comienzo. Todo lo que queramos hacer, deberá comenzar siempre desde allí: un árbol vive de sus raíces, la savia viene siempre desde allí.

Durante la jornada de retiro que precedió a la conclusión de la primera semana, el Padre Nallappan nos recordó que para recuperarnos de una enfermedad – hemos hablado a menudo de heridas, de curación – no es suficiente tener una receta médica, ¡es necesario tomar el medicamento! Esta puede ser, sólo para poner un ejemplo, la palabra de Dios que proclamamos. Evangelizar significa decirle a la gente, especialmente a los pobres, quién es Cristo, y ¿cuál es la mejor manera de lograrlo sino a través de su propia Palabra? Estamos llamados a hacer de la Palabra el centro de nuestra vida. Al principio de su experiencia, Eugenio deseaba que sus hombres pasaran un buen rato en comunidad entre una misión y otra, justamente para meditar, profundizar, compartir la Palabra, que después habrían proclamado durante las misiones populares. Nosotros, los Oblatos de hoy, aún estamos llamados a decir quién es Cristo: en un mundo diferente, en un contexto diferente, pero la misión es siempre la misma.

Identidad es pertenencia. La reunión intercapitular comenzó con una evocación de nuestros mártires: ellos fueron capaces de dar la vida por Cristo y por la Iglesia porque su sentido de pertenencia era más fuerte que cualquier otra llamada. Lo que Tertuliano dijo sobre la sangre de los mártires en relación con la Iglesia podemos decirlo también nosotros de nuestros mártires: que su sangre sea la semilla de nuevos Oblatos. De esa semilla, del derramamiento de sangre, hemos crecido para ser lo que somos hoy en día; esto también es parte de nuestro regreso a las raíces, a los orígenes. Oblación, vida dada. Creo que es realmente un camino de conversión. En cada nivel estamos llamados a un nuevo encuentro, personal, con Eugenio, y con Cristo crucificado junto

a Eugenio, porque es a partir de allí que todo ha comenzado. De esto depende la calidad de nuestro ser, de nuestra vida, de nuestra misión, de nuestra formación, de nuestra capacidad de compartir lo que somos y lo que tenemos.

La segunda semana de la reunión intercapitular se abrió con una presentación del Superior General que abordó varios puntos de nuestra vida y de nuestra misión: vivimos – dijo entre otras cosas – situaciones muy diferentes de una unidad a otra. Algunas unidades tienen muchos jóvenes Oblatos y deben hacer frente a desafíos en el campo de la formación; otras unidades deben enfrentarse a retos abrumadores en el campo financiero; algunas unidades quisieran tener la presencia de Oblatos más ancianos que les ayuden en su camino o simplemente con su sabiduría, seguridad y luz. Hay unidades que sufren de los efectos de la falta de vocación y del envejecimiento de la mayoría de sus miembros. Algunas unidades han sido fuertemente afectadas por los escándalos causados por el abuso cultural, físico y sexual y viven en un contexto donde la Iglesia misma se ha visto afectada por estos acontecimientos. En algunas unidades los Oblatos están luchando por descubrir o volver a descubrir el sentido de la vocación misionera, mientras que otras están inmersas en un sinnúmero de desafíos misioneros. Vivimos en una realidad ampliamente diversificada y es importante para nosotros saber cuáles son los desafíos comunes que estamos llamados a afrontar en el mundo actual.

El resto de la intervención del Padre General se encuentra en este número.

Los trabajos de la segunda semana continuaron con intervenciones por parte de otros miembros del Gobierno Central sobre asuntos de diversa índole, entre ellas, la presentación de la nueva comunidad de Aix-en-Provence con sus miembros y las actividades que se retomarán después de la obra de reestructuración de la casa. Los últimos días de la reunión se dedicaron a la preparación del siguiente Capítulo general. Después de haber seguido de cerca el desarrollo de los trabajos, el secretario de la reunión ha preparado un informe sintético con forma de mensaje final de los participantes a todos sus hermanos Oblatos y toda la familia Oblata. En este mensaje, cuya principal intención es compartir lo vivido en Bangkok, se hace hincapié en cómo la experiencia intercapitular ha sido un momento fuerte y alegre de la vida fraterna, de

oración y reflexión, un momento en que juntos hemos experimentado la riqueza de la Congregación, su vida y su compromiso misionero en el mundo.

La escucha ha sido la base de toda la reunión: escuchar al Señor y a su Palabra, escuchar a los hermanos, escuchar lo que se vive en la Congregación en respuesta a las llamadas a la conversión del último Capítulo general. Esta acción de escuchar nos ha llevado a descubrir los diversos contextos de la misión de hoy y las demandas a las que están vinculados: las sociedades secularizadas donde los cristianos son sólo una voz más entre muchas otras, las situaciones de injusticia y violencia, la pobreza y la desesperación, pero también un mundo donde hay sed de amor y de verdad. Es justamente a partir de estos contextos que nace en nosotros la pregunta: ¿Nosotros, los Oblatos, qué clase de hombres estamos llamados a ser si queremos llevar a cabo nuestra misión en este mundo? Tres campos nos han parecido prioritarios en nuestro camino de conversión en vista de la misión, campos que están atravesados y animados por la espiritualidad Oblata: la vida comunitaria, la formación y la misión.

Al mirar hacia el futuro y preguntarnos qué tema podría tener prioridad en nuestro próximo Capítulo general, nos ha parecido que como resultado de la reunión de Bangkok han surgido dos tendencias: la primera hace hincapié en la necesidad urgente de reafirmar nuestra identidad religiosa Oblata, con especial referencia al voto de pobreza como forma de vida al servicio del Reino; la segunda destaca la necesidad urgente de definir un enfoque común para la acción misionera de la Congregación en un mundo y con una Iglesia en rápida transformación. Encontramos aquí, en mi opinión, los dos aspectos más importantes de nuestra vida que se han retomado poco a poco en los últimos Capítulos generales: uno se refiere a nuestra vida “interna” y abarca cuestiones como la identidad Oblata, la consagración religiosa, la comunidad vista como tener un sólo corazón y un sólo alma, realidades resumidas en la primera parte del testamento de San Eugenio: “*entre vosotros la caridad*”; el segundo se refiere a nuestro compromiso con la Iglesia, el mundo, los pobres en particular y abarca la realidad de la misión, de la evangelización, del anuncio del Evangelio, la comunidad en cuanto inspirada en el modelo de los Doce instruidos y enviados por Jesús, realidad resumida en la segunda parte del testamento de San Eugenio:

“fuera el celo por la salvación de las almas”. No podemos vivir uno de estos aspectos sin el otro, son como los dos momentos de la respiración: ambos son esenciales para la vida. ¡San Eugenio, tú que nos indicas el camino a seguir, ayúdanos también a recorrerlo!

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Historia

LA MÉTHODE MISSIONNAIRE DE MGR OVIDE CHARLEBOIS OMI

ALFRED KERLING

Quand, en 1841, à la demande de Mgr Bourget, les Oblats commencent leur tâche missionnaire outre-Atlantique, ils apportent avec eux l'expérience d'une trentaine d'années de missions populaires en France. Mais là se présente devant eux un autre monde pour lequel les règles suivies jusqu'alors ne valent plus et ils doivent donc s'adapter. Au début, on les trouve engagés dans les missions populaires habituelles parmi la population blanche, mais face aux indigènes la situation change. Ils sont contraints de se faire missionnaires itinérants pour suivre les nations indiennes qui ne vivaient pas alors en sédentaires mais se déplaçaient à la recherche de leur nourriture. Comment concevaient-ils la mission et comment ont-ils réalisé cette adaptation ? C'est ce que nous verrons pour mieux comprendre l'apostolat de Mgr Ovide Charlebois parmi les Cris ¹.

LA MÉTHODE MISSIONNAIRE DES OBLATS,
UN HÉRITAGE ET QUELQUES INNOVATIONS

La Congrégation des missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée dans laquelle entre Ovide Charlebois en 1882, soit 66 ans après sa fondation, est née d'un appel pressant à la mission et à la conversion. Même si leur sollicitude missionnaire les poussait à embrasser la terre entière, au début les Oblats ne se dévoueront que dans les campagnes

provençales. Leur modèle apostolique est celui des missions populaires du XVI^e siècle. Pensées par les Jésuites, ces missions suivaient un programme soigneusement élaboré qui prévoyait prédication, catéchèse, confession, création ou réforme de confréries ; et elles laissaient voir à l'œuvre sur un même territoire un grand nombre de « missionnaires » durant un mois ou plus. Même s'il y avait quelque vague précédent avec la prédication de frères dans les cités du Moyen Âge tardif, ces missions représentaient cependant une institution nouvelle².

À cette méthode traditionnelle qui comportait comme éléments fondamentaux « l'enseignement des grandes vérités, la catéchèse, les grandes cérémonies et les processions pour toucher les cœurs, la pratique de la confession régulière pendant les missions pour assurer la stabilité de la conversion », les Oblats ont apporté quelques innovations spécifiques. Selon le P. Donat Levasseur, ces innovations peuvent être résumées en six points :

- La visite des familles pour les inviter aux activités de la mission mais surtout pour connaître les gens sur place ;
- Une prédication simple et claire dans la langue locale ;
- Le témoignage de l'esprit d'unité et de concorde entre eux qui devait distinguer les missionnaires oblats ;
- L'adoption de la théologie morale de St Alphonse de Liguori en contraste avec le jansénisme ;
- Une importance toute particulière à la confession vue comme le moyen par excellence de la rencontre entre Dieu et l'âme pénitente ;
- La procession de pénitence où le directeur de la mission devait s'offrir de manière symbolique comme victime à la justice de Dieu par le portement de la croix³.

La vision mazenodienne de la mission qui en découle s'avère fortement christocentrique. Le prototype de la communauté est celui de la communauté des Apôtres réunie autour de Jésus dont ils sont les coopérateurs. Le but que se proposent les Oblats est de rapporter la foi au milieu de tant de chrétiens qui ont oublié les exigences de leurs devoirs sacrés. Ils évangélisent non seulement par le service de la Parole mais aussi et surtout par l'exemple de leur vie communautaire. Plus celle-ci se distingue par sa charité, plus elle atteint son objectif. La particularité des missions oblats tenait en l'utilisation de la langue locale, le provençal, et une grande importance accordée aux visites des familles. Les processions de pénitence

étaient vues comme des moments privilégiés de rencontre avec le Sauveur. Durant ces cérémonies, conformément à l'exemple d'Eugène lui-même, le directeur de la mission, marchant pieds nus, portait une grande croix qui symbolisait Jésus prenant sur lui-même tous les péchés des habitants. Et avant que la mission ne se termine, des structures étaient mises en place qui permettraient sa poursuite, devenant en somme permanente⁴.

À ce concept, qui est né et s'est affermi au fil des missions de l'intérieur en France durant la première moitié du XIXe siècle, s'ajouteront par la suite des éléments issus de l'expérience des missions à l'étranger, d'abord en Amérique du Nord puis sur d'autres continents. Ainsi se dessine-t-il en ce qui concerne les Oblats, une manière de faire la mission *ad gentes* au Canada. La méthode, utilisée en France et codifiée dans la Règle sous l'influence et la stricte observance du fondateur, fut adaptée aux exigences de la mission à l'étranger.

DES OBSTACLES PARTICULIERS SUR LE CHEMIN DES ÉVANGÉLISTES

Quels furent toutefois les obstacles concrets rencontrés dans la tâche d'évangélisation par l'Église au Canada ? Dans les réponses rédigées par le P. Germain Lesage omi à un questionnaire de la Propagande, en 1943, nous avons une bonne description de la spécificité de l'environnement géographique et de la nature des nations indigènes qui rendaient la mission particulièrement exigeante. Il répartit ces difficultés en trois catégories : géographiques, religieuses et sociales. Pour les premières, il note : – la pauvreté des sols inadaptés à la culture ; – la diminution des occupations traditionnelles telles la pêche et la chasse due à l'arrivée des blancs, ce qui réduisait les indigènes à une grande pénurie que les missionnaires ne pouvaient compenser ayant eux-mêmes beaucoup de difficultés à s'approvisionner ; – le climat, la conformation géologique du terrain et le manque de routes ainsi que de voies ferrées rendaient les visites pastorales extrêmement difficiles et coûteuses.

« Pour visiter ses fidèles ou ses confrères, le missionnaire doit nécessairement se servir du canot et naviguer sur ces rivières, au milieu des moustiques les plus embarrassants qui soient : les «maringouins»⁵. Pendant l'hiver la traîne à chiens est encore le seul véhicule utilisable parce qu'il comporte le moins de risque et peut, à la rigueur, passer partout. On connaît les misères de ce genre de voyages. »⁶

Du point de vue religieux, la problématique est double : d'une part la concurrence des ministres protestants établis auparavant et d'autre part la difficulté des indigènes à comprendre correctement les concepts philosophiques et culturels dans lesquels le christianisme leur était présenté. « L'Indien n'est pas philosophe : un syllogisme, une démonstration ne le convainc pas. Ses convictions religieuses sont simplement ancrées dans sa chair : or, la sensibilité n'est pas un appui bien sûr pour la religion catholique. »⁷ [Le P. Lesage ajoute] : « Un esprit méditatif et ouvert aux vérités abstraites ne se crée pas en un jour. Dès lors, que dire de la compréhension de nos dogmes et de notre liturgie si substantiellement spirituels. »⁸

La diversité culturelle des nations indiennes constituait le plus gros problème et ne pouvait être surmonté que grâce à un effort continu d'inculturation du message évangélique. Les indigènes étaient en fait dépourvus de tout esprit de famille si bien que les enfants n'étaient pas accompagnés par leurs parents dans leur éducation. Ainsi faisait défaut la possibilité de transmettre des valeurs chrétiennes à l'intérieur de la famille. « L'enfant indien s'éduque tout seul. Ni le père, ni la mère ne s'occupent de sa formation. Il est simplement le roi que l'on désire et qu'on adore. En dépit d'incessantes prédications, comme il est difficile d'enseigner le catéchisme à la maison. Comment faire comprendre un tel devoir ? Que peut-on attendre d'un enfant dont la première et fondamentale éducation est totalement déficitaire, voire faussée ? »⁹

Le même argument fut noté et pris en considération par le solitaire de Cumberland qui discernait là le point faible dans l'éducation des jeunes natifs. Il s'efforcera donc de pallier ces manques bien qu'il lui semblait souvent ne pas y réussir : « Je me propose de ne pas passer vite sur ce sujet, car c'est peut-être le plus important ici. Les parents ne se donnent pas plus de peine pour élever leurs enfants chrétiennement qu'ils s'en donnent pour élever de petits animaux ; même encore moins. Ce qui fait que les enfants sont ignorants et méchants. L'hiver dernier je me suis efforcé de les instruire un peu, et depuis ils ont tout oublié ; car que voulez-vous ; les parents ne leur parlent jamais de religion, et ne les font pas prier à moitié du temps. Une preuve de cette ignorance : des enfants de 9-10-11 ans et davantage ne savent pas combien il y a de Dieu ! Ils vous répondent d'un sang-froid qu'il y en a 4-5, qu'Il n'est pas partout, qu'il n'est pas chez eux, etc. etc. Je vous assure qu'il y a

beaucoup à faire. Pour cela il faut du zèle, du courage, de la patience et par-dessus tout de la sainteté. Demandez tout cela pour moi au Sacré-Cœur et à Sa Ste Mère. »¹⁰

UNE IMAGE TOTALEMENT DIFFÉRENTE DE LA FAMILLE

Cette façon étrange de concevoir l'éducation était due à une image totalement différente qu'ils avaient de la famille, conception que les européens avaient depuis tant de temps de la difficulté à comprendre : le simple fait que dans les cultures indigènes d'Amérique du Nord prévalait le concept de « famille élargie ». L'enfant jouissait à la fois de plus de liberté et de responsabilité. En fin de compte, c'est de lui que dépendait la position qu'il occuperait à l'intérieur du groupe. Les fils étaient de toute façon plus importants. Ils contribuaient en effet à l'économie de la famille et représentaient une aide dans la vieillesse. Dès leurs premières années, les enfants étaient laissés libres dans le campement où ils entraient en relation avec les autres enfants de leur âge, s'éduquant eux-mêmes à travers leur participation à la vie sociale de la tribu.

« L'enfant appelait père, mère, frère et sœur, les nombreuses personnes avec lesquelles il était chaque jour en contact. Ainsi, les sentiments et intérêts familiaux s'élargissaient-ils jusqu'à un large cercle d'individus. L'Indien ne considérait pas la famille comme quelque chose d'exclusif ; la tribu ou le groupe représentait pour lui comme une extension des relations familiales. Chaque foyer se retrouvait dans un autre, se mélangeant dans une vie commune où l'intimité, au sens où nous l'entendons, était très réduite. Si un décès survenait, les enfants passaient tout simplement à une autre famille. »¹¹ Participant de près à la vie du groupe, l'enfant indien en assimilait les traditions et les valeurs, devenant ainsi un membre de plein droit après avoir surmonté les rites de passage. « Dans ces rites d'initiation, non seulement le jeune guerrier démontrait sa résistance à la douleur, mais se pliait à la loi de la communauté et devenait l'égal des autres initiés et des guerriers. »¹²

À CHAQUE JOUR SUFFIT SA PEINE

Ce n'était seulement qu'une des grandes différences qui rendaient la culture des peuples natifs si éloignée de la culture chrétienne. Une

autre particularité importante était le manque d'idéaux car les indigènes étaient habitués à vivre sans penser au lendemain. La chasse et la pêche étaient tellement abondantes que le souci de faire des réserves était totalement méconnu et c'est pourquoi, lorsque la situation change avec l'arrivée des colons européens, les indigènes se retrouvèrent pris au dépourvu... « Le chasseur sait qu'il ne doit pas faire des provisions, ce qui appauvrirait rapidement les ressources de son environnement. Le nomadisme permet d'échapper à la règle de la diminution des produits et impose aussi une limite au transport d'objets – ce qui explique le peu de valeur attribuée par les indigènes aux biens matériels. Chasseur et agriculteur, l'Indien passe peu de temps à la recherche de nourriture. Les blancs resteront surpris du nombre de fêtes, de danses et de réunions dans les campements. L'Indien passait beaucoup plus de temps à décorer ses vêtements, à fumer le calumet de la paix ou à jouer avec les enfants qu'au travail. Il ne s'est jamais décidé à travailler. Les colons blancs se lamenteront de la fainéantise, de l'indifférence et de l'absentéisme de ces robustes individus. »¹³

« L'Indien n'a donc qu'une préoccupation : la vie au jour le jour. À chaque jour suffit sa peine. Comment réussir à le faire organiser sa vie selon les exigences de la morale et des dogmes catholiques qui réclament tant de convictions et d'idéal ? Comment lui faire comprendre l'importance de l'éducation qui ne rapporte rien pour le jour même, ni la viande ni le poisson nécessaire à la vie ? »¹⁴ Nous verrons plus loin comment les Oblats et ensuite Mgr Charlebois ont envisagé et réalisé leur mission parmi les populations indigènes en tenant compte de telles particularités.

« En conformité avec la Règle, l'idéal des missionnaires était de porter les Premières Nations au Sauveur en utilisant les méthodes mises au point lors des missions en Provence. Ils ne connaissaient pas d'autres techniques et ce ne fut qu'à l'expérience qu'ils développeront une méthodologie – cherchant sans doute à respecter au plus près les injonctions souvent répétées par Eugène dans la Règle. Considérant que le baptême était le moyen pour porter ces peuples au Sauveur, les missions devaient s'y concentrer. Dans ces missions itinérantes, il était impossible de tenir un catéchuménat à cause de la nature nomade des populations ; il fallait donc profiter des courts moments où les gens se rendaient aux points de traite ou lorsque les missionnaires allaient dans leurs campements. »¹⁵

De ce tableau sur le début de la mission des Oblats au Canada, nous pouvons souligner quelques éléments importants. Tout d'abord concernant le but poursuivi, en conformité avec la mentalité missionnaire de l'époque, leurs efforts ont comme point de mire le sacrement d'initiation du baptême vu comme la porte et le sceau du salut. Pour parvenir à un tel résultat, les Oblats démontreront un grand dévouement qui atteindra souvent à l'héroïsme, et en même temps une grande humanité. Ce sont là des éléments jaillis de leur charisme qui met au centre de la mission ces « plus éloignés » que l'on ne peut toucher que par une grande charité, celle qui a pour fondement la miséricorde divine elle-même. À l'exemple des Apôtres, les Oblats s'efforceront de se faire « tout à tous » apprenant tout type de travail qui pouvait être utile tant à l'évangélisation qu'à leur propre subsistance : « Ils ont exercé tous les métiers, gagnant leur pain à la sueur de leur front et travaillant souvent comme des bêtes de somme (*hommes de peine*). Pour gagner des âmes, ils se sont faits écrivains, linguistes, ethnologues, explorateurs, médecins, architectes et naturalistes. »¹⁶ Par ailleurs, s'adaptant aux conditions culturelles des diverses ethnies présentes, les Oblats « ont appris la langue des indiens qu'ils desservait : le montagnais, l'algonquin, l'iroquois ou le cris ; ils ont composé ou réédité des livres de prière et de cantiques, des catéchismes en langue indienne. Dans leur apostolat ils ont attaché une grande importance à la chapelle comme lieu de rassemblement et de prière. »¹⁷

L'autre trait caractéristique était l'impossibilité de poursuivre la formation religieuse à travers l'institution du catéchuménat à cause de l'incessante mobilité des nations indigènes. Il fallait donc tirer profit de ces brèves périodes où les gens étaient réunis aux postes de troc ou dans leurs campements. C'était la raison pour laquelle fut prise l'habitude de donner des missions auprès des bûcherons comme cela est décrit dans la notice nécrologique du P. Reboul citée dans la thèse doctorale de F. Santucci : « Les missionnaires passaient les mois extrêmement froids de l'hiver à se déplacer d'un camp à l'autre, voyageant en moyenne neuf heures par jour pour atteindre un campement de bûcherons avant que la bise ne se lève. Quel que soit son état de fatigue, le missionnaire devait être de bonne humeur de 18h00 à 20h00, lorsque les jeunes travailleurs

revenaient de leur dure besogne, afin de les mettre en confiance et les « gagner au Christ ». Puis, de 20h00 à 23h00 et parfois plus tard encore, l'Oblat les guidait dans la prière et dirigeait l'examen de conscience, prêchait, confessait et ramenait au bercail la dernière brebis et, pour finir, dormait pendant quelques heures dans des conditions peu comodes. À 4h30 du matin, il se levait et célébrait la messe, donnait l'un ou l'autre avis final, et repartait en voyage pour toute la journée afin de rejoindre un autre campement. »¹⁸

À la discontinuité de la formation on palliait donc en tirant parti des quelques moments où la population se rassemblait même si cela signifiait que la transmission des concepts chrétiens et leur impact sur la vie morale sur la vie morale des néophytes en était rallongée et quelque peu décousue : « Une fois baptisés, les chrétiens avaient besoin d'instructions régulières et d'accompagnement pour pouvoir recevoir les sacrements de la confession et de l'eucharistie chaque fois que les missionnaires pouvaient la célébrer avec eux. À cette fin, les missions se donnaient habituellement lorsque les gens se réunissaient. Les instructions pouvaient ainsi se prolonger et de cette façon les doutes et les difficultés rencontrées durant les années précédentes dans les contacts avec les non chrétiens et les protestants trouvaient là leur solution. »¹⁹

Un processus identique était suivi dans le ministère auprès des chasseurs de bisons qui débuta en 1845 : « Deux fois l'an, les chasseurs de bisons passaient quelques mois ensemble avec leurs familles, vivant sous des tentes, suivant et chassant les bisons. Cela donnait une chance aux missionnaires d'instruire les femmes et les enfants, et d'avoir une certaine influence morale sur les hommes. »²⁰ Les instructions données par les missionnaires, autant que possible dans les langues indigènes, étaient concentrées sur les prières principales, les enseignements de base et les principes de la vie chrétienne. Leur contribution allait cependant bien au-delà du seul enseignement du catéchisme. En fonction de leur charisme, ils cherchaient à se rendre proches de la population ; ils « conseillaient les Indiens et accordaient, dans la mesure du possible, une aide aux pauvres et aux malades. Tous les missionnaires se sont attachés avec dévouement et amour aux Indiens et ceux-ci les ont vénérés et aimés. »²¹

Outre les missions itinérantes, les Oblats donnaient aussi des missions permanentes comme par exemple celles qui se déroulaient

à proximité des forts ou des *townships*, un ministère accompli entre 1843 et 1845. Dans le premier cas, « à l'arrivée, les Oblats salueront la population, l'invitant à une assemblée où ils se présenteront et donneront une instruction d'entrée qui invitera les gens aux missions à venir. Chaque jour, il y aura 3 ou 4 séances d'instruction, entretiens privés et également de catéchisme pour les enfants. »²² Dans ces missions, les missionnaires devaient très souples pour les horaires. Il n'était pas rare qu'un groupe de gens des Premières Nations n'arrivât en dehors des temps fixés ; il fallait donc tout laisser et donner une mission seulement pour eux, avant de reprendre le programme déjà établi. Dans les *townships*, au contraire, les missionnaires cherchaient à soutenir la foi des catholiques irlandais qui vivaient parmi les protestants anglais. Là, « ils allaient de porte en porte portant la lumière et la consolation à un peuple pauvre et ignorant. »²³

Quand ils n'étaient pas occupés par les missions, les Oblats résidaient dans leurs communautés, se livrant à l'étude des langues et accomplissant le ministère ordinaire auprès des gens des alentours. Les moments importants de l'année liturgique étaient célébrés avec une solennité particulière.

Pour ce qui est des moyens utilisés, sur la base de leur expérience les Oblats accordaient une grande importance à tout ce qui pouvait faciliter la compréhension et l'accueil du message évangélique : les cérémonies qui produisaient toujours un grand effet ; le chant vers lequel les natifs étaient naturellement portés ; les images sur les mystères de la foi ; les livres écrits dans les langues locales et qui contenaient des prières, des hymnes ; le catéchisme enfin. Mais ils comptaient surtout sur leur façon de se comporter avec ceux qu'ils évangélisaient. Ce dernier élément était décisif pour un bon accueil de la Parole et il représentait en même temps une forme concrète de l'incarnation du contenu de leur prédication. Les conclusions du chercheur oblat, Cl. Champagne, cité par F. Santucci, quant à la méthode utilisée par les fils de St Eugène sont les suivantes : « Les paroles seules n'étaient pas suffisantes, l'attitude des missionnaires a été vue comme très importante dans l'évangélisation. Les arguments les plus efficaces dans la conversion des indiens étaient la bonté et la charité des prêtres. C'est là la raison de la popularité des missionnaires ; les Pères manifestaient leur charité et leur affection pour les Indiens en les visitant et s'intéressant à

eux, particulièrement en soignant leurs enfants. Leur intérêt concret prit forme dans la construction d'hôpitaux et d'écoles. »²⁴

En conclusion, on peut dire que tout en restant dans l'esprit de leur Règle, les Oblats ont introduit certains changements en fonction de la particularité du territoire canadien. Dans les missions permanentes, ils ont continué à suivre le modèle français du XIX^e siècle qui privilégiait les cérémonies et l'impact émotionnel. D'autre part, l'évangélisation de la population indigène s'effectuait le plus souvent dans des périodes assez brèves suivies de voyages exténuants dans un pays grand comme un continent. Les missionnaires passeront ainsi une grande partie de leur temps à voyager dans des conditions extrêmes et en des lieux particulièrement inhospitaliers ; il ne leur restait finalement que peu de temps pour leur œuvre apostolique. Ils s'efforceront donc de présenter l'Évangile dans ces moments passagers durant lesquels ils se trouvaient parmi les indigènes. Ils s'aidaient d'images, de chants et de cérémonies. Un fait qu'on ne saurait passer sous silence fut l'utilisation de la langue que les missionnaires se devaient de maîtriser avant de commencer l'évangélisation. Un autre fait caractéristique fut la condition de grande pauvreté des indigènes. Cette situation due en grande partie aux colonisateurs blancs, ne pouvait pas passer inaperçue aux serviteurs de l'Évangile et, selon leurs possibilités, ceux-ci s'efforcèrent de subvenir aux besoins de la population. Ils le firent en devenant ses avocats et défenseurs auprès des institutions d'Etat ou auprès de particuliers blancs, en érigeant hôpitaux et des écoles ou bien encore en l'aidant matériellement.

COMMENT MGR CHARLEBOIS A-T-IL PRATIQUÉ LA MÉTHODE MISSIONNAIRE OBLATE ?

Le choix du jeune Ovide de se joindre à la Congrégation des Oblats fut une décision en connaissance de cause pour la mission. Répondant au questionnaire lors de l'entrée au noviciat oblat de Lachine, il écrivait : « C'est moi-même qui y ai pensé seul, c'est-à-dire dès que j'eus entendu parler des religieux surtout des Oblats, par les révérends pères qui venaient au collège ; aussitôt l'idée de les imiter m'est venue à l'esprit, et elle ne m'a pas quitté depuis. »²⁵ Il fait le choix des Oblats précisément parce qu'ils étaient dédiés à la mission et pour suivre son

désir de contribuer au salut de ceux qui ne connaissaient pas encore le Christ. Dans le même document, il explique aussi sa préférence pour cet institut religieux en particulier : « Je préfère les Oblats parce qu'il faut moins de temps avant d'être prêt à exercer le ministère, ensuite parce que je ne me sentais pas assez de talents pour faire les longues études des Jésuites. »²⁶

Environ cinq ans plus tard, à Cumberland, le nouveau prêtre a l'occasion de débiter son apostolat parmi les *infidèles* comme lui-même les appelait selon le vocabulaire de l'époque. Là, il a un premier contact durable avec l'une des ethnies indigènes les plus importantes du Canada, les Cris. Dans cette première mission, il étudie leur langue grâce à un apprentissage certes fatigant mais qui lui en procurera une bonne maîtrise et lui facilitera l'interaction avec la culture de ce peuple ainsi que sa compréhension. Durant cette première partie de son ministère d'environ treize longues années, O. Charlebois prend sa part de la tâche missionnaire de tout résident, immergé dans une rude solitude. Les missions établies étaient en fait le point d'arrivée de missions itinérantes car elles seules étaient capables de procurer une certaine continuité dans l'œuvre d'évangélisation. À partir de 1900 au contraire, lorsqu'il devient préfet du district de Lac Pélican et jusqu'à la fin, même comme évêque – excepté le bref intervalle comme directeur à Duck Lake – sa vie missionnaire se passera en voyages pour visiter toutes les missions et les groupes d'indiens présents sur le territoire confié à sa responsabilité. Il vivra toujours dans la plus grande simplicité, très souvent même dans la pénurie, partageant son temps entre le travail manuel et la tâche pastorale. Mgr Charlebois s'est totalement donné à son troupeau dont il partageait la pauvreté et pour le service duquel il ne s'épargnait aucune fatigue physique.

Ses efforts pour apprendre la langue cris et approfondir la théologie sont complétés par le zèle avec lequel il déploie son activité pastorale au milieu des populations indigènes. À la base de tout, il y met un grand amour pour les destinataires de son zèle apostolique. « Ils m'édifient beaucoup par leur foi et leur pitié. Je les aime et leur suis déjà très attaché. Je voudrais faire de tous des saints si cela fut possible. Cependant, ne connaissant pas encore la langue, je ne peux pas encore déployer mon zèle. »²⁷

Quoi qu'il fasse, visites ou travaux d'édition, tout est pour lui moyen d'évangéliser, par la parole et par l'exemple. Plus globale-

ment, sa manière de faire s'inscrit dans celle des Oblats au Grand Nord canadien comme cela a été détaillé précédemment. [Donat Levasseur note à ce sujet que] « Les missionnaires, dans l'Ouest comme dans le Nord canadiens, avant le développement du pays, établissaient ordinairement leurs missions dans le proche voisinage des postes de traite de la compagnie de la Baie d'Hudson, où se rassemblaient quelques fois par année les Indiens nomades. Ils donnaient alors les exercices d'une mission, consistant ordinairement à un enseignement de la foi sous forme de catéchisme et à l'administration des sacrements. Aux autres temps de l'année, ils s'occupaient des gens près de la mission, visitaient les camps indiens, répondaient aux appels des malades, même s'il leur fallait faire de longs parcours. Dans leur ministère, ils utilisent la langue des Indiens, le catéchisme par question et réponses, les tableaux-catéchismes qui illustrent les mystères de la religion : histoire du salut, dogme, morale, sacrements, notamment celui publié par le P. Lacombe²⁸. Les images saintes, les cantiques et livres de prière en langues indiennes sont également des moyens fascinants et utiles à l'instruction. »²⁹ [Les activités d'Ovide Charlebois s'inscrivent elles-aussi dans ces mêmes catégories : catéchisme, confessions, administration des sacrements, messe et communion, cantiques, visites aux familles, répétitions de chant et prière du rosaire.

TOUT POUR LA CONQUÊTE DES ÂMES

Durant l'hiver 1888 il commence à enseigner le catéchisme. Au début, il fait seulement apprendre aux enfants les prières et les réponses du catéchisme ; puis, peu à peu, il parvient à enseigner la doctrine de manière plus libre à mesure de ses progrès dans la langue.

Comme pour les autres missionnaires de cette époque, lui aussi considère le sacrement du baptême comme la porte du salut ouverte par le Fils de Dieu, et il n'y avait donc pas de fatigue trop pénible quand il s'agissait de l'administrer. Il allait baptiser les enfants ou administrer l'extrême-onction et apporter le saint viatique même s'il fallait pour cela faire de longs voyages. « Je suis très régulier [écrit-il à sa sœur Alma] à visiter les malades parce que je sais que cela leur fait tant plaisir. J'y tiens beaucoup car les protestants se lamentent que leur ministre ne vient pas les voir. Je suis très généreux pour donner l'extrême onction

et le saint viatique. Dès que je vois quelque danger, je ne tarde pas. »³⁰ En prévision d'une épidémie de grippe qui commençait à s'étendre en Amérique, le Vicaire apostolique conseille ses prêtres à propos de l'administration des sacrements : « En vue du salut de leur âme, il serait sage, je crois, d'aller sans retard dans la mesure du possible, dans les diverses groupes éloignés de l'église afin de permettre à chacun de se confesser et de communier en avance car une fois la maladie répandue, vous n'aurez pas le temps de courir au secours de chaque malade. Après avoir administré les sacrements, vous leur ferez comprendre la nécessité de demeurer en état de grâce s'ils ne veulent pas exposer le salut de leur âme. »³¹ Dans une autre lettre circulaire à ses prêtres, le Vicaire du Keewatin insiste pour que les indigènes reçoivent les informations nécessaires pour ne pas être contaminés ou gravement atteints : « Pour vos sauvages, veillez à leur donner à tous les conseils nécessaires pour éviter la contagion. Qu'ils prennent garde de prendre froid. S'ils se sentent touchés par la maladie, qu'ils pratiquent la sudation sans tarder en se plongeant les pieds dans l'eau chaude ; etc., ayant soin ensuite de ne pas s'exposer au froid. L'important est de se tenir au chaud. Se frictionner la gorge et la poitrine avec de l'huile de croton, si l'on en possède, est excellente pour éviter la pneumonie qu'il faut craindre le plus. »³²

[Dans ces lettres] il est souvent fait mention du sacrement de baptême comme de celui de la réconciliation pour lesquels il se rendait toujours disponible. En ce qui regarde le sacrement de la communion : observant qu'à 18 ans les jeunes sont déjà vicieux, d'accord avec son supérieur le P. Bonnard, il ramène en 1888 l'âge de la première communion à 10 ans, préférant « l'innocence à la science ».³³

VIVRE LA CHARITÉ DANS LA RELATION PERSONNELLE AVEC TOUT HOMME

Il ressort clairement de sa vie que toutes les fatigues qu'il endure ont pour but la conquête des âmes pour lesquelles il avait consacré sa vie et sa mission. Pour mener à bien cette entreprise, le P. Charlebois cherche à cultiver une relation personnelle sur la base de la charité chrétienne avec chacun des indigènes avec qui il entre en contact. [Dans une de ses lettres, il confie] : « Ma tactique ordinaire avec les sauvages et métis, c'est de leur parler en particulier. Là je leur dis tout ce que je veux avec douceur, ils sont contents ; tandis qu'en public ça les met

hors d'eux-mêmes... »³⁴ Cette manière de faire correspondait à l'engagement qu'il avait pris durant la retraite annuelle de 1885 : « Un religieux qui n'est pas charitable n'est pas un religieux. Un Oblat surtout qui n'est pas d'une charité irréprochable n'est pas un Oblat ; car c'est sa vertu distinctive, celle que nous a léguée notre bien-aimé fondateur. »³⁵

Sa façon habituelle de traiter avec les indigènes avait tous les traits d'une rencontre familière : « J'aime bien les sauvages, je me plais bien avec eux. Hier soir, je les ai tous réunis, nous avons dit le chapelet, nous avons fait la prière du soir, je leur ai adressé quelques mots sur la dévotion au Sacré-Cœur de Jésus comme meilleur moyen d'éviter le péché ; j'ai lu ensuite une consécration au Sacré-Cœur. Je leur ai parlé ensuite de la Ste Vierge, et j'ai lu une nouvelle consécration à notre Bonne Mère du Ciel. Entre chaque exercice nous chantions des cantiques ; je chantais le couplet en français et ils répondaient en cris. »³⁶

À diverses reprises dans ses lettres circulaires, il encourage ses prêtres à pratiquer ce type d'approche qui doit être une caractéristique du missionnaire, les visites étant le lieu particulier de l'incarnation de la charité chrétienne et du soin des âmes : « Je vous prie de vous montrer zélés pour visiter et assister les malades. C'est un devoir qui l'emporte sur tout le reste. Visitez souvent ceux qui sont près de vous, même lorsqu'ils ne sont pas en danger ou qu'ils soient des malades de longue durée. Une telle visite bien accomplie fait toujours du bien. Faites aussi tout votre possible pour aller visiter ceux qui sont loin quand ils sont en danger. Dans ce dernier cas, montrez-vous prêts à leur donner le saint viatique et l'extrême-onction s'il y a le moindre danger de mort. Aimez vos malades et n'ayez pas peur de les visiter souvent. À chaque visite, ayez toujours une parole pour eux, faites-les prier et priez avec eux, procurez-leur les bienfaits des sacrements le plus souvent possible. Le temps que vous y passerez sera ainsi bien occupé. »³⁷... La vertu de charité donc, cette vertu qui, comme on l'a vu plus haut, était estimée au plus haut point parmi les fils de Mgr de Mazenod.

Pour combattre la pauvreté des indigènes, il mit en place en 1893 l'Association de la Sainte Famille et, en 1898, l'Œuvre du Pain des Pauvres. Chaque jour les missionnaires étaient confrontés à la précarité matérielle des indigènes. Mgr Grandin avait rigoureusement demandé à ses prêtres de ne pas être dispendieux mais de vivre sur le même

style de vie des indigènes et de partager généreusement ce qu'ils possédaient. Les Cris venaient souvent demander de la nourriture ou de quoi se vêtir. Le P. Charlebois réussit à obtenir des habits de certains de ses bienfaiteurs tandis que pour la nourriture il s'en tenait aux règles données par son supérieur ecclésiastique.

« Nous voilà de nouveau en hiver ; il vente, il neige, et il fait froid. Quand j'entends siffler le vent, j'ai le cœur tout petit en pensant à tous ces pauvres malheureux sauvages qui peut-être n'ont ni de quoi manger, ni de quoi se vêtir. Hier encore on a apporté le corps d'un homme trouvé mort dans le bois. Prions donc aussi pour ces pauvres malheureux. Prions surtout pour que Dieu ait pitié de leur âme. »³⁸ Parmi tant d'exemples de la providence divine qu'il rapporte compte aussi celui des indigènes qui dans leur dénuement ne sont pas oubliés de Dieu : « Voyez cette multitude de sauvages qui peuplent les forêts et les plaines de ce vaste Nord-Ouest. Y a-t-il quelqu'un sur la terre de plus pauvre qu'eux et de moins prévoyant ? La plupart du temps ils ne peuvent pas même prévoir ce qu'ils mangeront le lendemain. »³⁹

LA PIÉTÉ ET LES DÉVOTIONS, CHEMIN DE VIE SPIRITUELLE

Conformément à la manière française, le P. Charlebois accordait une grande attention aux divers moments de l'année liturgique. Il célébrait avec toute la solennité possible les fêtes de Noël et de Pâques, et il ne manquait pas d'accomplir les prières particulières des mois de mai et juin. Dans son *Privatim*, il note que le premier vendredi du mois de février 1891 il a consacré les enfants au Sacré-Cœur.

Il cherchait à inculquer à ses fidèles une intense vie spirituelle, et pour cela il encourageait les diverses dévotions de la tradition catholique. Dans un épisode qu'il rapporte, on peut entrevoir l'effet de ces formes de prière dans la vie des indigènes.

« Voici un petit trait bien naïf qui eut lieu dernièrement dans cette mission. Un petit garçon de 9 ans, intelligent et gentil, avait un jeune chien qu'il affectionnait beaucoup et dont il espérait se servir pour voyager plus tard. Mais voilà que tout à coup le petit vorace mangea son poisson trop vite et s'étouffa avec un os. On lui fait des traitements ; mais tout est inutile, il va mourir. Petit Joe (c'est le nom de l'enfant) en est attristé. Il entre chez sa grand'mère, se met la figure entre les deux

mains et semble on ne peut plus affligé. Soudain il se dresse, et avec un air de triomphe : “Je sais, dit-il, ce que je vais faire”. Il est déjà nuit, mais n’importe, il part et court vite. Il se rend à l’église, s’agenouille devant la statue de St Antoine de Padoue et lui parle ainsi : “Toi qui es dans la maison du Grand Esprit, tu es puissant pour prier pour les hommes. On me dit aussi que tu aimes les pauvres et que tu es content quand on te donne quelque chose pour le soulager. Tiens, si tu veux guérir mon chien, je te promets que la première fois qu’il travaillera et qu’il gagnera quelque chose, je te l’apporterai pour tes pauvres”.

Il s’en retourna consolé et plein de confiance. Mais l’état du chien n’avait pas changé. Il ne se rebuta pas : “Viens, dit-il à sa petite sœur, nous allons réciter le chapelet ensemble, peut-être que St Antoine nous écouterait mieux étant deux”. Pendant que le reste de la famille était occupé à travailler ou à parler, les voilà tous les deux dans un coin à compter les grains de la prière. Mais la petite, elle, ne tenait guère à la vie du chien ; aussi était-elle distraite et semblait vouloir s’occuper de toute autre chose. Vite elle en est reprise : “Fais donc attention, St Antoine ne nous écouterait pas”. Le chapelet fini, ils se couchèrent ; mais petit Joe ne dort pas en paix, il ne songeait qu’à son chien. Aussi de bonne heure, il était sur pieds et sa première visite fut pour son malade. Mais quelle surprise ! Quelle joie ! Un vrai miracle ! Son cher chien vient le rencontrer la queue droite sur le dos et de bonne humeur comme jamais. »⁴⁰

QUELQUES ÉLÉMENTS SPÉCIFIQUES

Sa méthode reflète fidèlement la vision missionnaire du XIX^e siècle, l’expérience de sa Congrégation et, non des moindres, les directives données par la Propaganda Fide à ses missionnaires à l’œuvre dans toutes les parties du monde. Cette mentalité missionnaire qui a évolué et grandi en maturité, comporte comme éléments fondamentaux l’apprentissage de la langue locale et, dans une certaine mesure, l’interaction avec les cultures locales. En négatif toutefois, elle manifeste encore une attitude assez fermée vis-à-vis des us et coutumes traditionnels. Mais cette question sera surmontée vers la seconde moitié du XX^e siècle et de manière fondamentale avec le concile Vatican II. Nous pouvons donc maintenant dresser une liste de quelques-uns des

éléments spécifiques de l'action pastorale de Mgr Charlebois :

- Une charité concrète, un dévouement total et un amour sincère pour les indigènes ;
- Une grande importance donnée à l'éducation et à l'enseignement religieux ;
- L'utilisation des cérémonies, des cantiques et des images ;
- L'emploi de la langue locale ;
- Le partage total de la pauvreté et de la vie dépourvue des indigènes.

Quand il se retrouve en 1933 à l'hôpital de Le Pas, à l'âge de 71 ans, c'est à la suite d'une bronchite aggravée par un ultime voyage de 8 kilomètres en traîneau à chiens malgré la maladie, pour aller visiter un malade de la mission de Barrows qui l'avait appelé. Pour ses funérailles, il avait demandé qu'elles soient célébrées avec la même simplicité que celles des indigènes. Sur sa tombe seront seulement inscrits ces quelques mots « Je ne possède rien en propre ». Encore un autre signe de la manière dont il vécut sa vie missionnaire : totalement au service des autres, en tout semblable à ses chers natifs.

POUR CONCLURE

La longue période durant laquelle l'infatigable missionnaire oblat, Ovide Charlebois, a déployé son œuvre évangélisatrice parmi les natifs de ce vaste pays d'Amérique du Nord, entre 1887 et 1933 – donc environ 56 ans – nous fait découvrir une page particulière de ce que fut l'histoire des missions de l'Église à un moment historico-social précis : le Nord-Est canadien à la fin du XIX^e siècle et le début du XX^{ème}. Entre la rigueur du climat, la pauvreté des moyens et l'adversité des hommes, l'œuvre d'O. Charlebois apparaît à nos yeux comme une entreprise véritablement audacieuse qui fait de lui le Père de l'Église du Keewatin. Il est clair cependant que personne n'aurait pu affronter les obstacles de sa vie missionnaire ou supporter le rythme intense de la vie qu'il a menée sans être animé d'un zèle chrétien véritable et d'une charité tant humaine que surnaturelle authentique pour les destinataires de son souci pastoral, les Indiens Cris.

En cela, il fut poussé par un profond désir de sanctification personnelle qui ne pouvait pas faire abstraction du bien spirituel de ceux qui

ne connaissaient pas encore le trésor précieux de l’amour du Christ. L’enseignement chrétien qui met au centre la personne humaine et en fait découvrir la beauté ainsi que sa dignité en présence de Dieu, lui révélant ainsi le bonheur éternel auquel elle est appelée, n’était plus seulement une philosophie originale mais une réalité vécue et témoinnée par ceux qui la prêchaient. Finalement, c’est la véritable mission de l’Église : témoigner en paroles et par la vie la volonté salvifique de Dieu à l’exemple du Maître. Dans cette optique, le Serviteur de Dieu Ovide Charlebois apparaît comme un témoin authentique et un exemple à suivre.

Au terme de notre parcours (...), nous pouvons reprendre de manière synthétique les points les plus importants qui ressortent de notre enquête sur son action pastorale.

Une action missionnaire qui appartient à l’histoire même de l’évangélisation déployée par l’Église depuis les origines.

(...) La mission de l’Église prend sa source dans la vie trinitaire et se déploie à partir de la prédication des Apôtres (...). Ce sont les Douze qui reçoivent le mandat missionnaire de l’annonce de l’Évangile à toutes les nations. C’est sur cette base que la communauté des croyants, soutenue par l’Esprit, poursuit à travers les siècles et jusqu’à nos jours la mission du Fils. De la province périphérique de Palestine la foi chrétienne embrasse dès les premiers siècles les peuples du Moyen-Orient, de l’Europe et d’Afrique du Nord. À la fin du XV^e siècle, le Nouveau Monde est découvert et avec lui naît une nouvelle Église locale. En Amérique du Sud le christianisme s’impose à un rythme relativement rapide tandis qu’en Amérique du Nord il doit faire face à des défis plus nombreux : l’immensité des territoires, les conditions géographiques et climatiques rigoureuses – surtout au Canada – et, de plus, la grande diversité sociale des cultures indigènes. C’est là, à cheval entre le XIX^e et le XX^e siècle, que se situe l’action du P. Ovide Charlebois. Deux éléments importants la caractérisent : le contexte historico-social du Canada au XIX^e siècle et la particularité de la Congrégation à laquelle il appartenait, les Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée, présents seulement depuis quelques décennies. La connaissance de ces deux réalités contribue à donner une image claire de son apostolat en ce qui concerne l’utilisation des langues locales et des méthodes d’approche

des peuples autochtones.

Une attention particulière aux populations indigènes qui se place tout de suite au centre de son cœur et de sa mission.

Dès le début de sa vocation missionnaire le jeune Ovide exprime le désir de travailler pour les natifs qui ne connaissaient pas encore le Christ, une œuvre à laquelle il s'est préparé spirituellement avec méticulosité et sérénité.

À partir de 1887, lorsqu'il devient résident à Cumberland, O. Charlebois se rend tout de suite compte que la mission était loin d'être quelque chose de poétique mais bien plutôt une réalité prosaïque et qu'elle réclamait un réel désir et un engagement total. Une fois surmontée la difficulté de la langue, il cherche à entrer toujours plus en contact et en harmonie avec ses chers Cris. Une relation vitale qui le marquera pour toujours. En qualité de préfet du district de Lac Pélican, il a la chance de mieux connaître la complexité de la réalité missionnaire avec ses problématiques concrètes dont la pauvreté des indigènes et des missionnaires s'avérait être l'une des plus importantes. À la direction du pensionnat de Duck Lake pendant 7 années, il se rend compte de la nécessité de la formation humaine et religieuse des enfants et des jeunes gens comme d'un élément essentiel pour l'intégration et la défense des droits des ethnies indigènes. La dernière étape de sa vie mais aussi la plus lourde, à la direction du nouveau vicariat du Keewatin, le voit se dépenser corps et âme à la construction matérielle et humaine de l'Église locale. Il voyage sans cesse sans se soucier des dangers et des difficultés. Il prodigue ses conseils et admoneste ses missionnaires. Il visite toutes les communautés indigènes, cherche à subvenir à leurs besoins, construit des églises et fonde de nouvelles missions.

Le partage total de la vie de ceux qu'il évangélise.

Né dans une famille modeste et habitué dès son plus jeune âge à travailler, le P. Charlebois conserve ses saines habitudes dans son service de l'Église. Qu'il soit missionnaire résident à Cumberland ou à Duck Lake, ou missionnaire itinérant, ou bien encore préfet de Lac Pélican et ensuite à Le Pas comme évêque, il a toujours vécu dans une grande simplicité, manquant parfois même du nécessaire. Une situation guère différente de ses chers indigènes contraints à tant de privations.

Le dépouillement dans lequel vivaient les missionnaires eux-mêmes ne lui permettait pas de répondre à toutes les demandes qui lui étaient adressées et les seuls moyens auxquels il pouvait recourir étaient la prière et la générosité des bienfaiteurs même si elle se révélait insuffisante à couvrir les besoins incessants des natifs. La relation étroite qui finit par se tisser entre Mgr Charlebois et ses indigènes fut telle qu'elle prit les traits d'une relation de famille. Pour eux (...) il fut un père qui ne pouvait pas résister à leurs appels et ils étaient pour lui comme une famille au sein de laquelle il se sentait comme l'un d'entre eux.

Appréciation des vertus humaines des natifs et contribution à la sauvegarde de leur langue.

Vivant parmi les natifs, Ovide Charlebois apprend peu à peu à reconnaître leurs qualités humaines et spirituelles. Durant ses voyages et à travers ses contacts quotidiens, il eut la possibilité de découvrir la candeur et le savoir-faire de ces hommes et femmes habitués à vivre en solidarité les uns avec les autres, et en total respect de la nature. L'intelligence, la générosité, l'humour et une foi simple mais forte étaient autant de traits caractéristiques notoires. Un autre aspect considérable de son action apostolique fut l'importance donnée à la langue locale. Jeune missionnaire, il en avait ressenti la nécessité et bien qu'il enseignât en français certaines prières ou matières scolaires, cela ne signifiait pas qu'il avait renoncé à utiliser la langue locale. En fait, dans sa pastorale, il utilisera principalement la langue cris. Directeur d'école à Duck Lake, il insiste pour que les enfants apprennent à prier dans leur propre langue ; évêque, il compose et traduit lui-même des chants et des prières. Il demande aux pères de maîtriser la langue des indigènes et désire ardemment la fondation d'un journal en langue cris. La langue étant le facteur principal dans la transmission de la culture d'un peuple, O. Charlebois y aura donc contribué pour beaucoup.

Un style simple et direct dans sa prédication fondé sur la rencontre personnelle et la compassion.

Le Serviteur de Dieu, Ovide Charlebois, a toujours été une personne simple et sans grande prétentions intellectuelles. Lorsqu'il est nommé pour le siège du Keewatin, il en est donc profondément bouleversé se considérant comme la personne la plus inapte pour ce type

de ministère. Et ceci vaut tout autant pour sa prédication où il fut à la peine dans les premières années à cause de la pauvreté de son vocabulaire. Il résolut donc d'y remédier par la cohérence de sa vie en ayant à cœur de vivre en conformité avec ce qu'il enseignait. Une caractéristique qui ne passait pas inaperçu à ceux qui l'entendaient et qui le faisait s'approcher d'eux en toute authenticité. De fait, il privilégiait ordinairement la rencontre personnelle et la visite des personnes dans leur cadre habituel, une pratique très appréciée des natifs. Une façon de faire qu'il n'hésitait pas à encourager sans cesse chez les jeunes prêtres.

Depuis son entrée au noviciat de Lachine, en 1882, le futur évêque oblat n'avait jamais cessé d'être au service de l'Église. Sa première préoccupation est le salut des âmes pour lequel il s'efforce de se perfectionner à travers la pratique de l'humilité, de l'obéissance, de la pauvreté, de la charité et de la chasteté. La sainteté de vie vers laquelle il tend n'est cependant pas pour lui-même dans une recherche égocentrique ; elle s'exprime à travers sa relation aux destinataires de sa mission qu'il voudrait bien mettre sur le même chemin qui conduit au bonheur, non pas seulement terrestre mais surtout éternel. L'annonce de la foi passe en même temps par le concret de sa vie quotidienne et les nécessités du corps et du matériel. C'est pourquoi il travaille sans cesse à établir des structures permettant à l'évangélisation d'avancer : écoles, hôpitaux, églises, résidences missionnaires. Le territoire immense du vicariat qui fut confié à soin pastoral manquait de tout : édifices, personnel et finances. Peu à peu et sans perdre courage durant les 23 années qu'il en fut le pasteur, Ovide Charlebois a fait face – et dans la majorité des cas en s'engageant personnellement – à tous les besoins si bien que le jour de son décès il put laisser derrière lui un héritage important. Par son travail, il a édifié l'Église du Keewatin, pouvant être ainsi compté parmi les Pères de l'Église canadienne et se distinguant comme un grand apôtre des Premières Nations.



40 YEARS IN PAKISTAN

VICTOR GNANAPRAGASAM, OMI

I was eleven years old and was studying in St. Patrick's College, Jaffna, when Fr. Nallaiah, omi, made me realize that I am called by God to serve Him and His people. I told my mother about it and she told me, "You should join the priests who wear the cross"; and fortunately for us, our then parish priest too was an Oblate: Rev. Fr. J Nicholas omi. Thus began my life's journey towards priesthood and religious life. While I was in the Juniorate in Kohuwela, Novitiate in Kalutara, and Scholasticate in Kandy, quite a few Oblate missionaries passed through Sri Lanka and made it a point to visit us whenever their ship docked at the Colombo harbor for a week or two. They not only spoke to us about their missionary experience but also encouraged us to become missionaries; in fact they used to ask us who would like to go to the overseas missions; and I was one of them who always put up my hand. The seed sown by these missionaries remained dormant in me and began sprouting up after I was ordained a priest. I expressed my urge for overseas missions to the then Provincials, first to Very Rev. Fr. Anthony Fernando, omi, and then to Very Rev. Fr. Lucien Schmitt, omi. I waited for seven years for my request to be fulfilled.

When the news about my transfer to Pakistan began spreading among the Oblates, many local Oblates, especially my friends, were trying to discourage me; in fact, one of the senior Oblates told me, "Since you know three languages, you could do the service of three priests here, if you go to Pakistan, you would be only one priest with one language". On the other hand, the foreign missionaries who were still serving in Sri Lanka were very happy and proud; they exclaimed, "We thank God for letting us see the fruit of our labor; we came as missionaries to Sri Lanka and we are proud to see Sri Lankans going out to other countries as missionaries". On my part, I was convinced that I have been called by God to the foreign missions and I didn't want to look back after putting my hands on the plough.

At last, the long awaited day arrived and I boarded the plane at the Colombo Airport, together with Rev. Bro. Henry Mendis, omi, on our Missionary journey to Pakistan. We landed in Karachi, the commercial capital of Pakistan, on the 19th of May 1973; and we were received by the De La Salle Brothers of Sri Lankan origin. This made us feel at home from the first day itself. We were the second batch of missionaries to Pakistan; the pioneers were Rev. Frs. Theogenes Joseph, Job Basil Silva, and Lester Silva. They were the “Oblate Valentines” of Pakistan who stepped on the soil of Pakistan on the 14th of February, 1971, accompanied by the late Fr. Lucien Schmitt, then Provincial of Sri Lanka. The following day we flew to Lyallpur (now Faisalabad) where the pioneer Oblates received us with open arms. After the initial honeymoon period, we were packed off to Murree to learn Urdu in the language school of the Protestant missionaries. The cool weather of this hill town, compared to the hot weather of the plains where we spent a few days, came as a great relief to us. The next three months we spent studying Urdu and then we were brought back to the plains, to the Diocese of Lyallpur.

For almost a year, I was pushed from pillar to post, to the parishes of Gojra, Chak 424 and Khushpur to acclimatize myself and to have a variety of experiences in these three parishes. In August 1974, I was appointed Parish Priest of Gojra parish and I began my missionary work in earnest. I also had the opportunity of serving in the parishes of Toba Tek Singh, Khanewal and for a short while in Derehabad. The rest of the years were spent in administration as Mission Superior (2 years), Delegation Superior (12 years) Apostolic Prefect (8 years) and Apostolic Vicar since 2010.

My first shock came on my first Christmas in Pakistan as the Parish Priest of Gojra. I had observed that there was a practice of taking the offertory collection at the end of the Mass, during the final hymn, after which the people dispersed. I found it rather odd and I told the catechists that collections should be made at the offertory since it is the offering of the people during the Mass. The catechists had their own objections and explanation but I insisted on having the collection during the offertory. At the offertory, two of us priests stood in front of the altar for the people to bring their offerings. As the collection was being made, I observed that the people were dispersing after giving their offering to us as if the

Mass was over. I asked the person at the microphone to announce that the Mass is not over which he did again and again and requested the people stay on till the Mass ended. It didn't have much effect; by the time the offertory was over, more than half the crowd had gone away. I was really astonished and dumbfounded; I just couldn't imagine that there could be Catholics who didn't know about the Holy Mass. That made me aware of the need for a lot of catechizing to be done.

One of the problems I faced was the climactic conditions: extreme heat during summer and extreme cold during winter, which I was not used to. I was also confused with the long and short days of summer and winter which took some time for me to get used to. The next problem I had to face was the oily food and buffalo milk that didn't agree with me and kept my stomach running for days and weeks. At one stage I felt that I could not go on like this and even thought of returning to Sri Lanka, but God who called me came to my rescue and my stomach got settled after a year or two.

The Christians were the poorest lot in Pakistan; the majority of them were illiterate and employed in menial and servile jobs. They were heavily indebted to their landlords or brick kiln owners; and whole families lived as bonded laborers. In spite of their poverty and illiteracy, they were a pleasant lot; humble and simple in their ways, always ready to welcome visitors, especially the religious leaders, and gave them their best.

Christians were constantly discriminated against by the majority community in every walk of life; and they had no other choice but to bear up whatever the situation demands as Christians. The encouraging factor is their strong faith; although they know that they would be much better off by converting to Islam, they continue to remain Christian and feel proud of it.

Bribery and corruption was rampant; nothing could be done without greasing the palms of those concerned, which was beyond the means of our poor Christians. We also began to realize our helplessness to help these poor and needy people because we didn't have the money to bribe everyone for everything; and we didn't want to do it either. In fact, we were wondering whether our presence was of any help to these unfortunate people; if not, what was the purpose of our coming here as missionaries? This made us depressed and discouraged at times and we

felt as helpless as the people themselves. Well again God's hand was with us and the protection of Mother Mary; that made us realize that our helplessness helps us identify with our people and be in solidarity with them.

Every parish had many outstations and most of our time was spent visiting the people of these outstations and catering to their spiritual and material needs. I began my missionary tour on a bicycle, then on a motorcycle; and later on I was given a jeep. When visiting the outstations, we always went with the catechist in charge of that area and spent three to four days going from village to village. In most of the villages there were no churches or chapels, so we had no other choice but to celebrate the Holy Eucharist in a house or in the open. In those days, tables and chairs were very rare materials in the houses of our Christians; in fact in one of the villages I was surprised and puzzled that I couldn't find even a small table in anyone of the Christian houses to celebrate the Holy Eucharist; finally I had no other choice but to celebrate Holy Eucharist on a trunk (metal box used to keep clothes). In place of chairs, all we had were what I used to call, "multi-purpose beds" which were used for sitting, eating, sleeping, entertaining visitors etc. For quite some time I was confused at the fact that when they put the bed out, they not only cover it with a sheet but also keep a pillow at one end of the bed. I was wondering why they were doing so, since I had no intention of sleeping as soon as I went to a house. Later on I came to know that because many sit on a bed, the one who is most respectful sits by the side of the pillow; if someone more respectful than the one seated near the pillow walks in, the one closest to the pillow moves away from it and gives the place close to the pillow to that person; a beautiful custom.

Catechists are the live-wire of Christianity in Pakistan; in my opinion, Christianity would have died a natural death if not for the service of the catechists. The parishes are vast with over 100 outstations, and it was impossible for one or two priests to regularly visit the people of their parish or to cater to their spiritual needs. The catechists were assigned 10 to 15 villages which they regularly visited and were present to the people, catechizing them, praying with them, preparing them for various sacraments, participating in their joys and sorrows, listening to their problems and solving whichever ones they could, assisting the priests in all matters pertaining to the people of the villages entrusted to their care, etc.

We priests always go with the catechist of that area on our visits to the outstations; they guide and help us in every way in our ministry to these people. They inform the people of the time of our visit, arrange for a place to celebrate the Eucharist, arrange for our meals in some house and also arrange for a house big enough for us to spend the night. The order of sleeping in a house would be: the priest, catechist, male members and the female members of the family and finally at end of the room is the buffalo; this order is followed in winter when it is cold; in summer we sleep out in the open or on the roofs of their houses.

The biggest problem I faced in these villages was the lack of toilet facilities. For a call of nature, we had to go outside the village into the wheat fields, sugarcane plantations, or in the shrubs; for this, too, we could not go anywhere and everywhere; traditionally or customarily separate directions are marked out for males and females which only the people of the village know; so we had to depend on their help for this important and unavoidable exercise. Since I was used to toilet facilities from my childhood, I found this to be the most difficult experience of my missionary life.

Practically every house had a buffalo or two and when a buffalo dies, the people of the village and relatives, even those living in other villages, come to sympathize with the family that lost the buffalo, as if a member of the family had died. I was amused and confused till I came to know that a buffalo is their “nutritious bank” and considered as part of the family. Buffalos in the house are a source of fresh milk, home-made butter, butter milk, etc., which keeps the family members healthy. At the same time when they are in need of big money for some occasion like a wedding in the family; they would sell a buffalo; so a buffalo is considered a mother and a bank in the family and a loss of one of them is a great loss for the family.

The unbelievable reality I had to face right at the beginning of my parish work was to come to know that there are people who can’t even sign their name. I went to a village to solemnize a wedding; after the ceremony I requested the bride and the groom to sign the Marriage Register; I was stunned when they told me that they did not know how to sign. The catechist asked me why I had not brought the inkpad for them to put their thumb impression. Well, I told him I never knew that there were people who couldn’t even write their own name. Finally, I

squeezed out some ink from the pen and got their thumb impression on the Marriage Register.

One of the things that I admired and adopted is “Kawaali”: folk-songs, very popular in Pakistan. Since the majority of Christians were illiterate, the early missionaries made use of Kawaali to catechize our people. They composed Bible stories and psalms into Kawaali music and had the people learn at least certain parts of the Bible by singing them in Kawaali form. I was very much taken up by this form of education and tried to use it in my apostolate by adopting Kawaali music for religious as well as secular purposes: the Passion of Christ, Value of Education, Cleanliness etc. Of course, I had a catechist musician who was able to compose on the topics I gave him and the response from the people was very encouraging.

The illiteracy rate is high in Pakistan, but it is higher among the Christians. Many didn’t know their date of birth or that of their children; as I have already mentioned, many couldn’t even sign their name. Education was not a priority for them, in spite of the many mission schools in almost all major cities. They were satisfied with the menial and servile work that they were doing; they were quite happy that they had a job to do and quarters to live in and pass it on to the next generation. Further, they didn’t have the financial support needed to educate their children, especially for higher education; if they managed to educate their children, they were not able to find a job, mainly because they didn’t have the money needed to bribe those concerned to get a job. Educated young men were not ready to do the job that their parents do and being unable to get a job in line with their education, they live a jobless life and get involved in all sorts of evil such as drugs, alcohol, gambling etc. and become a big burden for the family. This is a serious problem that we are grappling with and trying to rectify or at least minimize the harm done by this cancerous situation within our Christian communities.

I am not ashamed to acknowledge that after coming to Pakistan I was able to understand the Bible better than when I was in Sri Lanka:

In Sri Lanka, beds are heavy and cannot be carried by one person. So Jesus healing a paralyzed man and telling him, “Arise, take up thy bed and go home” (Mt. 9:6) was something I was not able to understand. How could a single person carry a bed? Here in Pakistan, the

beds are made of bamboo frame, woven with ropes; they are very light and easily carried around for various purposes, the “multi-purpose bed” that I had already referred to. So, now I realize that a single person could carry a bed without any difficulty.

The roofs of houses I have seen are conical and nobody climbs on them except for some repair work, so I was wondering how four people could climb a roof carrying a sick man on a bed (Lk. 5:19) In Pakistan, all the houses have flat roofs with stairs leading up to the roof and people climb the roof almost daily for drying clothes, wheat, chilies or anything that needs to be dried in the sun; and in summer it is a common practice to sleep on the roofs. So now I understand that climbing up a roof with a sick person is not an impossible task as I thought. It is only here in Pakistan that I have seen workers standing at street junctions waiting to be hired for work (Mt. 20:1-7) or people being wrapped in a white cloth for burial (Jn. 11:44 Lazarus; Lk. 23:53 Jesus).

The extended family system is a custom that I admired because it reminded me of life in an early Christian Community (Acts 2:44-47). It was the norm for all married male members of the family to live with their parents in the same house, with their own families. Whatever they earned, they gave to their mother and she spent according to the needs of all the family members, i.e. each contributed according to his/her capacity and each received according to his/her need. I found it difficult to understand how they were able to live in this manner; but they, on their part, felt a certain amount of closeness and solidarity in their lives and felt less threatened socially or economically to fulfill their needs. In fact, I felt that this is the way we as religious are expected to live. Unfortunately this system began to crumble with so called civilization and modernity and is dying a natural death. It is a pity that such a beautiful custom is dying off.

The Braadri system is another custom that I have a high regard for. In every village or ethnic group, a person was elected as the leader of that community called “Chaudry”. He was accepted and respected by the people and they were always ready to listen to him. He was consulted in all matters pertaining to the community or even of individual families. His presence was important on all occasions and he always participated in the joys and sorrows of all concerned. Any dispute or misunderstanding in the group entrusted to his care is solved by him

in the customary way. This system came in handy in our apostolate too; whenever we had some problem to be solved with an individual or group, there was no need for us to approach the people concerned; we only had to inform the “Chaudry” about it and he would settle it in his own way. Unfortunately, this custom too is dying a natural death.

If I don’t write a few lines on the hospitality of the people of Pakistan, I would be unjust towards them. I was new to the country and I was in the parish of Chak 424/J.B. as substitute for the Parish Priest who had gone abroad. One evening two men came from Faisalabad to meet the Parish Priest; since I didn’t know the language well enough to talk to them I asked the two people who were in the parish compound to assist me. With the help of these two people I made the visitors understand that the parish priest had gone abroad and asked them how they would get back to Faisalabad, since it was getting dark. They expected me to give them accommodation for the night, but I was reluctant since I didn’t know who they were. Realizing my reluctance, the two who were helping me with my language problem were ready, not only to give them a place to stay but also provided them supper and breakfast, although they too didn’t know them. I felt ashamed that the ordinary people are better than me, a priest, but that is the sense of hospitality of the people of Pakistan. Whether in a village or house or in a bus or train, their hospitality is something extraordinary which I have not experienced in any other country, even in Sri Lanka. This value too is dying off because thieves and fraudsters began exploiting the hospitality of the people.

The faith of the Christians of Pakistan is something to be admired. Living in an oppressive Islamic milieu, the majority of them remain faithful to their religion, in spite of the difficulties and discrimination they have to face because of their religion. Most of them accept as the Will of God whatever happens to them in life. Whenever I went to a house where a tragedy had taken place, even before I could say something to console them, they would say, “It is the Will of God and we accept it”. In fact sometimes I feel that we priests and religious don’t have the amount of faith that these ordinary people have.

After my forty years of missionary presence in Pakistan, I find that our Christian community has lost and gained in various ways. We have lost many beautiful and important values and customs to the so called

civilization and modernity; at the same time, we have gained a lot in other ways. Now, our Christians are more educated in the religious and secular field; they have better jobs, both in the Government and private sector; economically they are much better off; they have more self confidence and feel that they are well accepted by most of the people of the majority community; they keenly participate in politics and get involved enthusiastically in activities of national interest. Now they feel they have an identity that makes them strong and confident enough to assert their rights and challenge the Government and the majority community when injustice is done to them. On the whole, there is tremendous progress in the lives of our Christians from what they were forty years ago; and I feel happy to see the growth of our Christians in Pakistan in various fields of life leading to a better future.

In spite of the various problems I had to face, I would say that from day one I was happy with my missionary call to Pakistan and jumped into the fray with full of enthusiasm. I love the people of Pakistan, and in turn they shower on me their love and affection. I am certain that the words of Jesus is being fulfilled in my life: “I assure you that anyone who leaves home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the Kingdom of God will receive much more in this present age and eternal life in the age to come” (Lk. 18:29). I have received much more than I have sacrificed, and I am thankful to God for his kindness and Mary, our Mother, for her maternal protection. I am waiting for the second part of the above-mentioned verse to be fulfilled “and eternal life in the age to come”.

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Vita et missio

A NEW CALL TO CONVERSION: THE PROPHECY OF CONSACRATED LIFE

LOUIS LOUGEN, OMI

I would like to share with you some of my impressions about the life and mission of the Congregation after three years as superior general. I am very grateful to the members of the Central Government for their assistance with the input of this reflection which is the fruit of our experience of three years. I am indeed thankful to them and to all the members of the General Administration for their proactive and collaborative leadership for the sake of the Congregation. I would like to emphasize that there is a great deal of service rendered to the Congregation by many generous Oblates working in the General Administration. We are blessed to have such dedicated and responsible men.

From October 2010 until September 2012 the Central Government has been living the experience of transition. There was the change of administrations occasioned by the elections at the General Chapter of 2010. Then other personnel changes took place: Fr. Emmanuel Mosoeu became General Councilor for Africa (Sept. 2011) when Fr. Evans Chinyemba Chinyama was nominated Bishop; Fr. Marek Jazgier was appointed to the office of Secretary General (also Sept. 2011); and Fr. Marc Dessureault became the Treasurer General (Sept. 2012). I would like to express our gratitude to Fr. Joseph Mokone, Fr. Ryszard Szmydki and Fr. Luc Tardif and their respective Provinces for having so generously freed up these Oblates to work in the Central Government.

Together with the reality of transition, our ministry as the Central Government has been an effort in collaborative leadership in our concern for the mission of the Congregation. We have given great importance to Constitution #130:

The Central Government is made up of the Superior General, the General Council and the General Officers, and is responsible for carrying out the policies and directives of the General Chapter as well as for assuring the animation necessary for a united missionary body. They constitute the Central Government community and work closely together as a team.

We share a common vision that we are co-responsible for the Congregation in our ministry of governance, administration and animation. We seek to be a collaborative team, working very closely together, living out the principle of subsidiarity in our responsibilities.

We believe strongly that C. #130 calls us to form Oblate apostolic community. We live this in our commitment to pray together, to participate in meaningful community meetings every Friday evening, to support one another and to be together in various ways. We are forming, with God's grace, a communion of life among us which enables us to act corporately in our leadership of the Congregation. We are not individuals doing a job, acting autonomously, but we see our service to the Congregation as the fruit of our communion of life. Building apostolic community among us is ministry and mission, not just for our own lives; it is a service to the entire Congregation. We are achieving a solid basis of acceptance among us with the respect and freedom of brothers who are trying to live in a deep way the call to conversion in our apostolic community life and in the mission of leadership to which we have been called. In our life together we find strength, friendship, fraternal questioning and spiritual bonding. For each of us this has been an immense source of grace and joy. This experience calls us to continuous conversion.

During these three years as the Central Government we have discovered much depth, richness and life in the 2010 General Chapter's "Call to Conversion". This mandate is the center of our mission as Central Government. We are trying to live the call to conversion very concretely in our apostolic community life; in the exercise of our lead-

ership; in the stewardship of finances; in the ministry of formation; and in the mission of the Congregation as the 34th General Chapter of 2010 challenged the Congregation to live. I am profoundly grateful to each member of the Central Government for his generous commitment to leadership in the Congregation and for the support, wisdom and collaboration we share in our responsibilities and our community life.

GRATITUDE TO THE MAJOR SUPERIORS OF OBLATE UNITS

I would like to recognize and thank all of you for your dedication and generosity in your ministry of leadership in the Congregation. We are blessed because each one of you has accepted the call to be the Major Superior of your Unit. You have done so with prayer and discernment and without hesitation. This is a real sign of Oblate availability and our spirit of obedience, characteristics of Oblate life that I believe flow from the heart of Saint Eugene. While I have heard of some Congregations that are having great difficulty to find Major Superiors, we are blessed with men who come forward to assume this responsibility. Thank you!

When I wrote to you in February of this year in preparation for the Interchapter I mentioned that we come with Easter joy and also with the concerns and challenges of our responsibilities. We face very different situations from Unit to Unit around the world. Some Units are filled with young Oblates and have formation challenges; others are faced with overwhelming financial challenges; some Units, with many young members, seek the presence of older Oblates for wisdom, light and support; others experience the effects of a vocational drought and the increased age of their members. There are Units which have been heavily affected by allegations of cultural, physical and/or sexual abuse or exist within a local church reality where there has been much suffering in these areas. Some Units are struggling to discover or rediscover the sense of mission today while others are immersed in innumerable missionary challenges. We are missioned in Units that once were thriving Catholic cultures and now the practice of the faith has all but disappeared. In other Units we find young communities of Catholics that are vibrant and growing. In still other realities we find ourselves to be a vibrant minority seeking to be partners in dialogue with others who constitute the majority. We live widely diverse

realities as Oblates and it is good to pay attention, listen and become more aware of this during the Interchapter. Let us hear the Spirit so that we also discover the common challenges Oblates face throughout the world.

In reviewing some of our statistics one notices that we have had many departures from the Congregation, mainly of younger Oblates. We have some Units which have had very troubled histories and solutions seem difficult. There are some delicate political and religious situations which make Oblate life and mission very challenging. Some Units are very limited because of fragile personalities and dysfunctional people unable to assume responsibilities or to work or live together with other Oblates. With society's influence on us some have been confused morally in the area of finances, sexuality and the exercise of authority and have acted improperly. These challenges and the exaggerated emphasis on the individual and his personal achievements diminish the unity of the Congregation and urgently call us to conversion. Our communion as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate needs careful and intentional nurturing.

As you face the challenges of this reality, please care for yourself in a healthy and holy manner. Each of us must have the genuine Gospel love of self so that we can be fully alive for the ministry we have received to lead our Units, to exercise the charism of Superior with immense hope, charity and zeal. Three qualities are essential for good health: first of all, your own faith life has to be cultivated, not alone, but with a spiritual director. Secondly, collaborate closely with your Council and Treasurer; and three, live in an apostolic community and cultivate a communion of life with other Oblates. Of course there are other important things we have to do like taking care of our physical health, having good friendships, a time for leisure and a good retreat every year. If we find we are depressed, laden with worries, can't sleep or eat and feel isolated, we should seek good professional help without being ashamed of that.

Our relationship with the Lord Jesus is central in our lives. Give prolonged time to regular personal silent prayer each day. Work closely with your council in the spirit of collaboration. Live what you call others to live, that is, a life of apostolic community. In these areas I think we all have room for personal conversion as called for by the Chapter.

OUR MISSION TODAY

“We are a missionary congregation. Our principal service in the Church is to proclaim Christ and his Kingdom to the most abandoned.” (C#5) The 35th General Chapter “Call to Conversion” is a call to us to revitalize our life and mission in light of the Gospel and in the power of the Spirit. At this moment in the Church’s history, full of many shadows and internal troubles, we are engaged in discussing what the “New Evangelization” signifies; we live with intensity the “Year of Faith”; and we are getting to know our new Pope, Francis. We live these times with hope, trust and Mazenodian audacity. As Oblates we profess our love for the Church and our loyalty to the Holy Father, Francis.

The Call to Conversion of the 2010 Chapter has been preparing us to be Oblates who are radically free and audacious, going beyond personal interests to embrace the most challenging missionary projects in common with other Oblates, with laity, and with other priests and religious. As we give ourselves to the process of a deep personal and community conversion we are enabled us to cross borders and to be available to serve in the most difficult missionary situations with and in service to the poor and those who are most abandoned, the offspring of society’s injustice. The “Call to Conversion” is preparing us for a change of mind and heart, for Gospel freedom, for availability so that we are revitalized for mission. I invite us to pray often for the grace of conversion and to open ourselves beyond all our resistances, fears and complacency so that we will be available for the mission to preach the Gospel to the most abandoned.

THE CALL TO CONVERSION IN OUR OBLATE LIFE TODAY

In view of the purpose of this Interchapter meeting, I will share with you what we, the members of the Central Government, see as unfinished work in each of the five dimensions presented by the 35th General Chapter when it called us to “a profound personal and community conversion to Jesus Christ.” I will highlight some of the most important and concrete areas to which we should give our attention.

The Call to Conversion: Apostolic Religious Life

Our identity as religious or consecrated, vowed men is at risk throughout the world. The call to conversion, personal and communal, is urgent for our future as a religious congregation. Apostolic religious life is our commitment to the following of Jesus and consists in: living the evangelical counsels; living in faith; and living in apostolic community (CC&RR #11-44). The ‘spirit of the world’ is penetrating our way of life and is diminishing, even obliterating, the meaning of consecration as following Jesus in a radical way. Elements of this ‘worldly spirit’ are: the emphasis on the individual, his needs, likes, wants, personal happiness; the accent on comfort, material things; the tendency to consume, to buy, to have and possess; the desire for independence and autonomy; self-centeredness; the primacy of work and of the need to achieve personal success and recognition, even in terms of salary; psychology centered on one’s personal self-realization and self-actualization. I will touch on each of the three areas of consecrated life (vows, faith, community) and mention briefly some of the challenges we have in maintaining our vowed life as the radical commitment to follow Jesus.

The Evangelical Counsels: (see CC&RR #12-30)

– *Poverty*: the simple life; characterized by following Jesus who became poor (Ph 2:6-11); asceticism; solidarity with the poor; corporate witness as religious; and concern for the environment; are some elements of the vow of poverty which are disappearing from among us as the tendency for comfort, consumerism and materialism dominates us. The commitment to share in common all we have earned and received is being weakened by the desire to have personal money and acquire private possessions. The awareness of each one’s responsibility for the common sustenance of the community is being replaced by a sense of entitlement in which one expects the community to supply all his desires.

– *Chastity*: is a personal response to a special invitation from Jesus and characterized by passion for God, intimacy with him and mature, healthy relationships within and outside apostolic community. This vowed commitment is seriously compromised by society’s influence

upon us: fragile human psychosexual maturity; sinful double lifestyles; superficial utilitarian relationships; the exaggerated emphasis on sexuality in the media; and great confusion around chastity, celibacy and sexuality. We are accepting society's views on sexuality and instead of listening to the voice of the Church, we adopt the opinions of the mass media in this area.

– *Obedience*: following Jesus in free obedience to the Father is being compromised because as part of society, we too suffer from individualism, the desire for personal, unrestrained autonomy and self-gratification; we are less available for the most difficult missions; we resist communal commitments and collaborative team work. Humility has practically vanished from our religious vocabulary and is replaced by the emphasis on doing my will.

– *Perseverance*: following Jesus, faithful in love until the end, is being replaced by a functional relationship with the Congregation that resembles an employee in a company; healthy Oblate identity and the sense of belonging to a religious family is diminished. The tendency now is a sense of provisional belonging to the Congregation inasmuch as it is useful to fulfill personal needs, goals and projects. The Congregation is often merely a useful place to advance in studies and opportunities to further one's personal career, achieve a sense of personal realization and self-worth and even to make a good salary for private use.

Living in Faith: (see CC&RR #31-36)

The serious commitment to deepening our relationship with God through a life of prayer, individually and communally, is being eroded by an over-emphasis on work, a lack of faith, activism and practicality. At times in our communities there is an absence of and indifference to prayer and the sacraments as though we were strangers to God. Sometimes there are ideological struggles and the value of prayer itself is negated; at times the way a community should pray cannot be agreed upon; at times the spirit of the community is weak, antagonistic and divided; at times faith seems absent. The spirit of trusting in God's Providence is absent or even ridiculed. The pursuit of holiness (one of the finalities of our Congregation) is understood as empty pious spiritualism. There is a tragic disconnect between the world of faith and our everyday life even

for us, men of God. I believe the “Year of Faith” has a special relevance for the renewal of the Gift of Faith for religious, Brothers and priests.

The Apostolic Community: (see CC&RR #37-44).

We struggle to establish and live a common life in our communities because the individual’s life/work/preferences take priority over the commitment to communal life: prayer, meals, recreation, meetings, sharing of material goods (salary, etc.) are readily sacrificed for the individual preferences and schedule. There is an increasing tendency for a single lifestyle and a loose, optional connection to the Unit and local community. Oblates choose to attend community functions on the basis of whether or not they are free and are interested in the particular community activity. The unconditional commitment to the community and the sense of belonging are becoming weakened. Our unity, “cor unum at anima una,” so emphasized by Saint Eugene, is compromised.

N.B.: I believe that one of the reasons the vocation of Oblate Brothers has diminished among us (and sadly we seem unconcerned about this) is because we are losing the sense of what it means to be consecrated men whose lives are based on the evangelical vows, on a life of faith and on apostolic community. We are happy enough to become a loose association of priests who write “O.M.I.” after our names and have a mission cross on our walls. We don’t see the need for Brothers because we are losing our conviction about the value of consecrated life itself.

THE CALL TO CONVERSION: OUR OBLATE MISSION

Communal Discernment of Missionary Commitment

The most serious and concrete call to conversion in the area of mission is to continue to make real the objectives of the Immense Hope Project of the previous administration: that our participation in God’s mission be a communally discerned project carried out and evaluated in and through apostolic community in each Unit.

The Immense Hope Project sought to animate provinces, delegations and missions to engage in an ongoing collaborative, communal process of evaluating the mission in light of societal and ecclesial reali-

ties, our personnel, the actual ministry commitments and the resources of each Unit. This was not a project for six years or twelve years, but a conversion to a way of being missionaries so that Units discern and establish a communal missionary program and periodically evaluate and adjust it.

Fr. Steckling's question to us in the "Report of the Superior General to the 35th General Chapter" (p. 35) is extremely poignant: "Today do we discern God's will as to our congregational mission to evangelize the poor or just keep doing by inertia what we are used to?"

Preaching Jesus Christ

A deeper question calling us to conversion is our conviction about bringing the poor to faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who reveals God as a community of love, the Trinity. Our life is about proclaiming and witnessing this faith to the poor. We have a unique treasure to offer humanity and we cannot become lost in the ideology that all religions lead to God and are just the same. We cannot compromise on our faith in Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life of the world. At the 2010 Chapter the question was posed whether we are one more nongovernmental organization (NGO) rather than missionaries of faith. Our own passion for Jesus Christ, an essential element of the Oblate charism coming from the heart of Saint Eugene de Mzenod, must drive our mission to proclaim his Good News. This is of course done with respect, dialogue and through a process of peace.

The Church

Linked to the centrality of Christ is also our faith in the Church and our unconditional love for it. The Founder's inheritance to us is that we love the Church as we love Jesus and vice versa. The "Preface" to the CC&RR describes the devastation of the Church and the call to rebuild it. It is not unusual to hear Oblates who declare they are for the "church of the poor" and not the hierarchical Church. There is no such division. Or again, the Oblate who affirms he is committed to the Kingdom and has gone beyond the Catholic Church. These statements are comprehensible as times because of the sins of the Church which are our sins. Our charism calls us to a deep love for this privileged sacrament of the Kingdom with all its humanity and in its sinfulness, still believing in

its holiness as the Body of Christ, in constant need of conversion. We are Church and we seek conversion. This calls for great humility and an incarnational understanding of the Church.

Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation

This theme seems to cause a certain discomfort among us at times. Our CC&RR state this is an integral part of evangelization, not an optional appendix for those interested in it. The Central Government experienced the call to conversion around this dimension of our Oblate life and mission. We spent significant time at three plenary sessions to discern what the Lord was asking of us in this area. The members of the Central Government fully embrace this commitment as stated in our CC&RR, as proposed by the Church and demanded by the Gospel. All Oblates are called to integrate peace, justice and the integrity of creation as constitutive elements of our preaching of the Good News to the poor. The ministry of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation in all the activities in which it is involved must be at the service of evangelization, leading others to the Gospel, to encounter Christ and to the Church. In all dimensions of Oblate life and in our ministries: pastoral, catechetical, liturgical, formation for faith, Biblical formation, mission with youth, etc., we are called to help people understand and be committed to Catholic social doctrine, connecting faith with the concrete questions of life. Living justly, acting as peacemakers and stewards of creation are essential to our mission of preaching the Gospel to the poor and most abandoned.

THE CALL TO CONVERSION: SERVICE OF LEADERSHIP AND AUTHORITY

“The Provincial Superiors share in the Superior General’s responsibility for the whole Congregation. They will be in regular communication with him and cultivate relationships with other Provinces, especially those of their own Region.” (C#99).

Oblate Units Restructuration

Constitution # 98 states: “It pertains to the Superior General in Council to establish Provinces, to change their boundaries, and to suppress or unite existing Provinces. Before taking any such actions, the

Superior General will consult those concerned.” The ideal process is for the Units to elaborate a plan and propose it to the Central Government for approval. This takes time, patience, dialogue. Between Units there are sensitive issues (e.g., the location of the house of formation; questions of finances; etc.); sometimes we have delicate histories and wounds among us. The restructuring process goes to sleep.

The members of the Central Government hear various Units requesting us to do something about restructuring. It seems it is time for us to intervene as a catalyst to help Units talk to each other and work toward a plan. It is painful to see some Units languish when it could be otherwise.

I would like to work closely with you through the General Councilors to have a good restructuring plan in place for 2016. I call us to this sign of conversion for our life, for the sake of the mission, for vocations and for the lay people who collaborate with us.

Obediences

Our world is on the move and so are Oblates! We have to analyze what is happening and why. We need not only to organize this better, but to help create a climate of discernment and to prepare all who participate in missionary exchanges. Our communities are becoming more international; are we making the deeper change, becoming intercultural? This is not something that happens by simply having various nationalities live together, but is an intentional process to know, respect, accept and be mutually enriched by the meeting of cultures.

In these complex times, missionaries need a strong and healthy human basis for crossing borders. There must be present a deep spirituality, a generous heart and flexibility to adapt. There must be preparation to face the dying and rising in moving from one culture to another. The individual who is sent, the receiving Unit and the specific community which receives the Oblate from abroad must all be prepared in a holistic way. Accompaniment must be provided for a missionary being sent to another culture and Unit.

We must be open to very frank and fraternal conversations about the motivations for missionary exchange. I have received many complaints that a tendency among us today is that missionaries ad extra are

moving to certain Units in order to find a better life; they demand many personal items upon arrival; they become quickly engaged in personal fund raising; and they seek higher education for personal betterment. These are not missionary motivations for sending Oblates to evangelize in missions outside their home countries. Oblate formation must help the conversion process in the area of our motivations for mission. A discernment process for being sent on mission *ad extra* should help clarify motivations of the individual and articulate the expectations of the individual, the sending and receiving Units. A sensitive issue to be reviewed in this regard is sending missionaries in exchange for monetary remuneration or opening missions for economic motives.

In regard to first obediences, I have been called by the Central Government and by some of you to be more courageous in giving young Oblates first obediences outside of their home Units in keeping with St. Eugene's generous heart and the Congregation's tradition. We can be too focused on our particular Unit's situation and we forget that we are a global missionary Congregation and there are needs around the world for which together we are responsible.

I will offer you a questionnaire to help deepen the discernment for first obediences with you, the young Oblate, the General Councilor and the Formators. I will assign some of those asking for first obediences to Units other than the home Unit and I ask for your support and collaboration. Saint Eugene's generosity inspires us in sharing personnel, whether abundant or scarce, with the entire Congregation. We will be blessed for this.

Consolidation of Formation Houses

This is fundamentally a question of our conversion as leaders. We are responsible together for the common good of the Congregation and this applies to formation. In some Regions we are moving ahead admirably. In other Regions there is little collaboration, Oblates are not made available or prepared for the ministry and our formation is very weak. Sometimes the formators have other ministries and are not exercising the ministry of formation. The poor formation programs are reflected in the high number of scholastics who abandon their vocation.

I believe it is sinful for us to bring young men into poorly organized formation programs and it must stop. When we study the files of

young Oblates who have been dismissed from the Congregation and/or priesthood, we usually see evident signs in the formation years. The quality of formation was poor or entirely lacking and the People of God, the Church, the Oblates and the individual are all made to suffer.

Administering the Unit

It is a dimension of leadership along with governance and animation. We are a society within the Church and within civil society; our life has legal implications. We can no longer live as though we are an informal group with clerical privileges and neglect the professional requirements of good administration. Our administrative responsibility is serious and one to which we must be more carefully attentive.

Administration may not be the particular gift of the Unit superior, but he must have an Oblate or lay assistant for the administrative aspects of our life. The alternative, to ignore this and not give it its due importance, will result (and has already resulted) in many unfortunate situations, waste and loss of the patrimony of the poor.

I ask you to please cooperate with the Treasurer General, the Secretary General and the Procurator General in their work to make sure our administrative and legal affairs are in proper order. I am grateful to the members of the Central Government who worked on a revision of the Administrative Directory. Let us become familiar with it and use it.

Oblate Brothers

The vocation of Brothers in the Congregation is essential to us as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. I invite leaders to a deep conversion of heart so that we become convinced of the important place of Brothers in our Congregation, even where there is cultural resistance. I request that you foster the vocation of Oblate Brothers in the Units that have vocations. Let us do something special to promote the vocation of Oblate Brothers for the 200th anniversary of the Congregation in 2016.

A Brother is a sign of what our life as consecrated men is all about. The Brother's life calls us to be conscious and intentional about our vocation to live the evangelical counsels, to a life of faith and apostolic community. Oblate Brothers are witnesses to our deep communion of brotherhood in Jesus Christ and the fact that we are all sons of the Father. Brothers remind us that our Congregation is much more than a loose association of priests.

The decision to become a Brother needs discernment and positive reasons. The young man must be assisted to discover the motivations for becoming a Brother and to be fully integrated into the community. A quality program of formation with a trained formator throughout the initial years must be provided. It is no longer viable to simply send a candidate for the Brotherhood or a Brother in temporary vows to work in an Oblate house and consider that as his formation period.

The new edition of the General Norms of Formation has included norms regarding the formation of Brothers and a more detailed program of formation for Brothers is being drawn up by the General Formation Committee.

Personnel for the General Administration

I have written to all of you concerning the needs the General Administration has for personnel. I am happy that some of you have generously responded to my appeals. We continue to seek assistance.

Aix en Provence

The community in Aix is under the General Administration at this time. I am very grateful to Fr. Yves Chalvet de Récy and the Province of France in helping to make this change in status and for the various Oblates from the Central Government who worked on this new arrangement.

We have four men assigned there and the fifth is expected by the end of the year. We hope that the Centre International de Mazonod will continue to be truly a holy place for us and will serve the Congregation, lay people and other religious associated to the charism. Your support is needed to staff and to use the Centre. I would like to suggest that Provincial Councils or the Leadership of Regions plan to make retreats together in Aix at some time in the three year period leading up to 2016.

THE CALL TO CONVERSION: FORMATION

Permanent formation is the ongoing commitment to conversion which is animated by the leadership.

Collaborative planning among Units for initial formation

Unit leaders must move toward quality formation with reasonably sized houses of formation (the fruit of collaboration). This is an attainable goal. Why can we not achieve this? Conversion calls leaders to work together for the good of the Congregation so that we provide excellent preparation for our men so they will be the best missionaries to the poor. Is this a goal for 2016?

Prepared Formators

Unit leaders must expend time and finances to form men, not just in academic preparation, but in the art of formation with all the skills this demands. With planning and collaboration among Units we must achieve this.

THE CALL TO CONVERSION: FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP

We are called to conversion around the area of stewardship in finances. Together we are responsible for the finances of the Congregation. We must have concern for the entire Congregation and each Unit Superior, collaborating with his Council and Treasurer, must prepare for the future.

Formation for Treasurers

It is essential today and has to be planned. The professional competence of the Treasurer is an extremely serious responsibility and the co-responsible functions of the Unit Superior and Treasurer are essential to be respected in line with the principle of subsidiarity.

Wisely Appoint the Treasurer

The Unit Superior with his council must carefully choose a trustworthy person competent in financial administration and capable of collaboration. The Treasurers are part of the administration of the Unit. The Unit Superior respects the responsibilities and areas of competence of the Treasurer and follows the proper procedures in relationship to the finances of a Unit. A good working relationship is essential among the Superior of the Unit, the Treasurer and Council. The Major Superior sees to it that the Treasurer has the appropriate opportunities for ongoing formation in light of his duties as Treasurer.

Difficult Days

The Congregation is in a very challenging time financially that has been announced for many years. I am told that there is mistrust and disbelief that we really have financial challenges. Conversion to face the reality is necessary.

CONCLUSION

The Interchapter is an opportunity between Chapters to see what we have done in relationship to the last General Chapter; to see what remains to be done in regard to unfinished work from the last Chapter; to begin remote preparation for the next Chapter. I have presented here a reflection from the point of view of the Central Government on what are some challenges around the theme of conversion to which we should attend. This is not “The Superior General’s Report” which is to be given at the General Chapter. I have presented the unfinished challenges in light of the Call to Conversion that we as Central Government have perceived in Oblate life and which we understand as the call of the Spirit in the ongoing process of conversion.

At another opportunity I will share the wonderful signs of life among us. The visits which I make to the Units of the Congregation are a great privilege and give me great pride, joy and hope. I am humbly aware that the Church has a great need for our Congregation and its unique charism. I am convinced that right now we live a *kairos* moment and that the Holy Spirit has been leading and inviting the entire Congregation to *conversion*. It is marvelous to realize that the Spirit has been assisting us and we have been able, by his power, to respond to his call! We are being offered a unique opportunity of grace and blessing to be set on fire with apostolic zeal for God’s mission. Let us seize the moment as we prepare for the 200th anniversary of the Congregation in 2016. The Spirit at work in us is able to do far more than we can ask or imagine! (Ef.3:19-20).

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THE MISSIONARY OBLATE: WHAT KIND OF MAN?

OSWALD FIRTH, OMI

The Inter-Chapter was taking place in the context of the *invitation to conversion* addressed to the entire Congregation by the last Chapter. A *kairos* moment of renewal and change of mentality, orientation and a return to the center. We need to transform these words into action.

We are currently in the Resurrection Mode. The fact is that even the Apostles found the Resurrection something difficult to believe. It did not occur in the normal course of events. It was something out of the ordinary. It was never really expected, despite all the prophesies to the contrary.

The fact is that Jesus had to prove to his own disciples that he had risen from the dead. Most of the phrases in Luke's narration bear this out: Why do these doubts arise in your mind? Look at my hand and my feet, touch them and see that I am no ghost or hallucination. Everything about my resurrection has been written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets. In Mark 16:9-15, it is said that Jesus reproached the eleven for their incredulity and obstinacy because they refused to believe those who had seen him (ordinary people and women), after he had risen from the dead.

How much do we *listen* to God's voice coming through simple people? The question needs to be reversed today: "Do people believe in us, Missionary Oblates? Do they seriously listen to us when we tell them about Jesus and his mission?". Do what we *are*, what we *do* and what we *tell people* show that we truly believe in the Lord? If we do, then "show me!" That's the challenge! We will perhaps remember the words from a well known movie: "Tell me no tales, sing me no songs, read me no rhymes, don't waste my time; if you're in love... show me!" Says Mahatma Gandhi: "...It's better to have a heart without words than words without a heart".

Today, what we need is witness more than words. Pope Francis' witness – washing the feet of the detainees (helpless, hopeless people),

irrespective of whether they were male or female, spoke more than words. Witness speaks volumes more than words. So too should our lives as Oblates be.

A PAGE FROM THE 2007 INTER-CHAPTER

Having said this, being a Missionary Congregation, one would have expected the theme of the 35th General Chapter to redefine or rediscover our mission in the context of contemporary reality. But surprisingly, a strong feeling emerged at the 2007 Inter-Chapter that a personal and communitarian conversion must necessarily precede mission. Mission is entrusted to a trusting disciple. Our mission and our message to the world would be futile and sterile if the missionary is not a genuine, trustworthy disciple called, transformed, challenged, and sent into the world.

What appeared to be in question in 2007's Inter-Chapter was not our mission and our role in the Universal Church, but the credibility of our personal lives, our attitudes, our values, our priorities and our community life which were both intrinsically and extrinsically linked to our mission. So, it was more *the man* than *the mission* that raised concerns in the minds of the capitulants. Our lives were to be a tangible expression of our Mission.

There was a strong feeling that it was the “messenger” and his way of life that mirrored the “message”. Form the missionary, the disciple, and the mission would follow. But today how far is the missionary and his mission centered on, focused on Jesus Christ? That's the crucial question the Chapter had to battle with.

So, it is logical that the Chapter document constantly reminds us that “Jesus Christ is the center of our life and mission...” and to arrive at this we need a “profound personal and communal conversion: a new heart, a new spirit, a new mission”.

But where does the process of conversion of the missionary begin? Should it not commence at the very initial stages of formation? We need to be aware that many of our candidates entering religious life carry with them scars and wounds of psychological fragility due to an unstable family background, wounded personal experience, mixed or confused religious motivations, and so on.

A QUESTION OF PRIORITIES

Not that “Mission” was less important, but the interior person of the missionary, the very vehicle, the instrument which carried the mission to the world, was becoming our major cause of concern. This was especially true in the context where cases of child and cultural abuse were sweeping across the Church in many parts of the world.

As for our Mission, we had fairly well identified its substance and its essential components, leaving it in the hands of the local churches to define the most suitable milieu and the medium to transmit the Good News of God’s Kingdom. These essential components were adequately captured at various General Chapters and in the revised Constitutions and Rules. They consist of, in brief, the following:

- Our mission is “evangelization”, sharing the Good News especially with the poorest and most abandoned segments of society, irrespective of social, geographical or cultural differences. We are evangelized by the poor as much as the poor are evangelized by us. We proclaim a message of liberation, of dignity and of freedom.

- Our mission is preached and ministries exercised in and through community.

- Being international, intercultural and concern for justice are vital traits of our mission.

- Our governing structures are collaborative, participatory and flexible, based on the needs of the mission.

- We share our personnel and financial resources to maintain quality and continuity of our missionary endeavors.

It has taken years to reclaim this identity, but we have now reached fundamental agreement on these principles – not contested thus far – but they still need to be worked on so that they transform us from catch phrases to mission in action that may otherwise ring hollow when confronted with living reality.

AN ASIAN CONVERSION

But there is a missing element in all this, and that missing element is “The Soul”, the “Inner Spirit”, “The Flavour”, “The Quality”, which can come only from the “Local Church”, the “lived reality”, “the context”.

And right now, given the locus of the Inter-Chapter, that “context” is Asia, home to two thirds of the world’s population, and the birth-place of all major religions and cultures, the largest Continent on earth. In spite of her defects, deficiencies, and contradictions, *this is the century of Asia*. This must have special relevance to a Congregation planted nearly 150 years ago in Asian soil.

It would be futile searching for a substantive reality called Asia. The adjective “Asian” is a certain quality, a flavor in the life and multifarious cultures and traditions of the Asian people. There is no such thing as *the* Church of Asia, or *a* Church of Asia, but we have an Asian Church. And wherever that Church might be in Asia, whether in India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Afganistan, Laos, Vietnam, Korea, etc. there are two constitutive elements typical of what is Asian, namely its *poverty* and *spirituality*. These are both cultural traits, the axis which determines what it is to be Asian. To be a missionary in Asia says Asian theologian Aloysius Peiris, one has to be baptized in the spirituality of Asia and crucified in the poverty of Asia.

Poverty has nothing to do with the lack of something, but the spirit of *sharing* everything we have, “kenosis” (the emptying of oneself). There was a time when there were no fences round houses, around rice fields. Land and water (most precious gifts of nature) were shared for the survival of all.

Spirituality is not meditation, but integration of every aspect of life into the sacred, so that there is no more a selfish “I”, but a “oneness with the sacred and the divine, with nature, persons, history, relationships, ways of life, struggles and communion with all beings alive, and with those gone beyond the horizon”.

– So, being Asian does not mean *immersion*, but *incarnation*, entering under the skin of the other.

– It means going from *text* to *context*.

– Not *crossing borders*, but *transcending all borders* into a new reality.

– From being *global* to being *local*.

– From being *inter-cultural* to being *cross-cultural*.

– From being *present* to being *rooted*.

– From engaging in *inter-religious dialogue* to being *inter-religious communion*.

– From being *religious* to being *inter-religiously* religious.

– From being *preachers* to becoming *witnesses*. (Preach always, use words only when necessary: Francis of Assisi).

– From being a *community* of the *church* to being in *communion* with the *kingdom* and its values.

– From being *followers* to being *disciples*: being called, challenged and sent by the Community.

– Moving from *meditation* to *contemplation*.

– Not to *bring* the good news (in the garb of a foreign theology) but to *discover* the good news (a hidden treasure) and its challenges through Asian realities, joys and sorrows, hopes and frustrations of people).

– To be *servants* not *masters* (Oscar Romero).

– From being *colonial* and *static* to being in *constant evolution*, dynamic and creative. This is where vocations are, where theology is being formulated and vibrant new communities are in growth and being salt and light to the world. (Pope Francis reminds us not to be ‘tasteless salt’. Recall the words of St. Eugene: to be burning lights not smoldering wicks).

– We combine both *prophetic* and *mystic* in our daily lives (Karl Rahner; Albert Nolan).

Being Asian means to live with and love nature. The environment does not belong to us, we belong to the environment.

There are our own examples of this Asian approach to Mission, and I can think of five of them:

– Fr. Michael Rodrigo: who being a Catholic priest preached Christianity by living Buddhism.

– Fr. Marceline Jayakody: commonly known as the priest of the temple.

– Bishop Marcello Zago: A Christian prophet and a Buddhist Mystic.

– Fr. Felix Mevel: Setting up human communities among Christians and Buddhist and Islamic children.

– The Ashram experience in India, living the Gospel through a Hindu inspirational way of life.

There are other prophets and mystics, spiritual poets and ascetics, like Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Matteo Richi, unfortunately, we do not have the time and space to ponder over these spiritual giants. The Spanish Martyrs do not belong to Spain alone, nor simply to the Catholic Church. They belong

to the whole of humanity because of their exemplary faith and courage.

These are not examples of syncretism or hybrid, but genuine examples of *conversion to an Asian module of evangelization*.

We still need to bring the “Context” into our life, our mission, our formation and our servant-leadership. We may have failed not in our efforts in building the *Church* (history shows we have done much), but we have failed in promoting *Kingdom* values while being sons of the Mother Church. We are still a maintenance Church not prophets of the Kingdom. This is partly due to our framed theology. Time for Oblates to invest in and start their own philosophical and theological centres of well researched theological thinking. There was a time when we conceived and gave birth to a “philosophical-theological spring” in Colombo, but it suffered suffocation.

WHAT KIND OF MEN?

This brings us then to the theme of the Inter-Chapter which flows from the Founder’s internationally famous Preface to our Constitutions and Rules, and comes to you in the form of a question: “Missionary Oblates, what kind of Men...?” The focus is primarily on “the-man-the-missionary” rather than on the “mission”. On the formation of the missionary Oblate, rather than on mission formulation. The Preface gives us certain insights into the theme:

... They are convinced that if priests could be formed, afire with zeal for men’s salvation, priests not given to their own interests, solidly grounded in virtue – in a word, apostolic men deeply conscious of the need to reform themselves, who would labour with all the resources at their command to convert others – then there would be ample reason to believe that in a short while people who had gone astray might be brought back to their long-unrecognized responsibilities.

Let me rephrase the challenging theme, “Missionary Oblates, what kind of men are we to convert ourselves into?” An immediate response may be traced in the CRR of 1818 where St. Eugene lays it out clearly: “Apostolic men”. As Bishop Marcello Zago explains, “This was not an *ethical ideal*...it was an *evangelical ideal*, that is to say, inspired by the Gospel and following the same dynamic of Christ in whom the

Good News was identified with the person". Genuine shepherds of the people, ready to sacrifice their lives, if the need arose.

Quoting the Founder he says:

How indeed did our Lord Jesus Christ proceed when he undertook to change the world? And how should men who want to follow in the footsteps of their divine Master conduct themselves if they, in turn, are to win back the many souls... (Marcello Zago, *In The footsteps of St. Eugene*, Rome, 1997, pg. 46-47)

Beyond all doubt, in the mind of our Founder, it was Jesus Christ who was the real founder of our Congregation, and the one we should emulate if we are to be authentic, genuine and credible missionaries. Jesus was to be our model. So, we should be, as the Founder says, "apostolic men deeply conscious of the need to reform themselves". We are to be Apostolic men not simply by what we "do" but by what we "are". It was not numbers the Founder was concerned with – these can be replaced – but with quality men.

It is time, therefore, to reroute ourselves and return to the path the Founder has mapped out for us, "priests not given to their own interests, solidly grounded in virtue – in a word, apostolic men deeply conscious of the need to reform themselves". This is conversion.

CONVERSION AND THE FOUNDER

Our own Francis Cardinal George, at the very inception of the 35th General Chapter, reminded us that for us Oblates, "conversion" is not an alien concept: "The Oblates, as you know, were born from the conversion of St. Eugene de Mazenod, especially at that stirring moment of Good Friday 1807".

The conversion to Christ crucified is our *first conversion*.

From his conversion the Congregation was founded for the conversion of the poor, first in Provence and now of the world". "Conversion to Christ crucified", continues the Cardinal, "was at the very heart of De Mazenod's life and, therefore, of the mission of the first Oblates and of our mission today. We are not just dispensers of Sacraments in parish churches. Constant conversion to Christ is assu-

red in our formation in contemplative and meditative prayer to which we are all introduced in our novitiates.

Conversion to Christ is closely linked to *our love for the poor, our Mission*. Oblates have generally and genuinely been faithful to that part of our charism, perhaps more certain at times about the “pauperibus” part of our motto than about the “evangelizare” part. We live with the poor without romanticising them, for they are not automatically saints. They are sinners like everyone else, but they too have values that are deeply human, as we see in the writings of the Founder.

There was a time when we started not with Christ, nor with Scripture, nor with conversion; we started with the global social trends, trying to be faithful to the signs of the times, as the Church was instructed to do in *Gaudium et spes*, the Second Vatican Council’s document on the Church in the Modern World. It wasn’t that Christ wasn’t present in our deliberations; of course he was. But we started in imitation of the CELAM documents, analysing the situation using any available secular analysis.

Into the challenge of the social trends we inserted Christ, seeing him as someone who accompanied the poor than as their saviour from their sins. The journey from CELAM to Aparecida has undergone a change. Aparecida starts with the encounter with Jesus Christ as the first moment of mission, not as something that comes after social analysis.

THE RICH CONCEPT OF CONVERSION

The concept of “conversion” is, of course, one that is pregnant with a variety of meanings that has relevance to the Oblate we are called to be.

– “Conversion” can mean being able to reach our full potential, having a “*new heart and a new spirit*” (Ez. 36:26). We could also refer to this kind of conversion as “Metanoia”, not simply changing old ways, but changing the way we look and perceive reality as Jesus did. As our own Ron Rolheiser reminded us during the last Chapter: “Metanoia” has a rich etymology, bringing together two Greek words: ‘meta’ (above) and ‘nous’ (mind). This literally connotes a “big mind and a big heart” as opposed to a “petty mind and a small heart”. What is opposed to “Metanoia” is “paranoia” (*fear* that resists conversion and change).

To “convert” is to become “unparanoid” and living to your fullest potential.

– “Conversion” can also mean a “turning from something to something”. It is in reality a turning from “self-centredness” to “absolute faith and reliance on God”. “Letting go”, “surrendering to the Lord”. Conversion begins “within us” and “among us”, and this is where God’s Kingdom begins to grow and blossom. Here “conversion” is emptying of one’s “Ego” – “Kenosis” - so clearly demonstrated in John 13:2-5, at the ‘Washing of the feet’.

This was a striking act of humility, of “self-emptying” of his social status as *teacher and Rabbi*; a renouncing of his religious superiority as the *Messiah*; or his royal heritage as descendant from the *lineage of Kings*; stripping off a lot of outer things such as pride, moral judgments, ideology, including his personal dignity. Clearly something close to the heart of the Asians.

– “Conversion” may also mean “crossing-over” from known and secure borders or boundaries to the unknown or lesser known. Jesus was always “crossing borders”. Two very striking example of this are found in the episodes of the Samaritan woman at the well and the Syro-Phoenecian woman (Mk. 7:24-30; Mth.15:21-28). Conversion in this instance too is a challenge, to leave secure borders and be open to the Spirit working in other cultures, faiths and behaviour.

– “Conversion” is the perception one has of one’s resources and their potential to deliver for the wellbeing of the community. It’s the equivalent of David standing before Goliath. Our resources may always appear *inadequate*. David had faith in himself, but more, in the power of God. So too with the multiplication of bread. Little is always more in the hands of Jesus.

THE OBLATE: A MAN FOR THE FUTURE

Bernard Dullier, former provincial of the Province of France, and certainly one among the best informed on the life, the work and the spirituality of St. Eugene, writing on the 10th Anniversary of the canonization of the Founder, places before us certain fresh insights on our Founder which may be relevant to our theme of being centred on Christ. He says:

From his Good Friday of 1807, until the last day of his life, Eugene allowed himself to be surprised, amazed and captivated by Christ. He allowed himself to be transformed by Christ. He accepted the loss of his ready-made ideas. He accepted that Christ would daily reveal to him a new face, ever original, ever amazing.....he is the man of the encounter, the encounter with Christ, the Man living in the midst of humankind;.....the lover of humankind... (Words that go straight to our heart, mind and feelings).

It is this same encounter with Christ, says Fr. Dullier,

that led Count De Mazenod, who had looked down on his fellow men with disdain, disgust and a caste spirit, to become Father De Mazenod, telling the poor of every stripe – the youth on the streets, the prisoners, the artisans, the unemployed, the farm workers – that they were God’s favourites.....that they were saints.

Pope John Paul II, speaking on the occasion of the canonization of Eugene, had this to say,

We are living in the second Advent of the world’s history. Eugene de Mazenod was a man of Advent, a man of the coming. He not only looked forward to that coming, he dedicated his whole life to preparing for it, one of those apostles who prepared the modern age, our age.

“Conversion” is thus one’s *sensitivity to what is to come in the future*, and not be too engrossed and preoccupied with the past. We are called to be “Advent” people, people of the future.

The new Pope, Francis, has his own contribution to make on our theme of the kind of man the Oblate is expected to be. Not too different from what our Holy Founder had to say. Holy Father Francis warns,

If we don’t proclaim Jesus, we become a pitiful NGO, not the bride of the Lord...when we walk without the cross, and when we preach about Christ without the cross, we are not disciples of the Lord. We are worldly. We are bishops, priests, cardinals, popes, but we are not disciples of the Lord.

St. Eugene said it equally forcefully “we are Apostolic men called to preach Jesus Christ crucified”, not just men working for social change or transformation. There can be no resurrection without the cricifiction!

THE OBLATE AND THE CHURCH

We can observe how this resonates with Benedict XVI's Apostolic Letter, *Porta Fidei*, announcing the opening of the Year of Grace to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Vatican Council II. The Pope speaks of the New Evangelization, a time of particular reflection and rediscovery of the faith. Says, the Holy Father:

The Church as a whole and all her pastors, like Christ, must set out to lead people out of the desert, . . . , towards the one who gives life, and life in abundance. It often happens that Christians are concerned for the social, cultural and political consequences of their commitment, continuing to think of the faith as a self-evident presupposition for life in society. . . in reality, not only can this presupposition no longer be taken for granted, but it is often openly denied. . . Today, there is a profound crisis of faith that has affected many people.

We cannot accept that salt should become tasteless or the light be kept hidden (cf. Mt.5:13-16). (We) need to go to the well, like the Samaritan woman. . . .to draw upon the source of living water. . .

The Year of Faith, from this perspective, is a summons to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Saviour of the world" (p. 3, 4).

We are experiencing a serious crisis of faith due to secularization, despite certain elements in it that may promote humanitarian values.

THE OBLATE AND THE FIVE CALLS

At the last Chapter, we identified five important areas as being our major areas of concern, namely, *Our Community; Our Oblate Mission; Service of Leadership and Authority; Formation; and Financial Stewardship*. All these major areas of concern begin with the following affirmation:

- Jesus Christ is the centre of our life and mission, and our religious Life shared in an Oblate community.
- Jesus Christ is the centre of our life and mission to bring the Good News to the poor.
- Jesus Christ is the centre of our life and mission expressed in leadership and authority.

– Jesus Christ is the centre of our life and mission regarding first and on-going formation.

– Jesus Christ is the centre of our life and mission, in affirming our historical solidarity in financial stewardship.

To get these commitments moving we need a management model or tool.

So, first, in all this we need to identify “strategic trends :

Secularization; globalization; inter-culturality (IRD/ICD); demographic change; youth restlessness; information technology.

Then convert them into *mission strategies*: Research on these trends, how do they affect the mission of evangelization; how do we reach out to the secular world; how do we build a new leadership; how do we respond to the youth; how do we use information technology for mission to cross borders.

What are our *organizational capabilities* to respond to the mission’s needs: Set up a committee of competent persons; set up communities to live sharing and invite professionals, various categories of groups to share this experience as a deterrent to the negative aspects of secularization and globalization; have exposures for trainees to social situations from where they will learn the consequences of secularization and globalization, refugees, migrants, for example; revisit the “Immense Hope “ project.

We need *workforce strategies* to get the mission moving: Recruit suitable lay and religious to form organizations that would respond to secularization, globalization and other social trends; contextual training for recruits; on-going formation to respond to changing needs; collaborative leadership with a vibrant spirituality; partnering with the laity.

To end, I would like to share with y you a prayer composed by slain Archbishop Oscar Romero:

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

This is what we are about:

We plant seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds, already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
An opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,
But that is the difference between the Master Builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not Messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.

Amen.

“Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.” (*Martin Luther King Jr.*)

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MY LIFE IN CHRIST

SYLVESTER DAVID, OMI

I was born into a Catholic home and got to know about Christ from the earliest days of my Christian formation. Early on I looked at Jesus as any young boy would look at his hero. I liked the stories my mother told me about him. When we visited the home of my uncle I took great delight in paging through his bible which contained glossy pictures and all the words of Jesus in red letters. I used to read and marvel at how Jesus always got the better of his adversaries. This childlike admiration stirred in me, even at a young age, a yearning to discover more and more about Jesus.

My parish was served by many good Oblates but in my younger days I heard very little about the person of Jesus in the parish. The priests at that time were trained in the pre-Vatican II notions of priestly ministry. The homilies were mainly about right living and had a heavy moral slant to them. Then in my late teenage years when I was very impressionable a new team of younger Oblates headed by the parish priest Fr Joseph Money came into the parish and with the changes brought about by Vatican II there were some significant changes in the parish. These younger Oblates started preaching about Christ. All else flowed from there. The right living came into it but the difference was that we embraced the faith and did not react out of fear. Lay participation became more evident and we started to see our parish as a family. Youth clubs were the in thing in the Archdiocese of Durban and we celebrated our Christian life in very meaningful ways.

Growing up in apartheid South Africa caused me to ask questions such as what light did my Christian faith shed on the lived experiences of my compatriots. Now that I reflect upon it, what I was doing was in fact engaging in theology. My faith was seeking understanding. The Oblates showed me the prophetic dimension of the life of Christ. A name familiar to us is that of Archbishop Denis Hurley. He boldly condemned the unjust social system and stirred up in us a true love for freedom. The motto

of Archbishop Hurley was most appropriate: *Ubi Spiritus, ibi libertas*. There were several other Oblates who worked tirelessly to overthrow the system. I clearly remember attending mass at the Emmanuel Cathedral in Durban and was astonished to see that the Oblate who spoke the message of Christ so boldly and with great risk to himself was in fact a white South African. I was seventeen at the time and saw apartheid stamped on the foreheads of every white person in the country. To my mind that priest could certainly not have been South African. After mass I went up to him (Fr George Purves who died in 2012) and asked where he came from. It surprised me to hear that he came from the same province as I did. His example forced me to rethink, and in fact afforded me the opportunity to free myself of prejudice. Not all white people supported apartheid. And so the preaching of the love of Christ for all by a white South African Oblate had a profound effect on me.

Still later on when I joined the Oblate congregation, I searched out Christological works and devoured them with relish. We read Latin American Christologies and discovered our own South African notions of who Christ is. My teachers at the Scholasticate (Oblates and others) were very good and encouraged us to engage in a contextual reading of Theology. The recently deceased Bernard Nordkamp was outstanding as was Buti Thlagale (now Archbishop of Bloemfontein). One book in particular that made a very big impression on me was Albert Nolan's *Jesus before Christianity*. What Nolan (a South African Dominican) did was to rescue Jesus from the several layers of doctrine that we have piled on him and allow him to speak for himself. What emerged from the book was a refreshing man whose values were so relevant they simply could not be ignored. It was only then that the doctrines started to make sense. Nolan subsequently became a friend and a colleague and I was privileged to have had several discussions with him. All this time I acquired and cherished a spirituality focusing almost exclusively on the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This sustained me through my years of initial formation and continued well into my priestly life and ministry.

But my following of Christ was not complete. As wonderful as my spirituality was there was a *lacuna* in it. What was the missing component? Once while talking with my spiritual director who at that time was John Patterson, he listened very carefully and in the feedback gently got me to see that it was wonderful to make Christ the focus but that

I had to bear in mind that Jesus had a spirituality and that this spirituality was based on his relationship with his Father. Then John suggested that I allow Jesus to lead me to the Father. That was the best advice anyone ever gave me. After a few weeks of trying to soak all this up I started to probe the scriptures and searched for the meaning of fatherhood. Through the prophets I discovered that the Bible portrayed God as a Father whose fatherhood was characterized by covenant love and tenderness. The deeply moving accounts of God's tenderness in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Hosea made a deep impression on me. I probed the meaning of the word *Abba* and saw clearly why Jesus referred to God by that term. The heart of John's prologue (which for me is Jn 1:12-13) reveals that those who believe in Jesus actually are considered to be begotten by God. Imagine that – you dear reader and I, the children of mortals, actually have the power to become the children of God. And then St Paul in the 8th Chapter of his letter to the Romans, reminds us that we have received the spirit of adoption. I checked up on this and found that the word for adoption literally means to *make into a son*. And so it is not only Jesus who can address God as *Abba* – you and I can do the same. This discovery of the relationship with the Father has coloured my world, my prayer and even how I read scripture. I think I now follow Christ a little more deeply as, like him, I too contemplate and preach the love of the Father. More recently in a serious academic project I acknowledged the insights into the person of Jesus brought about through a rigorous academic enquiry. Yes indeed! The thirst for knowledge about the Saviour still continues and the more I read about him and the more I get to know him, the more I am drawn into the presence of the Father.

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Familia Oblata

LES OBLATES MISSIONNAIRES DE MARIE IMMACULÉE

CLAIRE NANTEL, OMMI

Nous sommes en 1945. Un évêque de l'Ouest canadien, Mons. Henri Routhier, rencontre un de ses missionnaires, le père Louis-Marie Parent, un Oblat de Marie Immaculée, et lui confie son désir de voir naître une nouvelle forme de consécration à Dieu pour des femmes qui vivent en plein monde. Il dit: "Il faudrait un Institut dont les membres ne porteraient pas de costume religieux, qui consentiraient à vivre dans de petites localités où le prêtre ne fait que passer de temps à autre..."¹

Le 2 février 1947, le Souverain Pontife Pie XII publiait la Constitution apostolique "Provida Mater Ecclesia" qui marquait la fondation

¹ Sur les *Les Oblates Missionnaires de l'Immaculée* : L.-M. Parent – R. Gauthier, *Oblate Missionnaire de l'Immaculée, Caritas Christi*, Cap-de-la Madeleine, 1957, 47 p. Parmi les écrits spirituels du père Louis-Marie Parent concernant les *Les Oblates Missionnaires de l'Immaculée* : *Je touche le Seigneur...*, Trois-Rivières, 1982, 103 p.; *Là où est ton trésor...*, [s.l.], 1982, 104 p.; *En intimité avec Jésus*, Institut Voluntas Dei, Trois-Rivières, Québec, 1987, 194 p.; *Sur les pas de Jésus. 5 attitudes*, Volontaires de Dieu, Trois-Rivières, 1989, 168 p.; *Le moment présent (Un jour à la fois!)*, Trois-Rivières, 1990, 336 p.; *Tu es à moi*. Edition révisée et augmentée de « Tu as du prix à mes yeux », Volontaires de Dieu, Trois-Rivières, 1994, 109 p. Il a également écrit son autobiographie en deux volumes : *En route vers Quelqu'un... Essai biographique (1910-1938)*, Québec, Marquis, 1997, 196 p.; *En route avec Quelqu'un. Autobiographie 1938-1957*, Trois-Rivières, 1999, 462 p. La siège social de l'Institut des Oblates est: 7625 boul. Parent - Trois-Rivières, Qc, Canada G9A5E1. Le site web de l'Institut: www.ommi-is.org.

des Instituts séculiers. Le père Parent écrivait alors: “Ce fut pour moi une véritable lumière qui m’a fixé définitivement. Il s’agissait donc de trouver les premiers sujets et d’attendre *l’événement providentiel* qui nous permettrait de démarrer”. “Ce n’est qu’en 1949 que j’ai rassemblé les premières recrues qui me restaient unies par la correspondance”. Le père Parent rédige alors son projet d’Institut séculier en s’inspirant de la Constitution apostolique “Provida Mater Ecclesia”.

Nous retrouvons dans les archives générales de l’Institut, à Trois-Rivières (Québec, Canada) une lettre écrite par le père Wilfrid Cyr dans laquelle il faisait connaître quelques détails sur la fondation de l’Institut des oblates (1951). Voici ce qu’il écrivait :

J’étais hospitalisé à l’Hôtel Dieu d’Edmundston (Nouveau Brunswick, Canada) et Sœur St-Charles, des Hospitalières de Saint-Joseph, était la directrice de l’école des infirmières de l’hôpital. Elle vint me trouver dans ma chambre et me demanda si je connaissais un prédicateur ayant un peu d’expérience pour prêcher une retraite aux infirmières. Après avoir contacté un ami prêtre qui habitait à Chicoutimi (Québec), celui-ci me répondit qu’il n’était pas disponible aux dates indiquées par la religieuse mais qu’à ce moment-là, devant lui, il y avait le père Louis-Marie Parent qui était libre à ces dates et qui acceptait volontiers de venir à Edmundston pour prêcher cette retraite aux infirmières.

La retraite eut lieu dans une maison des Pères Oblats à Edmundston. Une infirmière, mademoiselle Luce Lacombe, participait à la retraite et elle devint la fondatrice des oblates. La conférence de clôture fut donnée par l’évêque, Mons. Roméo Gagnon, qui accepta plus tard les premières oblates dans son diocèse comme Union Pieuse et leur donna leur première obédience: prendre en charge l’hôpital de Grand-Sault (Nouveau Brunswick) qui était devenu un problème pour lui. La proposition fut acceptée par le père Parent, par Luce Lacombe, Reine-Aimée Welsh et d’autres demoiselles présentes à la retraite.

L’Institut *Les Oblates Missionnaires de l’Immaculée* a été fondé le 2 juillet 1952, à Grand-Sault, Nouveau Brunswick, Canada, par le père Louis-Marie Parent, OMI. Dans l’année 1953 a vu s’étendre l’Institut à travers le Québec et le Nouveau Brunswick avec sept nouvelles fondations (c’est-à-dire des œuvres gérées par les oblates).

À partir de 1954 quelques oblates commencent à aller vers les États-Unis et le Chili, et peu à peu vers les Antilles, puis en Asie, en Europe et en Afrique. Elles répondaient ainsi à des demandes qui provenaient des Églises de divers pays ou encore elles réalisaient des projets de coopération internationale. A ce moment-là le père Parent écrivait: « Vous ne savez pas jusqu'à quel point je compte sur vous pour ce travail de la charité et de l'amour à travers le monde entier ».

L'Institut a connu un début fulgurant : après trois ans d'existence, en 1951, il y a déjà 300 oblates réparties dans trois pays: le Canada, les États-Unis, le Chili. Cette année-là le père Parent transfère son bureau à Cap-de-la-Madeleine où se trouve le plus grand sanctuaire marial du Canada.

Trois nouveaux pays verront arriver des oblates: la Bolivie, Haïti et Panama en 1956, et du 15 juillet au 15 décembre il y eut 16 nouvelles fondations au Canada.

Le père Parent écrit: “à partir de 1952 l'Esprit Saint les a multipliées avec une étonnante rapidité pour les ‘souffler’ dans tous les coins du monde”.

Le père Roger Gauthier, OMI, vient prêter main-forte au père Parent durant cette phase initiale. Il restera pendant 10 ans.

Départ missionnaire pour le Laos au mois de février 1957. Rappelons-nous que l'Institut n'a pas encore cinq ans d'existence... il fallait beaucoup de courage de la part du père Parent et des autorités de l'Institut pour envoyer les premières oblates au Laos !

Les Oblates sont présentes dans 3 autres provinces du Canada: Saskatchewan, Alberta, Manitoba; il y aura aussi un groupe en France, puis en Belgique.

La première assemblée générale de l'Institut a lieu les 27-28-29 décembre 1958 et 26 oblates sont présentes. C'est l'élection de la Directrice générale avec quatre conseillères.

Du 22 au 27 août 1959, deuxième assemblée générale et sept pays sont représentés : Canada, Chili, Bolivie, Haïti, Laos, France, États-Unis. En 1960 il y a déjà plus de 1000 oblates réparties en de nombreuses villes du Québec mais aussi dans d'autres provinces du Canada et dans les pays déjà mentionnés.

Le 2 juillet 1960: l'Institut est érigé canoniquement en “Association de perfection”. L'année suivant départs missionnaires pour l'Afrique: le

Tchad, le Natal, la Rhodésie du Nord, puis pour le Honduras et l'Italie. À la demande de la Congrégation des Religieux, le nom est changé pour *Oblates Missionnaires de Marie Immaculée*.

Le 2 février 1962 l'Institut est reconnu comme un Institut séculier de droit diocésain par Mons. Georges-Léon Pelletier, évêque de Trois-Rivières, Québec, Canada. Le père Parent écrit: "Dieu nous veut, l'Église le prouve. Quelle joie et quelle force pour nous". Le 2 juillet on souligne en même temps le 10^e anniversaire de la fondation et le 25^e anniversaire de vie sacerdotale du père Parent. À cette fête 800 oblates étaient présentes !

J'ai voulu raconter les dix premières années de l'Institut avec plusieurs détails parce qu'ils font comprendre, je crois, combien l'Esprit Saint a inspiré le père Parent et les premières oblates en autorité à avoir une confiance totale dans ce projet qui réunit des personnes qui vivent une vocation à la vie consacrée dans les milieux ordinaires.

Autres étapes importantes :

Le 24 mars 1984 l'Institut reçoit l'approbation comme Institut de droit pontifical et les Constitutions sont approuvés au même moment, sous la signature du Cardinal Eduardo Pironio et de Mons. Agostino Mayer.

En 1997 l'assemblée générale accepte l'énoncé de notre charisme: « Une constante disponibilité à la volonté du Père pour vivre partout la charité du Christ par le service, avec l'aide de Marie. »

En 2001 l'assemblée générale reconnaît la mission de l'Institut en ces termes: « Comme le Christ, manifester l'amour inconditionnel du Père, à toute personne, en révélant les signes de la présence de Dieu au cœur de la réalité quotidienne. »

Dès le début l'Institut a eu un groupe associé appelé "Volontaires de Dieu". Ce sont des hommes et des femmes qui désirent approfondir leur engagement baptismal, prolonger la mission de l'Institut et partager son idéal spirituel.

LA SPIRITUALITÉ DE L'INSTITUT

Les membres de l'Institut reconnaissent dans leur spiritualité un appel à la perfection de la charité. Cette spiritualité se concrétise dans une formule-synthèse appelée "5-5-5".

Premier "5" – Vie de prière : Puisant à la source de l'Évangile, de la prière de l'Église et du silence, l'oblate s'offre cinq moments privilégiés de prière où elle ajuste son cœur à Jésus aimant et se laisse façonner par lui. Elle trouve en Marie, modèle accompli de l'Amour, inspiration et force.

Deuxième "5" – Attitudes de vie : Pour accueillir le monde dans toute sa beauté et son salut, l'oblate s'efforce de vivre la mentalité du Christ et témoigner de sa charité. Voici les cinq points lui dictant une attitude d'ouverture à son milieu et de transformation personnelle :

– Présence de Dieu : Être attentive à la présence de Dieu au moment présent

– Absence de critique destructive intérieure et extérieure : Cultiver un regard aimant sur soi et sur les autres

– Absence de plainte inutile intérieure et extérieure : Accueillir positivement les événements

– Être de service : Orienter sa vie vers le service des autres

– Artisane de paix : S'appliquer en toutes circonstances à construire la paix.

Troisième "5" – Charité en action : Pour s'entraîner à maintenir et développer l'élan de son amour envers tous ses frères et sœurs, l'oblate pose chaque jour cinq actes conscients de charité.

LIENS AVEC LES PÈRES OBLATS

En ce qui concerne les liens entre l'Institut des OMMI et les Pères Oblats, je peux dire que durant les premières années, dans la majorité des cas, c'est à cause de la présence des Pères Oblats dans certains pays du monde que les oblates ont pu collaborer à la mission "ad extra". En effet, le père Parent confiait souvent à un père Oblat l'accompagnement spirituel des premiers pas de notre Institut dans l'un ou l'autre pays.

En 1991, grâce à l'initiative du père Marcello Zago, o.m.i., le père Parent et la responsable générale de l'Institut ont participé, à Rome, à une rencontre des Instituts en lien avec les Pères Oblats. Cette occasion a aussi favorisé une audience avec le Pape Jean-Paul II.

La responsable générale de ce temps écrivait:

Les premiers jalons de notre histoire sont marqués par l'appui des Oblats ... Le Fondateur, le père Louis-Marie Parent, très attaché à sa communauté, associe celle-ci à la fondation et au développement multiculturel et missionnaire de l'Institut:

- L'inspiration vient de Mons. Henri Routhier, o.m.i.;
- Plusieurs fondations de l'Institut des Oblates sont rattachées aux œuvres des Oblats, que ce soit au Canada ou aux États-Unis, mais aussi en France, en Afrique du Sud, et d'autres encore;
- L'activité missionnaire au Chili, en Bolivie, en Haïti, au Laos, dans le grand nord canadien et québécois, au Tchad, au Sri Lanka, est rendue possible avec l'aide des Missionnaires Oblats sur place.

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Documenta

Oblatio
Oblati

GENERAL SERVICE FOR OBLATE STUDIES: STATUTES

During the Plenary Session of January-February 2013 the Superior General in Council has established a General Service for Oblate Studies. The present Statutes have been approved by the Superior General in Council on October 7th, 2013.

1. Nature

The General Service for Oblate Studies (hereafter referred to as the *Service*) is a Service of the General Administration of the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (cf. C. 132 and R. 149f), with its seat at the General House in Rome.

2. Objectives

2.1. To promote, coordinate and support the efforts of those who conduct research and study in any field pertaining to Oblate history, life, mission and spirituality.

2.2. To care for and provide access to the historical sources, particularly what pertains to St. Eugene, the early generations of Oblates, and the study and research accomplished in past generations.

3. Means

3. 1. Editing of the review *Oblatio* and other possible publications.

3. 2. Organizing events both at the local and at the general levels.

3. 3. Maintaining links with the *International de Mazenod Center* in Aix en Provence, with the *Association of Oblate Institutes of Higher Learning* (AOIHL), with the Archives of the Congregation in the various Oblate units and with the various Houses of Formation throughout the Congregation.

4. Organization

The organizational and operating structure of the Service consists of:

4.1. *The Director*

The Director is an Oblate of Mary Immaculate appointed by the Superior General for a mandate of 3 years, renewable. He remains in office until the appointment of his successor.

4.2. *The Board*

The Board is composed of the Director and three other Oblate members, appointed by the Superior General, after consulting the Director. They are chosen for their competence in the areas of Oblate history, missiology or spiritual theology.

The mandate of the members of the Board lasts for 3 years, renewable.

4.3. *The Collaborators*

The Board brings together a pool of interested and competent Oblate or non-Oblate resource persons to collaborate with it on a regular basis.

For the specific projects of the Service, the Director may ask any other persons to make a particular contribution.

5. Method of functioning

5.1. *The Director*

5.1.1. The Director is responsible for ensuring the carrying out of the objectives. He is accountable to the Superior General.

5.1.2. He proposes the nomination of the members of the Board, after consulting the actual members of the Board. He sees to it that the Oblates who have been proposed and their major superiors are consulted.

5.1.3. He convokes the Board meeting, drawing up the agenda and proposing the date and place. Such agenda will be submitted for approval to the Superior General in Council.

5.1.4. He reports to the Board on the work that has taken place during the year.

5.1.5. Once a year he will submit to the Superior General a written report, approved by the Board, on the activities of the Service.

5.1.6. At the beginning of each financial year he prepares a budget

according to the directives of the General Treasurer. He submits it to the Board and, when they have approved it, he presents it to the Superior General.

5.2. The Board

5.2.1. The members of the Board work with the Director to assure the achievement of the objectives of the Service.

5.2.2. They meet once a year at a date and time arranged by the Director.

5.2.3. They offer proposals and initiatives pertaining to the objectives of the Service.

5.2.4. They evaluate the work that has taken place during the year, and the quality of the projects proposed for the future, as well as their value for the Congregation.

5.2.5. They approve the annual report to be presented to the Superior General by the Director, as well as the financial statement.

6. Finance

6.1. The budget of the Service is presented to the Superior General before the beginning of each financial year.

6.2. The budget of the Service is approved by the Superior General in Council within the budget of the General Administration.

6.3. On an ongoing basis the Director and Board will also look for other ways of finding resources.

6.4. An annual report will be presented to the Superior General and to the Treasurer General regarding the financial operation of the Service.

7. Approval of and modifications to the Statutes

The present Statutes are approved by the Superior General in Council for a period of 3 years.

With the approach of the end of this period, the Board will evaluate its efficiency and will submit proposals for eventual changes to the Superior General for his approval.



**ARCHBISHOP DENIS EUGENE HURLEY OMI,
AT VATICAN COUNCIL II**

ALAN C. HENRIQUES, OMI

On the 50th anniversary the Ecumenical Council Vatican II, it seems opportune to publish the memoirs of one of the most active of the Council Fathers: the archbishop of Durban, Denis E. Hurley, OMI. The article originally appeared in the commemorative booklet: We Give Thanks. Ukwanda Lwaliwa Umthakathi, St. Joseph's Scholasticate – Theological Institute, 1943-1993 (Cedara, 1993) p. 23-26. We have asked Fr. Alan Henriques, OMI, archivist of the Scholasticate, for a preface to introduce us to the Archbishop. (Editors)

Archbishop Hurley's parents both came from Skibbereen in the South of Ireland and they married on 11 November 1913. Hurley's father was Denis Hurley (senior) and his mother was Teresa May O'Sullivan. The Hurley's had four children: Helena the eldest (b. 1914), Denis (b. 1915), Jeremiah (b. 1919) and Christopher (b. 1922) Mr Hurley was a lighthouse keeper and during his childhood the young Denis Eugene lived at several lighthouses along the Cape and Natal coastal belt, the most famous being his stay at Robben Island. This analogy of the lighthouse remained with Hurley and eventually led to him being referred to as the "Guardian of Light." Hurley attended various schools: the first being on Robben Island, the second was the Dominican School in Newcastle and the third was the Marist Brothers' school in Pietermaritzburg known as Saint Charles College.

OBLATE FORMATION AND STUDY ABROAD

Hurley completed his matric at St Charles College in 1931. In January 1932 he was sent to Cahermoyle in Ireland where he was to do his novitiate with the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. On completing his novitiate he was sent to Rome where he continued his

studies at the Angelicum run by the Dominicans and then onto the Gregorian which was owned by the Jesuits. Hurley was moved by the international contact he made in the student body as well as the intellectual stimulation that he received by his studies in Rome. He was impressed with Pius XI who took a stand in opposing Hitler and Mussolini, the Church's social teaching and the "See-Judge-Act" method of the Young Christian workers. While in Rome, Hurley had learned to organise his thoughts systematically into coherent form which served him well in the years ahead.

RETURNING TO FIGHT THE BATTLE AGAINST APARTHEID

Hurley returned to South Africa in 1940 due to the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe. He was appointed as curate to Emmanuel Cathedral in Durban. He was interested in the matters of social justice and the matter of establishing trade unions for the local indigenous African population. Some of the priests many years his senior cautioned Hurley in regard to meddling in such matters. Initially he would take the line of caution but later on became more overt in sharing his vision of equality for all South Africans. He was committed to his daily meditation, the praying of the Office and to praying the rosary with groups of faithful Catholics. In 1944 he became Superior at the Oblate Scholasticate at Prestbury in Pietermaritzburg. In 1946 when he was only 31 years of age, he was appointed bishop of the Natal Vicariate. Hurley's consecration as bishop took place on 19 March 1947 and made him the youngest bishop in the world at that time. Hurley visited the parishes and witnessed the plight of people that had been ushered in by the National Party's rise to power in 1948. The apartheid system, with its Calvinist approach, included topics that Hurley brought to the attention of the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC). At that time many of the Catholic bishops were afraid that being outspoken would lead to foreign priests and religious being deported from South Africa. Therefore, there was the general consensus to err on the side of caution. This was not the approach taken by Hurley. Hurley spent much of his energy in the early days as Bishop of the Natal Vicariate travelling and raising money for schools and hospitals in the Zulu missions. In 1951 he became Archbishop of what was then the Archdiocese of Durban.

The Bantu Education Act of 1953 pushed the Catholic Church to act in defiance to national laws that were based on apartheid. In 1957 the SACBC declared in a statement that apartheid was intrinsically evil. In terms of Catholic moral theology this was the strongest condemnation against apartheid and Hurley was the main advocate to ensure that the statement be made. Some critics however would say that the statement came too late as so many apartheid laws were now already promulgated that the political situation could no-longer be reversed.

II VATICAN COUNCIL

Before the Second Vatican Council the Church had become defensive against the Protestants and science; and many Catholic authors were taking a more progressive line of thought. On first hearing about the council Hurley questioned if that was what the Church required at the time. Pope John XXIII requested Hurley to be part of the 101 strong Central Preparatory Commission which had the task of receiving position papers from 14 commissions and setting the agenda. Although younger than the other members of the Central Preparatory Commission, Hurley was able to converse with other members of the commission such as Alfrink, Frings, Lienart and Konig who came from the territory north of the Alps. He was able to be on the same wave length with members of the more progressive and conservative groups with the Preparatory Commission. He had difficulties with the conservatives who did not present their papers in a systematic manner and were on the whole rather dull and reactionary.

In 1962 when the Council began, the conservatives wanted to rush through a quick programme of having their documents and representatives accepted as soon as possible. The rest of the bishops instead chose to prolong the process so that they could get to know each other better. There were sessions in the afternoons to listen to theologians, some of whom had formerly been disciplined by the Vatican. Hurley enjoyed the informal sessions between representatives and the meetings with the press. He began to benefit from what he read in the 1950s. Such authors like Durwell, Maritain, Howell and de Chardin began to make more sense to Hurley during the council which he described as a huge project in adult education. A small group of curial officials were not

allowed to dominate proceedings and the reality of a Catholic revival became more real for Hurley and others who were pushing for change within the Catholic Church. Hurley was committed to implement in the Archdiocese of Durban the changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council.

FORMIDABLE LEADER IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN SCENE

As apartheid intensified so did Hurley's mission to eradicate South Africa from this scourge increase. During the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s Hurley became known as a prophetic and practical leader in the battle against apartheid. He began to make contact with trade unionists, detainees and conscientious objectors who refused to do military service. He played a leading role in the establishment of Diakonia in Durban and supported PACSA (Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness). In 1981 he was elected President of the SACBC for the second time. The first time he was President was some 30 years prior to the second appointment. He was the right man at the right time and worked in close association with Bishop Desmond Tutu who won the Noble Peace Prize in 1984.

Hurley and the other bishops from South Africa went on a fact finding mission into Namibia. They reported the negative things done by the "Koevoet" counter insurgency unit. This led the South African government to press charges against Hurley. This was in regard to the manner in which South African troops were administering the area of Ovamboland. In the course of time the charges were withdrawn. This was due to the fear that more damage would be done by the releasing of the evidence that the SACBC had gathered while in Namibia.

It was inevitable that Hurley would come into conflict with the conservatives within South African society. The accusation was often levelled against him that he was more a politician than a clergyman. This was unfair as it is the role of a clergyman to be involved in issues of social justice. Hurley bore these misunderstandings with patience and charity. Years later when the Dutch Reformed Church accepted that apartheid was a heresy all would be forgiven and the time for healing and reconciliation would be the focus for the future growth of the South African people. Hurley was a deeply spiritual man, who would not ask

of others what he was not prepared to do himself. Apart from the Namibian report, there was also the report on the atrocities done in the South African townships (Vaal Triangle). This also produced damning evidence against the South African police and showed that the bishops were prepared to tackle these challenging incidents within South Africa.

During the 1980s the SACBC came to accept that the way forward was not to try to convince white South Africans to change but rather to engage with the external liberation movements and the internal United Democratic Front (UDF). As a way forward the SACBC sent a delegation to Lusaka to have meeting with the African National Congress. This marked a significant change from when in the 1960s the South African Catholic Bishops were simply content to make statements condemning apartheid. This led to a more effective mobilization of the faithful to resist apartheid in a more co-ordinated manner with the view to ending apartheid by co-operating with the members of the liberation movement and not with the church making an effort for change isolated from other forces working towards the same goal of achieving democracy within South Africa.

To sum-up: Archbishop Denis Eugene Hurley had the grace of being at the right place at the right time. He used his position and influence to change the Catholic Church and South African society. In 2004 he had attended at meeting at Sant'Egidio in Rome. On his return he attended a celebration of the Golden Jubilee of a school in Durban and on the way home Hurley died on the 13 February 2004.

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THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

DENIS E. HURLEY, OMI

This time thirty years ago we were launching into the second period of the Second Vatican Council. It opened on 29 September 1963. There had been some doubt that the Council would continue after the death of Pope John XXIII on 3 June 1963. But once Paul VI was elected

the doubts dissolved. The new pope was a Council man through and through and very soon approved the date for the opening of the second period. Vatican II was on course.

For those of us who lived and worked through it (the survivors are much reduced in number now) it was a privileged experience. Some memories linger on as sharp and clear as when they were first registered. Most Catholics, however, who have reached their middle years, must wonder why it is spoken of as an epoch-making event.

FORTRESS CATHOLICISM

Epoch-making it was because it marked the end of four centuries of what has come to be called “fortress Catholicism” and introduced a new and more dynamic vision of Church life. Fortress Catholicism, as the name implies, designates a Church on the defensive. It had become defensive in certain ways, but by no means all. In some forms of activity it had manifested extraordinary vigour, for example in missionary expansion, through two great drives, one before and one after the French Revolution.

But in certain other matters it had manned the barricades. It had been driven to this by three great historical movements: the Protestant Reformation, the so called Enlightenment and the Age of Revolution. The Protestant Reformation began in 1520 and unleashed fierce theological polemics, reciprocal persecutions and decades of religious war. The Enlightenment was a rebellion of western culture against the chaos of Christianity, a call to people to abandon the guidance of faith and put their trust in human reason and human freedom.

The Age of Revolution produced huge changes in human knowledge, work patterns and politics. The scientific revolution laid growing emphasis on what can be learnt from painstaking observation and careful experimentation and verification. The Catholic church got off to a bad start in regard to this development when it condemned Galileo for maintaining that the earth rotated around the sun and not the sun around the earth. This established a sour relationship between church and science which lasted all too long. The industrial revolution brought a fundamental change in methods of work. It introduced the factory and the capitalist system in which a few wealthy individuals and companies took ownership of the

means of production while the majority of people were reduced to being wage earners wholly dependent for their livelihood on the factory owners.

Political revolution introduced democracy, government by elected representatives. It started with the American War of Independence in 1775, reached a climax of violence in the French Revolution shortly afterwards and reverberated throughout Europe and other parts of the world for decades. Socialism emerged in opposition to capitalism, and in its most extreme form, Marxism, produced communist revolutions in Russia and China.

Fortress Catholicism battened down the hatches to defend itself against these tempestuous events. The hatches gravely affected relations with Protestants, with science, with the liberal spirit that had emerged from the Enlightenment and with most varieties of socialism, especially Marxism. In a certain sense the Catholic church was at odds with much of the culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the first half of the twentieth century.

CATHOLIC REVIVAL

As the confidence of the church in its survival and missionary expansion grew and as the bitterness of antagonisms subsided, communication across old battlements increased and Catholic social and intellectual leaders set about re-assessing the position and attitudes of the Church.

The re-assessment produced a veritable Catholic renaissance in theology, in the study of scripture, in catechetics, liturgy, social concern and lay participation. A great theological revival stemmed from renewed reflection on St. Paul's teaching on the Church as the Body of Christ. The realisation that the Church is Christ present in people was a great impulse in the revival of understanding of the Church, of the liturgy, of the role of the laity and social concern. Social concern, sparked in 1891 by the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII "Rerum Novarum", derived impetus from the "see, judge, act" method pioneered by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn and his Young Christian Workers in the 1920's.

In the decade of the 1950's after the shattering experience of World War II, all these revivals were coming to the boil. Magnificent books were pouring off the printing presses, a new vision of Catholicism was

taking shape and unfortunately not a few theologians were being disciplined for the part they were playing in the revival.

VATICAN II ANNOUNCED AND PREPARED

One elderly churchman sensed that the time was ripe for a dramatic decision. After being elected pope in October 1958 and assuming the name of John XXIII he took that dramatic decision. On 25 January 1959 he announced an ecumenical council—ecumenical in the sense of involving the Catholic Church of the entire world, but not ecumenical in the sense of involving other churches as well.

A few months later letters from the Cardinal Secretary of State were reaching bishops throughout the world. The letters were calling for suggestions for the Council. I looked at mine and I wondered why the Church needed a Council. There seemed to be no special crisis. Many bishops, I think, felt the same, especially in English-speaking parts of the world where the Church seemed to be in good shape, with churches well-attended, schools flourishing and vocations multiplying. In due course a reminder came from the Cardinal Secretary of State, so I rolled up my sleeves, pulled out my Latin dictionary and grammar and sent off my contribution in what I hoped was comprehensible Latin. Little did I suspect that every document pertaining to the Council would be published in the record, the “Acta”. The halting Latin of my humble suggestions lies enshrined in one of the mighty tomes of those Acta.

The next surprise was a communication informing me that I was to be a member of the Central Preparatory Commission of the Council. My nomination was probably due to the fact that the Holy See had an out-of-date report on the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference showing me as president, although I had stepped down from that function in February 1960.

The job of the Central Preparatory Commission was to coordinate and finalise the position papers (in Latin “schemata”) submitted by various other commissions charged with specific areas of doctrinal, pastoral and canonical concern. We had to study these position papers and formulate comments, make suggestions and vote on texts. In voting we had three choices expressed in these Latin terms: “placet” (in favour), “non placet” (against) and “placet iuxta modum” (in favour but with an

amendment). The amendment had to be submitted in writing.

It did not take long to notice that the members of the Central Preparatory Commission were divided into conservatives and progressives and the curial representatives, mainly cardinals serving in Rome were preponderantly conservative. The procedure gave the curial representatives an enormous advantage. After we had gone home after each session a team of them sifted through our votes and amendments to formulate the final text for the Council. The playing field was anything but level.

In early 1962 I had come a long way from my initial questioning of the need for the Council. By this time also I was becoming more and more despondent about the kind of position papers that would constitute the agenda of the Council. I went from cardinal to cardinal among those known as the “transalpini” that is, those from western countries north of the Alps, like France, Holland, Belgium, Germany and Austria and expressed my alarm. They all agreed but saw no way of remedying the situation. Possibly too they had more confidence than I had in what would happen once the Council finally met.

St. Peter’s Basilica was prepared as the venue for the Council. The nave was curtained off from the aisles. Ascending tiers of seats were arranged on either side for something like 2500 Council members. The area in front of the high altar was reserved for the presidency and secretariat. A first-class public address system was installed with microphones conveniently placed wherever necessary. For speakers “from the floor” the microphones were placed at intervals along the front row of seats on either side, with easy access down corridors between blocks of seats. The nave of St Peter’s became a most impressive “aula”, the Latin term for hall.

THE OPENING OF THE COUNCIL AND FIRST PERIOD

The Council opened on 11 October 1962. The bishops gathered in various rooms of the Vatican, vested in white cope and mitre and marched in procession through St Peter’s Square (the Piazza) into the Basilica. Unfortunately there was some confusion concerning the group to which I was assigned. We gathered in a part of the Vatican Museum (was this unintended irony?) and someone forgot to give us our march-

ing orders until it was too late to do the journey through the Square. We were rushed by a shortcut along the portico in front of St Peter's and injected into the procession at the main door.

The Mass that inaugurated the Council was, in the style of the old papal liturgy, a long one. At the end of it Pope John XXIII gave his famous address full of optimism, encouragement and hope and distancing himself from the "prophets of doom". There was a TV camera near me and I was afraid that it might catch me nodding off after the lengthy liturgy. But no, the address was so alive and vibrant that there was no temptation to nod off. On reflection now I wonder if, with my misgivings about the preparation of the Council, I should have counted myself among the "prophets of doom".

Once the Council got into its working stride the first item on the agenda was the election of the conciliar commissions. The preparatory commissions had been wound up and new commissions designed to function throughout the Council's lifetime had to be elected. This was duly done after an appeal for a few days grace to allow the members to reflect and compare notes. In the subsequent election I found myself voted onto the Commission for Priestly Formation and Catholic Schools. My name had become known here and there through an article I had written for the Irish periodical *The Furrow* on the pastoral training of seminarians which had been translated into other languages.

The role of the conciliar commissions was to work on the position papers after general discussion and, in the light of criticisms and proposals, to nurse them through further stages of revision and amendment until final approval.

With the commissions in place the scene was set for the general discussions to take off. The first position paper on the agenda was the one on liturgy. It had been very well prepared, was well received in the initial vote of acceptance and was launched on its way through the various stages of amendment to its final form.

Four other topics were treated during the remainder of the first period: The Sources of Revelation, The Means of Social Communication (press, radio, television), The Unity of the Church (a treatment of relations with separated Eastern Churches which ended up in the "Decree in Ecumenism") and finally The Church. The big ones were The Sources of Revelation and the Church. Both were found unsatisfactory

and the first period of the Council ended with a call for the revision of the agenda of the Council and of future position papers.

SECOND, THIRD AND FOURTH PERIODS

The experience of the first period showed that the Council would be much longer than many, particularly in Rome, had anticipated. In fact there had to be three more periods, all held in the autumn and early winter months of 1963, 1964 and 1965. Good progress was achieved in the end but not without crises and controversies.

The most contentious issues were the relationship between the primacy of the pope and the collegiality of the bishops in chapter three of the “Constitution on the Church”, the relationship between scripture and tradition in the “Constitution on Revelation”, the issue of religious freedom and the problem of reconciling the right of self-defence with the condemnation of total war, particularly nuclear war, a topic dealt with in the final chapter of the “Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.”

All together the Council produced sixteen documents designated according to importance as constitutions, decrees or declarations. There are four constitutions: those on the Church, Divine Revelation, Liturgy and the Church in the Modern World, the latter termed a pastoral constitution.

There are nine decrees: those on Eastern Catholic Churches, Ecumenism, Missions, Bishops, Priestly Formation, Ministry and Life of Priests, Religious Life, Laity and Instruments of Social Communication. There are three declarations: those on Catholic Education, Relations with non-Christian Religions and Religious Freedom.

Christian Education fell into the category of declaration because of a change of direction in midstream. What began as a paper on Catholic schools ended up as a document on Catholic education in general. The change of direction did not allow for sufficient time to produce a really satisfactory document.

The document on Religious Freedom is also termed a declaration. It was a highly controversial topic as the Council laboured to discard an old theology claiming some sort of state support for the one true Church and to enunciate a firm belief in the freedom of faith and the freedom

of religious practice. Without this document, ecumenism, relations with other churches and other faiths and with the modern world would have been seriously compromised.

A FRESH VISION OF THE CHURCH AND ITS MISSION

Essentially all the documents produced a fresh vision of the Church and of its mission. In regard to the nature of the Church the notion of community or communion is powerfully emphasised. It is pointed out that community in the Church flows from the community of the Blessed Trinity Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Church is indeed the People of God, the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. “The Church in Christ is the sacrament which brings about union with God and unity among people” (The Church 1).

The Council did not produce a special document dealing with the mission of the Church in its totality. Dimensions of mission are scattered about throughout the sixteen documents. Ten years later in 1975, subsequent to an assembly of the Synod of Bishops, a comprehensive view of the Church mission was to be formulated in the apostolic exhortation of Pope Paul VI “Evangelisation in the Modern World.”

The mission of the Church is to lead people to holiness (The Church 5). This it does by exercising the three-fold function given to it by Jesus: the prophetic, proclaiming the Word; the priestly, participating in worship; and the kingly or social and pastoral, transforming the world. All members of the Church share in these functions according to vocation. It could be said the exercise of the Church’s mission, that is evangelisation, has four dimensions of wholeness:

- it is addressed to the whole world,
- it is to be exercised by the whole Church,
- it should convey the whole message of Christ, and relate to the whole human scene.

The human scene involves the personal, the domestic and the societal; and the societal embraces social, cultural, political and economic relations. That is the vision of the Church’s mission that has emerged from the Second Vatican Council. It has demolished the barricades and battlements of the fortress Catholicism and thrown wide its doors to the whole world and all its peoples.

THE CLOSURE OF THE COUNCIL

Vatican II was closed on 8 December 1965 at the end of the fourth period. This is how I described the occasion in an article in *The Southern Cross*:

On December 8, feast of the Immaculate Conception, the last farewell was said in St. Peter's Square when a great phalanx of the People of God assembled with their chief pastor, their bishops and clergy for a Mass that reflected in its sense of community and intensity of participation the incredible liturgical progress of four short years.

mean to us we must never lose the Latin, never lose the ability to assemble a quarter of a million strong and send the sonorous Gregorian phrases rolling to the very gates of Heaven. Perhaps when we have learned to love the singing of God's praises in our mother tongue we shall find the occasional use of Latin and Gregorian a delightful and refreshing change. Perhaps...

There were seven messages to the world: to men in governments, to intellectuals, artists, women (not exclusive categories obviously!), the poor and suffering, workers and youth.

When Cardinal Lienart, reading the message to men in government, cried out that the Church expected of them no favours but only liberty many a tough old hand of the French Revolution must have turned in his grave and wondered what side he had been on.

When Jacques Maritain, looking incredibly old and frail, went up to receive a copy of the message to intellectuals from the Pope, the whole Church of God paid its due tribute to the man who had made her new understanding of human freedom possible.

It ended with the final invocations, the blessing of the Holy Father and his ringing valediction "Go in Peace". The response was the heartiest and most enthusiastic "Deo Gratias" that most had ever heard. Then the Council Fathers made their way along Bernini's colonnade and rode off in their buses for the last time, with thousands of smiling faces looking after them and a forest of hands waving a fond farewell. They had begun their journey back to their dioceses where they must endeavour to lead the great effort of bringing the Council decrees to life in the communities over which they preside and which they serve.

The first steps had been taken in the realization of Pope John's dream. The Church through her pastors and thinkers had taken a long searching look at herself and had seen clearly and deeply what, was

essential to her being and must be explored more fully and lived more intensely and what on the other hand she had gathered around herself as the ephemeral expression of her contact with great events and epochs of the past.

She had seen herself as the Mystery of Christ with the varied and multiple functions of her members. She had seen again the power of the word that had been given to her, and the simplicity and glory of her worship and the meaning of her mission to believer and unbeliever.

She had seen with new pride the role of her laity as the People of God and the leaven of the world. She had seen how all people in some way are hers and must be loved accordingly, so that in freedom they may seek and find her. She had seen how her religious must be renewed and how her priestly candidates must be trained for the great pastoral tasks of the future.

She had seen too, but more darkly, more confusedly, what the world means to her in the unfolding of God's design, in the fulfillment of the Kingdom.

All this she had seen through the eyes of her pastors and searchers. Now, she must see it through the eyes of all her priests and people – see it through their eyes and live it in their minds and hearts and hands.

That is the task that awaits us.

In retrospect the task has proved more difficult than the Council fathers imagined in their euphoria of 8 December 1965. Little did we realise the problem of communicating the revolutionary changes we had voted for. Little did we suspect that the very prospect of those changes would rock the Church as much as it did especially among clergy and religious. Little did we appreciate the problem of adjusting the training of candidates for the priesthood to the reformulated vision of the Church and its mission.

Cedara has been struggling with that problem and, it would seem, fairly successfully. But it will take some time before the training reaches the pitch we should like to see it achieve that will involve a profound sense of communion with the Father, the Son and the Spirit and with one another on the human scene' a keen liturgical sense, a clear grasp of how the Church must strive to transform the conditions of the world, a passion for justice inspired by love, understanding and skill in com-

munication, community leadership – all summed up in the pursuit of holiness, the goal of evangelisation. Put together like this it is a tall order – an ideal to be pursued in the hope that, in those aspects in which we fail, others, in the practice of community, will compensate for our shortcomings. The motto of the pastoral plan of Southern Africa sums it up rather well Community serving Humanity.

+ *Denis E. Hurley, OMI*



LA REVUE « PÔLE ET TROPIQUES »

BERTRAND EVELIN, OMI

« Pôle et Tropiques » est le nom d'une revue oblate francophone publiée entre 1947 et 2002¹. Faisant suite à la « Revue Apostolique de Marie Immaculée », l'organe officiel de l'Association Missionnaire de Marie Immaculée pour la province de France-Midi depuis 1921, elle s'inscrivit dans un champ de collaboration entre les quatre provinces francophones européennes : France-Midi qui en garda la responsabilité effective jusqu'à la fusion des provinces françaises en 1996 ; France-Est qui la rejoignit dès le premier numéro en janvier 1947 afin d'étendre son réseau d'influence à un public francophone² ; Belgique-Sud à partir de 1950 et France-Nord à partir de 1951. La Sainte-Famille de Bordeaux s'y associa en janvier 1964. En 1996, la nouvelle Province de France poursuivit la publication, toujours associée à la Belgique et aux Soeurs de la Sainte-Famille.

Les responsables successifs et le type de collaboration entre les partenaires cadencent la façon dont la revue a évolué.

Au début, la collaboration prit la forme d'une alternance, chacune des provinces ayant sa propre revue³. Un mois sur deux sortait un numéro commun édité par l'équipe lyonnaise. Au mois intercalaire, chaque partenaire publiait une revue d'allure plus modeste, portant le nom de « Pôle et Tropiques » avec, en sous-titre, l'ancien titre de sa propre revue. L'enjeu était de cultiver un lien familial avec les abonnés, mentalité héritée de l'Association Missionnaire de Marie Immaculée.

La Province du Midi vivait à l'heure des Éditions du Chalet, alors en pleine expansion depuis leur création en 1945. « Pôle et Tropiques » misa donc sur la qualité : héliogravure monochrome, nombreuses photos, articles variés et bien documentés, rédacteur en chef⁴ à plein temps. Le nombre des abonnements – 45.000 à son apogée entre 1953 et 1957 – le permettait !

Après onze années, cette organisation finit par montrer ses limites. En effet, si la collaboration avait belle allure sur le papier, il en allait autrement sur le terrain. L'emprise de fait de la province du Midi ne permettait pas aux autres partenaires d'y exprimer leur propre sensibilité. Du coup, côté lecteurs, on assistait à une étrange alternance entre un numéro « richement présenté » mais « volontairement neutralisé » et un

numéro « réduit à quelques feuilles » mais « en conversation avec ses lecteurs »⁵. Par ailleurs, si « Pôle et Tropiques » avait été pionnier sur le marché des revues missionnaires après guerre, la concurrence devenait rude à la fin des années 50. Enfin, la création du C.P.M.I.⁶ bouleversait la surface de contact publicitaire traditionnel que constituaient les missions paroissiales : à l'heure des grandes missions inter-congrégations, il devenait difficile pour chacune d'entre elles de venir avec ses revues sous le bras !

Les quatre Provinciaux concernés décidèrent donc la mise sur pied d'une équipe incluant plus directement l'ensemble des rédacteurs provinciaux. S'ouvrit alors pour « Pôle et Tropiques » une période collégiale qui allait durer jusqu'au milieu des années 60. Les rédacteurs se réunissaient quatre fois par an, Albert Duret assurant la ligne éditoriale. L'objectif fixé était triple : continuer à retracer l'oeuvre des Oblats, étudier quelques-uns des grands problèmes missionnaires de l'Église, contribuer à la formation missiologique des lecteurs pour qu'ils participent « plus profondément à la vie de l'Église ». La revue devint mensuelle. Chaque province restait responsable de sa distribution dans sa zone d'influence et y intégrait en encart un supplément à caractère plus familial⁷.

Pourtant, à partir de 1966, les réunions s'espacèrent. Par ailleurs, de juillet 1965 à décembre 1974, la Province du Nord relança en parallèle la publication des « Petites Annales » sous la responsabilité de Emile Le Hegarat et sous la plume d'Henri Reignat, tandis qu'Albert Duret, demandant à arrêter, était remplacé par Henri Mairot. À cette époque, un laïc, Eric Vautherin, s'adjoignit à l'équipe comme maquettiste. Il y resta jusqu'en 1996.

Sous la responsabilité d'Henri Mairot puis de Noël Leca, en collaboration plus légère mais effective avec les autres équipes de rédaction, l'équipe lyonnaise poursuivit la publication durant trois décennies. Au milieu des années 90, avec la perspective de la réunification des provinces françaises, mais également devant le vieillissement et la baisse du nombre des abonnés, un professionnel fut engagé. Il ne réussit cependant pas à renverser la tendance, malgré l'apport d'une partie des abonnés d'« Immaculata » qui stoppait son activité en 2000. Il fallait se rendre à l'évidence : à l'heure d'Internet, ce mode de communication rencontrait peu d'intérêt auprès des jeunes générations. La Province de

France décida donc d'arrêter les frais. Le dernier numéro sortit à la fin de l'année 2002.

Un panorama sur l'ensemble des articles est riche d'enseignement car la revue suit fidèlement l'évolution de la société et de l'Église.

Ainsi, dans les années 50, la mission apparaît comme un combat contre les forces du paganisme et de l'incroyance. La raison d'être de la revue et de ses lecteurs est éclairée par la métaphore de la Grande Guerre : de même qu'en 14-18, les soldats menant le combat au front étaient épaulés par l'effort de guerre que la société civile soutenait à l'arrière, de même aujourd'hui, les missionnaires ne peuvent tenir leur poste que si, à l'arrière, les laïcs remplissent leur tâche. Celle-ci prend trois formes : soutien moral et spirituel, appui financier, prière pour l'envoi de troupes fraîches. Les articles portent donc l'attention sur la figure du missionnaire, héraut – mais encore plus « héros » – de l'Évangile. C'est le temps des épopées qu'amplifient les éditions du Chalet à travers les livres d'Aimé Roche, Robert Buliard et quelques autres.

Pourtant, au côté de cette mentalité héritée du passé, la revue anticipe l'avenir. Dès 1951, la « page des jeunes » annonce l'importance que la décennie suivante accordera à cette tranche d'âge. De même, la revue fait preuve d'une étonnante attention aux cultures. On insiste sur l'importance, pour le missionnaire, de se couler dans la culture du peuple auquel il est envoyé.

Les années 60 systématiseront cette préoccupation avec des articles à visée ethnographique⁸ et avec les premiers balbutiements de ce qui deviendra plus tard l'inculturation⁹. Le point d'attention change : il y est moins question du missionnaire que de la mission dans laquelle il est engagé, des Oblats que des communautés qui surgissent de leur activité. Place est ainsi faite aux différents partenaires : les Soeurs de la Sainte Famille de Bordeaux qui rejoignent la revue en 1964¹⁰, les catéchistes, les différents acteurs de l'évangélisation, les laïcs européens qui donnent figure à cette nouvelle réalité missionnaire qu'est la coopération. Des récits donnent la parole aux personnes et rendent le lecteur attentif au travail que Dieu opère au cœur des hommes et des sociétés.

En outre, les années 60 reflètent la prise en considération que l'Église fait des sciences humaines. Les articles incluent une dimension socio-économique rigoureuse. De même, on cherche à comprendre le

passage à la modernité, à en évaluer les conséquences sociales, à en mesurer l'impact missiologique : en France, avec les camps catéchétiques, l'importance grandissante des mass-medias ou l'évangélisation sur les plages ; mais également chez les Esquimaux – pas encore appelés « Inuits » – que l'on dit contraints de vivre « à l'âge atomique » ; dans les différents pays africains enfin, où le thème de l'éducation prend une importance grandissante.

Enfin, Concile aidant, place est faite au dialogue, avec une audace qui fait aujourd'hui sourire : « Oui, parlez aux non-chrétiens ! » conseille ainsi un article de mars 1969. Au sujet du dialogue interreligieux et du bouddhisme, la revue publie une série d'études écrites par un Oblat promis à un certain avenir : Marcello Zago !

Durant la décennie suivante, « *Populorum Progressio* » est passée par là. Dans les colonnes de la revue, le « développement », si possible « intégral », croise des laïcs « conscientisés » qui aident des « opprimés » à « se mettre debout ». Ambiance post-colonisatrice aidant, la parole est donnée à un Sud qui interpelle les chrétiens du Nord. Mais le monde se transforme et la mission se cherche : fini le temps des certitudes. La conviction quelque peu incantatoire avec laquelle des articles affirment que, non ! le temps de la mission n'est pas terminé, cache mal le doute qui gagne les esprits.

Les années qui suivent sont filles de cette évolution, mêlant sereine acceptation et tranquille détermination. L'heure n'est plus aux grands récits mais à d'humbles témoignages : l'impressionnisme au service de la mission, en quelque sorte ! Un domaine est tout particulièrement visé, l'éveil vocationnel : les « Jeunes Oblats » remplacent désormais le « Grand Nord » dans la vitrine publicitaire. De Yves Chalvet en 1977 à François-Xavier Pham Duc Tri en 1999, les vœux et ordinations font désormais la « Une », enrichies d'intéressants témoignages. La revue se met ainsi au service de la propagande oblate, des piles de revues étant déposées dans les lieux publics : fond d'églises, sanctuaires, mais également aéroport Saint-Exupéry à Lyon.

Cela n'a pas suffi. En 2002, la revue s'arrêtait, remplacée par d'autres formes de communication : site Internet, bulletin « Audacieux pour l'Évangile ». Onze ans après, que reste-t-il de cette aventure ? Pas grand chose, aux dires des historiens qui font peu de cas de ce genre de revues trop militantes pour être honnêtes. Pour nous Oblats, c'est une

autre affaire. Ces cinquante-cinq volumes reliés constituent un sympathique album de famille... Peut-être même davantage d'ailleurs : en se voulant revue sans prétention en lien avec des gens tout simples, Pôle et Tropiques a entrecroisé des réflexions, des témoignages, des analyses et des méditations qui conservent un étonnant impact sur le lecteur d'aujourd'hui. À ce titre, elle participe bien du charisme oblat.

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¹ Mais le nom fut utilisé pour la première fois dans le cadre des « Petites Annales » de la province de France-Nord : en 1934 était publié un agenda sous le titre : « Des tropiques au pôle ». L'année suivante, on en vint à des considérations plus classiques avec le titre : « In finem terrae ». Puis, de 1936 à 1939, quatre éditions successives titrèrent : « Du pôle aux tropiques ».

² La province de l'Est publiait depuis 1920 « Immaculata », une revue germanophone qui stop pa en 2000.

³ Les « Petites Annales » pour France-Nord depuis 1891 ; le « Messager de Marie Immaculée » pour Belgique-sud à partir de 1920.

⁴ Raoul Lalanne (1922 - 1972).

⁵ Cf. le rapport du provincial de France-Midi, Joseph Chaudier, le 26 août 1958.

⁶ Fondé en 1952 mais avec un net développement à partir de 1958, le « Centre Pastoral des Missions de l'Intérieur » rassemblait la plupart des congrégations engagées dans les missions paroissiales pour des opérations de grande envergure (toute une ville) prêchées en commun (une centaine de missionnaires durant une année ou plus) et préparées par une analyse sociologique fouillée.

⁷ « Avec le supplément à la revue qui paraissait 3 ou 4 fois par an, le contact avec les familles était très palpable : intentions de prière pour les défunts, pour des malades, pour d'heureux événements dans les familles et chez les Oblats » (Noël Leca, août 2013).

⁸ Notamment ceux de Guy Mary-Rousselière (1913 - 1994), Oblat ethnologue dans le Grand Nord canadien.

⁹ « L'Église sait apprécier les richesses culturelles de chaque nation et elle veut en enrichir le culte divin » est-il écrit dans un éditorial de mars 1964.

¹⁰ Même si, dès 1952, tel ou tel article évoque leur travail au côté des Oblats.



NOTES DE LECTURE / BOOK REVIEWS / RECENSIONES

Philips E. JESUTHASAN, omi, *A Sri Lankan Saint!? A Biography of the Servant of God Rev. Fr. B. A. Thomas, O.M.I., Founder of the Contemplative Congregation of the Rosarians*, Gnanothayam, Mannar, Sri Lanka [2013], 126 p.

In this short biography Father Jesuthasan places before us the portrait of Fr. B. A. Thomas, Oblate of Mary Immaculate, founder of the contemplative Congregation of the Rosarians. Father Thomas was highly respected and appreciated as a man of God, in particular during the thirty-five years during which he guided, at the price of much physical and mental suffering, the new Congregation he had established. He came to be acclaimed as a very holy man, a guru, a sanyassi, a healer, a consoler, a comforter and even a miracle-worker by the faithful of the Jaffna peninsula and beyond. After his death, his fame of sanctity grew. Quite a number of people attributed temporal and spiritual favours to the intercession of Father Thomas. However, in recent years, his memory has been rather dimmed, due to the recurring struggle in the north of Sri Lanka. Tholagatty, the monastery he founded, has been for years a no-man's land. As it is in a very sensitive area, one cannot have access anymore to the grave of Father Thomas. Yet he is still very present in the memory of the Oblates of northern Sri Lanka, and other faithful who came to know him. The Oblates of the south, and the faithful, need to be told again about him so as to appreciate and venerate one who remains an unusual spiritual witness and model for each one of us.

Father Jesuthasan gives us a sketch of the life of Father Thomas without the exaggerations which were common in the past in hagiographic writings. As one browses through the narrative, one wonders how the young Thomas, who was so frail health-wise, became a priest and even more, how at all he became a religious founder. During his student days he was influenced by remarkable Oblates, Father Beaud, Fr. Blachot and Brother Grounsseault. Another Oblate, Father Claude Lawrence, who came to know him when he was a young student at St. Patrick's College, could not find words to express his veneration for his holy teacher.

During his years at St. Patrick's as a teacher and guide of the youngsters, Catholics and Hindus, a special divine call came to Father

Thomas. It was triggered, as it were, by the publication of the missionary Encyclical, *Rerum Ecclesiae*, of Pius XI, which was published on February 28, 1926. Father Thomas, a deeply spiritual man and a budding contemplative, was led to respond to the call of the Pope. He would endeavour to establish a new type of Christian witnessing within the context of Sri Lanka, and of the South Indian subcontinent, through a humble Indianized contemplative institution better adapted to the local context, with a special stress on prayer and contemplation, allied to austere living, and humble manual work.

The Bishop of Jaffna, Mgr. Guyomard, OMI, encouraged Father Thomas, and helped him in many ways to make a start. He had come to know his sterling qualities when he himself was the rector of Saint Patrick's. Father Thomas prepared the ground in his own quiet way after much prayer and reflection. He recruited his first disciples among the best youngsters he had come to know as he was ministering to the youth in Jaffna. The monastery was established at Tholagatty in 1928. Vocations began to come from South India as well. The Bishop obtained from Rome the canonical erection of the new Congregation in 1934.

In a substantial report to Father Perrot, the Oblate Vicar of Missions, dated March 1932, Father Thomas presented the main points of the Rosarian spirituality. It is worth giving a short summary of it. Father underlined the supreme importance of prayer and penance. Thus the monks would offer themselves as victims in union with Christ in order to make vicarious satisfaction for others, "thus filling up those things that are wanting in the sufferings of Christ." The monastery was to accept members of all castes; they would live like brothers in the same spirit, and serv one another with Christ-like charity. As he considered the sad condition of the world, he asked himself who will preside over the building up of a new social system, Christ or Mammon, divine Wisdom or human folly. Humility of the highest degree was to be the sacred source of the strength of the monks. The practices of piety would be suited to their capacity. Falter warned against exalted thoughts and aspirations in the practices of piety. A central place was to be given to the Eucharist, while the continuous recitation of the Rosary, day and night, would be the expression of the intense devotion that was fostered by the Congregation towards Our Lady. The preaching of retreats to priests, religious and laity, in groups and individually would also be sponsored.

The retreatants would be invited to enter God's plan of salvation with trust and humility, as the preacher would stress that God is all, that one has to make a choice in the struggle that is going on between light and darkness.

From 1928 to 1938, 43 monks made their profession; there was also a foundation in South India. The attempt at establishing another house in Madhu ended in a failure. The new monastery had been inaugurated in February 1935. To help the new community make a start, the Bishop gave a 31 year old Oblate, Father Villavarasingham, as a temporal administrator. He was down-to-earth, a great worker, practical minded, but unfortunately not sensitive enough to gauge the burden he imposed on the monks. Besides, the community was badly affected by recurring bouts of malaria. The house was closed in April 1937.

At this stage, the very existence of the monastery was in question. The councillors of the Bishop, who were practical missionaries, and had learned over the years to rely on their meagre revenues to run their missions, were increasingly annoyed because the diocese was called upon again and again to give substantial monetary assistance to Tholagatty. Father Thomas was given a six-month period of probation to make the monastery self-sufficient. If this goal was not achieved, the monastery would be closed. Father Thomas was a spiritual man; he knew that in things temporal he was helpless. This time once again, Father Villavarasingham was asked by the Bishop to be responsible for the temporal affairs of the monastery. It was a heavy cross for Father Thomas, for he had come to know the ways of the administrator who had been thrust on him. Father Villavarasingham did set things right; he placed the monastery on a sound footing financially, but at a heavy price. The Father administrator was not sensitive enough, as indicated above, to gauge the burden he placed on the monks who had to be content with the meagre fare that was allowed by their rule. Soon, a current of sullen resentment pervaded the community. Father Thomas was the silent and helpless witness of the changes in the community. Many monks left. In July 1936, two months after the arrival of Father Villavarasingham, he wrote in his diary that he lived 'in umbra mortis', in the shadow of death.

The stay of Father Thomas in Europe in 1938 was a providential interlude. Father Labouré, the Superior General of the Oblates, had been

impressed by the personality of Father Thomas when, in March 1937, he paid a visit to the monastery. The following year, Father Thomas was personally invited by him to the Oblate General Chapter which was to be held in Rome in September. Father left for Europe in May. Before the Chapter, he visited various monasteries and institutions in Italy, France and Belgium to make known his own monastic Congregation, and to obtain spiritual and material support. In September after the Chapter, he was not fortunate enough to obtain a private papal audience at Castel-Gandolfo. How he would have exulted if he had met the Pope!

Father Thomas was back at Tholagatty in December 1938, where he had to bear with a bout of sickness on arrival. The war years, 1939-1945, were lean years at the monastery, as it was for everybody else. A monastery for the Rosarian nuns was established in Vasavilan in 1952, not far from Tholagatty. Here too Father Thomas had to face right from the start, problems of funds and personnel. The monastery was for a number of years under the wise guidance of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Bordeaux

While the financial problems continued to affect the monastery, there were recurring complaints from within and without, that the monastic discipline and recollection were on the wane. Eminent visitors, Mgr. Lucas, the Apostolic Delegate, and later Mgr. Knox. his successor, recommended a canonical visitation. Father Thomas was such a loving father for the Rosarians that apparently due to his unusual gentleness and the limitations of age, he was unable to maintain good order in the monasteries he had founded.

Father Jesuthasan has rightly given much space to the last crucial years of Father Thomas. We discover in those passages a picture of Father's life which is very little known. Father Le Coutour OMI, Vicar General of the diocese, was appointed to conduct the canonical visitation of both monasteries, that of Tholagatty and that of Vasavilan. The report was in the Bishop's hand in April 1957. Father Villavarasingham, who was the right-hand of the Bishop and his trusted delegate in this affair, was once again appointed to implement the reforms which were recommended, or perhaps to better say, commanded, by the Bishop in the light of the report. For Father Thomas, it was the deepest blow ever. One can imagine the mental agony he went through. He pleaded repeatedly that someone else be appointed. His pleas went unheard. Father

Villavarasingham became not only the administrator; but he was also nominated superior of the monastery.

The biographer has reproduced part of the correspondence which enlightens us about this sad confrontation. We have here a sharp contrast between the main personalities involved. Those who have known and worked under Bishop Emilianuspillai will agree that, as a Bishop, he had an unusual ability at organizing things. He had a sharp and retentive memory. He guided and controlled everything, even to the least details, in his diocese. Though he was normally soft-spoken, he was insistent that everything had to be done his way. No doubt he was efficient, down-to-earth, and to some extent a financial wizard, who would keep a tight control over the diocesan purse. His right hand, Father Ml-lavarasingham, had neither the time nor inclination to ponder over the spiritual consequences of his rather rough ways of handling things and people.

If there is in one of his letters, a note of bitterness - the authenticity of the letter is questioned by Father Jesuthasan - one can understand and sympathize with Father Thomas. He was by then much diminished physically and mentally. After years of silent and prayerful endurance, he must have been at the end of his tether. It is about that time, probably in 1960, that I (the writer of these few pages), had the opportunity of paying a visit to Tholagatty. Father looked exhausted, and he addressed me a few gentle words as I went round. To my eyes, he was the very picture of humility, a holy man in the hands of God.

When in April 1961, a Rosarian priest was appointed prior, Father Villavarasingham returned to the missionary stations entrusted to him. A crushing weight was then lifted from Father Thomas' weak shoulders. On November 17, that year Father celebrated his golden jubilee of priesthood. It was the last ray of sunshine in a life which for so long had been visited by trials. Father Thomas allowed the monks, the clergy and the laity to celebrate the jubilee in a grand way. It was not for his own glory but for the glory of Christ the High Priest, that he allowed what some called "that extravaganza".

The strain caused by repeated public appearances taxed the fragile frame of Father Thomas. His condition was such that it was decided to send him to Jaffna where medical attention would be readily available. As he was about to be driven to Jaffna on the 1st of February 1962,

he prostrated himself full length before the Eucharistic Lord. It was a heart-rending departure. He was not to see his beloved monastery again.

For another two years, he continued to carry the cross of suffering with bouts of acute sickness that seemed almost terminal, but with repeated recovery. He was cared for by a Rosarian monk, and by the Fathers of the Bishop's House. He continued to live in mind and heart together with his beloved monasteries.

Father Thomas died on January 26, 1964. He was buried at Tholagatty. The crowds of people, high and low, which flocked to the monastery were the most eloquent witness that they were convinced of Father's holiness. Though the grounds of Tholagatty is now, as regards the Rosarians, *terra deserta*, Father Thomas, a witness of the primacy of the spiritual, continues to intercede for his Rosarians, and for us all, as we go through these troubled times. (*Martin Quéré, OMI*)

Eric J. Boule, OMI, (Ed.), *Journey of Faith – The Journals of Bishop Charles Jolivet OMI, Vicar Apostolic of Natal, 1874-1903*, translated from the French, and followed by a commentary and biographical notes, Dorspruit, South Africa (Jennydee Publications) 2013, 365 p.

Fr. Eric J. Boule OMI, born in 1929, and Oblate Missionary in his homeland South Africa (Province of KwaZulu Natal) since 1948, is the first to translate the French diary of Mgr. Charles Constant Jolivet OMI (1826-1903) into English. Jolivet, French by birth, entered the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate as a seminarian in 1848. After his ordination in 1849, he was active among the Irish immigrants in England. He was elected a general assistant in 1867. In 1874, he was assigned to be apostolic vicar of Natal as the successor of Mgr. Jean- François Allard OMI (1806-1889) and was ordained bishop in Paris. When Mgr. Jolivet first arrived in Natal in 1875, the vicariate was a gigantic territory that, today, is divided into almost 40 dioceses.

The above mentioned writings of Mgr. Jolivet were divided into three volumes. The original handwritten copies are found in the archives of the Archdiocese of Durban, South Africa. These diary notes encompass the entire time of Mgr. Jolivet's episcopate from 1874 until 1903. These memoirs offer us a primary source not only for the ecclesial history of Natal and South Africa, but it proves to be an important source for studying the history of the Oblates of M.I.

The reader of the diary learns a great deal about Mgr. Jolivet: his friends, his joys, his fears and hardships, his mission as bishop and missionary, his thoughts and actions. One also gets a good insight about the contemporary development of South Africa. The development of ecclesiastical life at that time in all its dimensions is illumined from the perspective of this bishop.

Fr. Boulle, who has researched Mgr. Jolivet since the late 60's, offers us not only a translation of the apostolic vicar's diary; he comments and explains the writings in a second chapter. The entire work profits from this considerably. Many photos and maps make the volumes eidetic. Three appendices follow, with biographical notes about persons mentioned in the memoirs, especially Oblates, Trappists, and Marianhill Missionaries. Newspaper articles from that time are also included. The work also includes an extensive topographical index of names and places, and lists also the ecclesiastical institutions. (*Thomas Klosterkamp, OMI*)

Angelica CICCONE, *MGC [Movimento Giovanile Costruire]*, "MGC. *Un intreccio tra desideri umani e progetto di Dio*, Edizioni Missionari OMI, 2013, 150 p. + DVD.

Ce livre, fruit d'un travail de recherche de huit mois, fait pas l'auteure, parcourt l'histoire du *Movimento Giovanile Costruire* (MGC), au moyen de nombreux « témoins clés » de son cheminement de 1988 à aujourd'hui.

Le mouvement est né à partir de jeunes Italiens qui se reconnaissaient distinctement dans le charisme de saint Eugène de Mazenod, dans la vie et les œuvres des Missionnaires OMI. Dans le livre, on parle de l'étincelle inspiratrice et des premiers pas qui ont été faits, comme par exemple, les premiers congrès à Lourdes. L'histoire du mouvement est riche de moments de formation, de congrès, d'écoles de formation, de camps d'été, de participation aux Journées mondiales de la jeunesse, de projets missionnaires, de participation à des missions paroissiales et de jeunes en Italie ou de voyages missionnaires dans des pays où travaillent les Oblats italiens. Le cheminement du mouvement a aussi été un instrument d'ouverture à toute l'Église et de discernement de vocation pour de nombreux jeunes.

« J'avais l'impression que les jeunes du mouvement aujourd'hui ne se rendaient pas compte de quelle grande histoire ils faisaient par-

tie, oubliant d'avoir de solides racines à la base du mouvement », dit l'auteur dans un interview de la revue oblate italienne *Missioni OMI*. « Raconter l'histoire du mouvement me semble une façon de réconcilier le passé avec le présent; de la même façon, j'étais convaincue que relire ces vingt-cinq ans à la lumière du projet de Dieu, pouvait aider à jeter quelque lumière sur le présent et sur les pas futurs que le mouvement devra faire ».

Le livre contient les fondements, les gonds de la spiritualité du mouvement. L'auteure a aussi dialogué avec 25 témoins directs de l'histoire du mouvement. Quelques-uns de ces interviews sont joints au livre et contenus dans un DVD : jeunes, laïcs et Oblats racontent l'histoire du mouvement et les espoirs de cet important anniversaire.

« Ce qui m'a le plus frappée dans le cheminement du mouvement a été de voir comment Dieu a fait avancer les choses », dit encore l'auteure. « La phrase que l'on trouve dans le titre du livre, tirée du texte écrit par les jeunes participants à l'école de formation de juillet 2012, en est une description parfaite. Il y a eu des moments difficiles dans l'histoire du mouvement, des périodes de crise, une diminution du nombre des membres, des occasions au cours desquelles l'humanité des personnes a risqué de tout compromettre, des visions inconciliables sur la nature et les buts ». On peut dire alors avec certitude que si aujourd'hui le mouvement a 25 ans, ce n'est pas par mérite humain. Ou, mieux, les hommes se sont rendus disponibles en se mettant au service du projet; mais c'est Dieu qui a permis au mouvement de croître, de surmonter les adversités, de concilier l'inconciliable, et de porter des fruits abondants dans la vie de tant de jeunes et aussi de tant d'assistants. (*Pasquale Castrilli, OMI*)

Rubens Pedro CABRAL, OMI, *Bispos Oblatos*, [sl], [sd], 98 p.

Hay que reconocer: en sus 3 años der servicio como Provincial de la Provincia de Brasil, Rubens Pedro Cabral logró traducir e incluso publicar una considerable cantidad de títulos oblatos. Entre ellos, hay una curiosidad, casi una ocurrencia, le instigó la pregunta: ¿cuántos obispos oblatos existieron y siguen hasta la actualidad? El resultado, antes que un libro, es más bien un folleto que pretende ser un elenco completo de todos los misioneros oblatos quienes durante los casi 200 años de la congregación han recibido el orden sagrado en el grado de *episkopos*

con los datos biográficos e incluso una pequeña reseña de su vida. Rubens toma como oportunidad el 150° aniversario de la muerte del Fundador, quien abrió la lista de los obispos oblatos. Toma como punto de partida la enumeración de 127 obispos, elaborada por Yvon Beaudoin en 1992, sumando ahora la cantidad de 146, de los cuales 44 en vida (en el año 2009). Ciertamente, el historiador meticoloso puede encontrar algún dato incompleto. Sin embargo, agradecerá tener un manual como éste, que le facilitaría cualquier investigación más exhaustiva. Y el “simple Oblato de a pie” se maravilla (hasta poder enorgullecerse) de esta riqueza nuestra dentro y para el servicio de la Iglesia; ya que completamos mientras tanto los 150... (*Miguel Fritz, omi*)

[Rubens Pedro CABRAL, OMI], *Testemunho de um Oblato no extinto Carandirú, Uma contribuição à Pastoral Carcerária*, [sl], [sd], 110 p.

Cuando nació en 1940 en los EEUU, su nombre fue Robert Francis Reardon. Se transformó en Francisco, cuando llegó al Brasil en 1968, más conocido como “Chico”. Su deseo de trabajar con los más pobres, como verdadero misionero oblato, se cumplió en varias parroquias. Sin embargo, fue desde 1985, cuando encontró realmente la gente más abandonada: en la cárcel más grande (de hecho llegó a trabajar en dos) de América Latina en Carandirú (Estado de Sao Paulo), con una población de 8.000 presos y 600 guardacárceles.

El libro de Rubens Pedro Cabral no es una investigación científica. Su mérito es haber descubierto las notas de un apasionado pastor cuando éste falleció en 1999 y haberlo publicado. Ciertamente, el Padre Chico fue bien conocido en el mundo oblato de la región; y más todavía en el Brasil, donde fue durante muchos años el coordinador de la Pastoral Carcelaria en la Conferencia Episcopal. Con todo, es este compendio de testimonios, que nos invita a entrar en un mundo desconocido, un auténtico infierno, donde el sacerdote intenta prender luces de esperanza, muy en el sentido del Fundador de la congregación oblata, San Eugenio de Mazenod, como insinúa la primera parte del libro.

Francisco nos da a conocer números y estadísticas, incluso de las infracciones más frecuentes, como también de las enfermedades tan presentes en ese ambiente (y tantas veces sin tratamiento adecuado). Asimismo, nos abre los ojos para la situación de sus familiares, para

la estructura de esa cárcel (hasta el pabellón de máxima seguridad), para las desesperaciones que culminan en una huelga de hambre. Esta desesperación también quiere apoderarse a veces del capellán, hasta la resignación: “Año viejo – año nuevo: siempre la misma historia”. Indignación, aun rabia no le son ajenas. A pesar de ello, logra transmitir esperanza contra todas las evidencias, predicándoles que “Jesús es más fuerte, pasó por la cruz y llegó a la resurrección”. No deja de ser profético cuando expresa que el “Gran Estado de Sao Paulo ... con todo su imperio económico e industrial ... no sabe tratar como un ser humano a su propio ciudadano”. Le llena de emoción, viendo a los presos preparar la fiesta de Navidad, acompañado por algún guardacárcel, “verdadero cristiano – una gran gracia de encontrar un guarda así dentro de la cárcel”. Comparte así su convicción y experiencia de fe: que “Jesús no se olvida de ustedes”.

Con todo eso, la lectura de este libro no es un pasatiempo divertido; es duro, exigente, desilusionante – sin ser desesperante, porque hace comprender que la cárcel es el “*corazón del infierno* con sus miles de contradicciones ... Y es el Reino, que brota donde nadie se lo esperaba; y que brota justamente en medio de un no-pueblo, del cual nadie creía que eran gente”. (*Miguel Fritz, OMI*)

Michael KRISCHER, *Pa’i Puku: Misionero. Santo para el Chaco del Paraguay*, Editora Litocolor S.R.L., Asunción, 2011, 200 p.

Pa’i Puku significa “sacerdote alto” en guaraní, lengua oficial del Paraguay; y es allí, donde el joven misionero flamenco Piet (Pedro) Shaw OMI llega a entregar su vida misionera. La presente obra del teólogo alemán Michael Krischer es traducción y resumen de una extensa investigación, que este historiador realizó durante un año en el mismo país, del cual él es entusiasta y buen conocedor, en vista a iniciar el proceso de beatificación de Pedro Shaw; lo había conocido en vida.

Introduce el libro, destacando que el pueblo paraguayo ya lo tiene como santo al Pa’i Puku; y lo comprobó con una amplia encuesta en todo el país, documentada en un capítulo anexo. Presenta al misionero oblat, nacido en 1925 en Bélgica, donde con 26 años fue ordenado sacerdote, llegando un año más tarde al Paraguay. Y lo presenta como un “misionero clásico”, entregándose a “un servicio muy sacrificado”. Es durante estos casi 30 años, que Pedro Shaw se conquista los cora-

zonas de la gente humilde, muy alejada de cualquier oportunidad de formarse, sea ya escolar, sea religiosamente.

Son los capítulos centrales del libro que comprueban, con que inquietud y creatividad el misionero busca y encuentra forma y medios para llegar a la gente, compartir con ellos su estilo de vida tan pobre, sin pretender más, procurando hablar su lengua y lenguaje: su carro de caballo, convertible en canoa (recién en los años posteriores tuvo un jeep); sus planes pastorales; y sobre todo su idea de tener un puesto central con escuela-internado – que llegó a ser realidad (gracias a su tenacidad y capacidad como “*fund-raiser*”) en la hoy famosa “Escuela Pa’i Puku” (la gente le impuso el nombre de su querido pastor). No así su deseo de poder trabajar entre los pueblos indígenas. Más contacto con ellos le permitió recién su ministerio como obispo del Vicariato Apostólico del Pilcomayo, para el cual le quedaron sólo escasos 4 años – hasta aquel trágico accidente del 1984 que puso un prematuro fin a su vida. Su muerte y sepelio, que causaron enorme impacto a nivel nacional, forman el cierre del cuerpo de la obra. Al cual agregó el autor un vasto anexo con materiales bibliográficos y documentos por un lado; y por el otro los resultados de la encuesta y recuerdos de los contemporáneos que aún viven. Además, da un resumen de su investigación, como recomendaciones para el proceso de beatificación.

De hecho, el libro es pieza clave para ello: contiene todo lo esencial para que el postulador y la comisión diocesana puedan elaborar los textos requeridos para el primer paso, que es el reconocimiento de las virtudes de Pa’i Puku; para que pronto sea declarado - lo que para el pueblo paraguayo ya es: un “Santo para el Chaco del Paraguay”.
(*Miguel Fritz, OMI*)

LECTURES RECOMMANDÉES / RECOMMENDED READING
/ LECTURAS RECOMENDADAS

Tiziana Longhitano, *sfp*, *Dialogo e profezia intellettuale a servizio dell'evangelizzazione. La visione antropologica nell'esperienza asiatica di Marcello Zago*, "Urbaniana University Journal", NS LXVI (1/2013), p. 91-116.

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