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# Præfatio

## 200<sup>E</sup> ANNIVERSAIRE DES MISSIONNAIRES OBLATS VU DU BERCEAU DE LA CONGRÉGATION

BENOÎT DOSQUET, OMI

**L**a lettre 9 octobre 1815 du Fondateur au père Tempier reprend trois piliers importants pour ce bicentenaire : se mettre au pied du crucifix pour n'écouter que Dieu, se pénétrer de la situation des gens et donner l'exemple d'une véritable vie communautaire avec la volonté et le courage de marcher sur la trace des Apôtres.

### LE PREMIER PILIER EST L'APPEL DE JÉSUS-CHRIST

Un appel entendu par Eugène de Mazenod, par ces premiers compagnons, par ses fils les Missionnaires Oblats et par les membres de la famille Mazenodienne.

L'appel de Jésus-Christ entendu par Eugène de Mazenod lui révèle sa dignité.

L'archevêque d'Aix et Arles, lors de la messe du jubilé le 24 janvier dernier disait : « que saint Eugène, derrière son air supérieur, son désir de plaire aux yeux du monde, cachait une pauvreté, une blessure. » Et il ajoutait : « parce qu'il était pauvre lui-même, il a pu accueillir l'Évangile et vivre une vraie rencontre du Christ. Parce qu'il était pauvre, le Christ est allé à lui. Ce fut pour saint Eugène de Mazenod une nouvelle évangélisation...<sup>1</sup> »

À partir de cette rencontre, sa conversion l'amène à partager l'amour reçu de Jésus-Christ aux autres. Le document *Identité et Mis-*

*sion du religieux Frère dans l'Église* parle « du don que nous recevons au don que nous partageons... Ce don reçu et partagé sera aussi communiqué dans l'accomplissement de la mission.<sup>2</sup>»

Les premiers compagnons du Fondateur partageaient également l'amour de Jésus-Christ dans leur ministère de prêtre. Le Père Maunier avait déjà témoigné l'amour de Dieu dans le sacrement du mariage. Malheureusement, sa fille et sa femme décédèrent à deux mois d'intervalle. Après quelques années, il entendit l'appel à devenir prêtre, malgré les aléas de la Révolution. Comme le père Mie, tous deux ont eu ce courage héroïque, ils furent témoins de Jésus-Christ au risque de leur vie, ils furent ordonnés en cachette à Marseille en 1797.

## LE DEUXIÈME PILIER EST DE RÉPONDRE AUX BESOINS DE CEUX QUI NOUS ENTOURENT

Eugène a perçu l'état d'abandon des habitants de la Provence et par la suite les besoins du monde, ainsi nous disons régulièrement qu'Eugène avait : « un cœur grand comme le monde ».

Les premiers missionnaires à rejoindre Eugène de Mazenod s'étaient aussi laissés toucher par les besoins des gens. Ils avaient à cœur d'être des missionnaires zélés !

Le Père Deblieu débordait de zèle missionnaire, il participait à presque toutes les missions jusqu'en 1823. Après avoir regagné son diocèse d'origine, il dirigea une équipe de missionnaires à Fréjus et termina son ministère à La-Seyne-sur-Mer toujours dans cet enthousiasme de communiquer sa foi vive aux fidèles de sa paroisse.

Le père Mie se laissait toucher par les pauvres mendiants, il était un prédicateur populaire qui se mettait à la portée de tous pour parler au cœur des gens.

## LE TROISIÈME PILIER EST LA VIE RELIGIEUSE EN COMMUNAUTÉ

Lors du 100<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la Congrégation, Mgr Augustin Donatenwill, 6<sup>ème</sup> Supérieur général (1908-1931) disait : « Nous affirmons, au nom de Dieu, de son Vicaire sur la terre et de notre vénéré Fondateur, que dans notre Congrégation, nous sommes religieux avant d'être missionnaires, religieux pour être des missionnaires surnaturels, religieux pour persévérer jusqu'à la mort dans les fatigues de l'apostolat.

Le jour où nous cesserions d'être religieux, nous porterions encore le titre de missionnaires, nous remplirions des fonctions apostoliques, nous pourrions même être des convertisseurs d'âmes, mais nous cesserions néanmoins d'être dans notre vocation... Notre vénéré Fondateur voulu que, dans sa jeune société de missionnaires, la vie religieuse précédât, préparât et informât la vie apostolique.<sup>3»</sup>

Si le fondateur ne parle pas de vœu dans sa première lettre au père Tempier, il désirait une vie commune qui n'ait qu'un cœur et qu'une âme, une communauté qui travaille à sa propre sanctification et « qui ait la volonté et le courage de marcher sur les traces des apôtres.<sup>4»</sup>

Marcher sur les traces des Apôtres comporte pour le Missionnaire Oblat, la vie en communauté : «la communauté des Apôtres avec Jésus est le modèle de leur vie ; il avait réuni les Douze autour de lui pour en faire ses compagnons et ses envoyés.<sup>5 »</sup>

Le Père Jetté écrivait en 1992 : « Eugène de Mazenod l'a ressenti dès le début de sa petite Société : il a établi la vie commune avant même de demander la vie religieuse. Il la jugeait essentielle pour deux raisons : comme soutien et stimulant dans notre effort vers la sainteté, et comme moyen de stabilité et d'efficacité dans notre action missionnaire. Il n'avait pas en vue de grouper des francs-tireurs apostoliques ; il voulait constituer un véritable corps – un « corps d'élite » – comme il disait. (Lettre à Tempier, 22 août 1817 ; dans Lettres, t. 6, p. 38), une communauté de prêtres et de Frères qui soient capables de vivre ensemble sous un même règlement et de travailler ensemble dans la vigne du Seigneur.<sup>6»</sup>

Le P. Tempier est le premier à entrer dans la perception que le Fondateur avait non seulement d'être missionnaire, mais d'être un religieux missionnaire. Le Fondateur comptait sur le père P. Tempier : « ... Je voudrais, au contraire, que vous fussiez des premiers à entrer dans la maison, qui est toute prête pour recevoir les missionnaires. Ce premier pas est, à mon avis, de la plus haute importance. À cette réunion nous arrêterons le règlement que nous aurons à suivre [...] Il faudrait commencer ensemble l'année 1816. Nous commencerons par travailler sur nous-mêmes ; après, nous réglerons le genre de vie que nous adopterons pour la ville et pour les missions ; enfin nous deviendrons des saints.<sup>7»</sup>

Le Père Fabre écrira dans la notice nécrologique du P. Tempier : « L'appel de notre fondateur méritait d'être entendu du P. Tempier et le P. Tempier méritait d'être appelé par notre fondateur. Ces deux âmes étaient faites pour s'entendre, s'unir, se compléter et concourir dans la mesure de leur vocation respective à la réalisation de l'œuvre de Dieu.<sup>8</sup>»

Ainsi, je crois que nous pouvons faire nôtres les paroles de l'Archevêque d'Aix, lors du cinquantième anniversaire du sacerdoce du P. Tempier, en 1864 : « Tant que la Société des Oblats de Marie Immaculée sera dirigée par l'esprit de foi, de dévouement et de zèle qui anima votre premier Père et qui anime toujours dans sa verte vieillesse celui qu'il pouvait appeler son fils non moins que son frère, son assistant et son ami ; tant que, marchant sur les traces des Mazenod et des Tempier, vous pourrez dire : *Societas nostra cum patre et filio ejus* (que notre Société soit avec Dieu le Père et avec son Fils), l'Église de la terre et l'Église du ciel auront à se réjouir.<sup>9</sup>»

En partant de ces trois piliers, je me dis : le 200<sup>e</sup> anniversaire des Missionnaires Oblats c'est avant tout une communauté. Le Père général disait lors du bicentenaire : « Le projet de vie communautaire pour le travail missionnaire était au cœur de notre fondation comme Missionnaires de Provence. De Mazenod et ses compagnons ont intentionnellement choisi de former une communauté engagée à une forte vie spirituelle...<sup>10</sup> »

Si nous regardons l'histoire de la fondation de la Société des Missionnaires de Provence, nous avons une première date : l'annonce de la fondation fut faite le 2 octobre 1815. Or ce n'est que le 25 janvier 1816 que les abbés de Mazenod, Tempier et certainement Icard débutèrent une vie commune dans l'ancien monastère du Carmel d'Aix. Le mois suivant, les abbés Deblieu, Mie et Maunier les rejoignirent. De même, le premier acte communautaire, la supplique<sup>11</sup> aux Vicaires capitulaires est datée du 25 janvier 1816 et les Vicaires y répondent le 29 janvier en ajoutant le père Maunier dans la liste.

La Congrégation aurait pu choisir de retenir le 2 octobre 1815 comme date de fondation, mais en 1865, le père Fabre demanda que le 25 janvier soit marqué « des plus vifs sentiments de reconnaissance envers Dieu et d'affection envers notre chère Congrégation.<sup>12</sup>» Cela montre que dès la fondation, ce ne sont pas des individus un à côté de l'autre

qui forment la Société des Missionnaires de Provence, mais une communauté rassemblée au nom du Christ pour vivre de lui et l'annoncer à l'humanité qui nous entoure. Chacun peut porter un regard sur les premiers compagnons d'Eugène de Mazenod qui n'ont pas poursuivi dans l'œuvre voulue par le Fondateur, mais nous n'étions pas à leur place et il est difficile de porter un jugement aujourd'hui. Sans leur présence au début de la Société des Missionnaires de Provence, la Congrégation n'aurait peut-être pas vu le jour.

### LES FESTIVITÉS DU BICENTENAIRE À AIX

Il y a trois ans, nous avons débuté les célébrations du bicentenaire par un programme de renouveau spirituel vécu par les Missionnaires Oblats. Le bicentenaire fêté à Aix-en-Provence s'inscrit dans cette dynamique. La communauté des Missionnaires Oblats d'Aix-en-Provence, avec les laïcs de la famille Mazenodienne, a prévu un programme de festivités étalées sur l'année 2016, afin de mettre en valeur les différentes figures qui ont contribué à ce qu'est aujourd'hui la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats.

Certes le point d'orgue a été les 24 et 25 janvier 2016. Avec la messe à la Cathédrale d'Aix-en-Provence le 24 janvier, présidée par Monseigneur Dufour, archevêque d'Aix et Arles, en présence du Supérieur général des Missionnaires Oblats et avec la participation de nombreux Oblats représentant les cinq continents. La célébration s'est terminée par une saynète présentant l'appel des premiers Missionnaires de Provence, préparée par la Frat-Oser et la Frat-Mazenodienne (groupe d'étudiants hébergé dans la maison des Oblats à Aix et des jeunes professionnels de la région aixoise). Le lendemain, le 25 janvier, nous nous sommes retrouvés dans la salle de fondation dès l'aurore pour un temps d'oraison qui est le fondement de la vie missionnaire afin de devenir davantage des « disciples-missionnaires », thème cher au pape François. Certes, tout chrétien est missionnaire dans la mesure où il a rencontré l'amour de Dieu en Jésus Christ ; mais le véritable missionnaire est celui qui ne cesse jamais d'être disciple, il ressent Jésus vivant avec lui au milieu de l'activité missionnaire. De même que la communauté est missionnaire : réuni en communauté autour de celui qui nous rassemble, il nous envoie comme témoins de cette expérience au cœur de notre humanité.

Après l'eucharistie vécue en communion avec l'ensemble de la Congrégation, nous étions rejoints par les invités de cette journée (malades psychiatriques, SDF ou gens du Quart-monde, des personnes que l'on n'invite pas d'habitude) pour un repas partagé dans l'esprit de Saint Eugène et de notre charisme « les pauvres sont évangélisés ». Le repas se clôtura par la plantation d'un olivier que l'on peut mettre en parallèle avec la phrase du pape Jean XXIII : « Le petit rameau, planté par Eugène de Mazenod en 1816, est devenu un arbre vigoureux, étendant ses branches sur deux hémisphères et, qui sait s'adapter aussi bien au climat glacé du Pôle Nord qu'aux chaleurs brûlantes de l'Équateur.<sup>13</sup> » En fin de journée, le Père général inaugura l'exposition du bicentenaire qui a accueilli durant 15 jours près de 800 personnes, dont de nombreux groupes scolaires. Et quel beau programme : se recueillir dans la salle de Fondation où tout a commencé, prier dans la chapelle intérieure, parcourir les différents lieux de la maison d'Aix afin d'y découvrir l'esprit audacieux de notre fondateur, le dynamisme de ses premiers compagnons partis d'abord annoncer la Parole de Dieu dans les villages de Provence, la foi ardente qui animait ces jeunes prêtres dévoués aux plus abandonnés, aux domestiques, aux prisonniers, aux jeunes désœuvrés, la confiance qui habitait ces aventuriers envoyés dès 1841 au Canada puis au Sri Lanka et en Afrique du Sud. Cette exposition qui avait pour thème : « Enflammés de l'amour de Jésus-Christ et de l'Église, ils ont le désir d'annoncer l'Évangile aux plus pauvres, pour que ceux-ci puissent connaître qui est Jésus-Christ et quelle est leur dignité aux yeux de la foi, » offrit aux visiteurs d'intenses moments de découverte et d'émotion au cœur du berceau de la Congrégation.

Au long de l'année 2016, un cycle de conférences, où les premiers compagnons, les premiers jeunes à rejoindre la Société, les figures du Père Albini et du Cardinal Guibert sont évoquées. Cela montre que Saint Eugène a reçu l'appel du Seigneur à fonder la Société des Missionnaires de Provence, mais que sans Tempier, Guibert et autres l'œuvre ne serait pas ce qu'elle est aujourd'hui.

Je termine avec les mots d'encouragement du pape François pour notre bicentenaire : « Afin que vous soyez toujours plus fidèles au charisme de votre fondateur, saint Eugène de Mazenod, il vous encourage tous à approfondir votre engagement personnel à Jésus Christ, et à être



des hommes qui toujours rendent témoignage de la joie de l'Évangile, non seulement en paroles, mais surtout par vos vies, transfigurées par la présence de Dieu. » (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 259)<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Homélie de Monseigneur Dufour, archevêque d'Aix et Arles, 24 janvier 2016, « Information OMI » 563, février 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Congrégation pour les instituts de vie consacrée et les sociétés de vie apostolique. *Identité et Mission du religieux Frère dans l'Eglise*, 4 octobre 2015, n. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Lettre circulaire du 25 décembre 1915, *Circulaires administratives*, III (1901-1921), p. 277-278.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Lettre d'Eugène de Mazenod à l'abbé Henry Tempier, le 9 octobre 1815, *Écrits oblats*, 6, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> CC, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. F. JETTÉ, *O.M.I. Homme apostolique*, Rome, 1992, p. 51-52.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Lettre d'Eugène de Mazenod à l'abbé Henry Tempier, le 13 décembre 1815, *Écrits oblats*, 6, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Notice nécrologique du P. Tempier par le P. Fabre.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Homélie de M<sup>gr</sup> l'Archevêque d'Aix le 7 avril 1864, fête du 50<sup>e</sup> anniversaire du sacerdoce du P. Tempier.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Homélie du P. Louis Lougen, supérieur général, 25 janvier 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Écrits oblats*, 13, p. 12-14.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. L. FABRE, omi, Lettre circulaire n. 15, 19 mars 1865, *Circulaires administratives*, I, p. 131.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Extrait de l'allocution du pape Jean XXIII, le 21 mai 1961, lors de la consécration de 14 évêques, dont Mgr Phakoe O.M.I., du Lesotho.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Félicitations du pape François pour le bicentenaire au Père Louis Lougen, par son secrétaire d'Etat, Pietro Cardinal Parolin, *Bulletin d'information OMI* 563, février 2016.



# Worldwide Section

July 2, 2015

## **DIRECTIVES OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE CONGREGATION AND OF GENERAL CHAPTERS REGARDING THE CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE CHARISM, 1972-2006**

PAWEŁ ZAJĄC, OMI

**B**ased on the published documentation produced by the General Administration and the General Chapters between 1972 and 2006, this article gives an overview of the statements and initiatives concerning the contextualization of the Oblate charism. The words “context” or “contextualization” appear rarely in Oblate documents, but its meaning is conveyed in other terms, especially whenever the Oblates have discussed the missionary aspects of their vocation. In the period following the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council, many Catholic theologians started to develop “contextual theologies” which provided new impulses for further reflection on the presence of the Church in various cultures and societies, including Oblate reflection on the ministry of the Congregation. The highest authorities (general administration, chapters) have not enforced any detailed policies, and were very attentive to the living experiences of missionaries. They nevertheless provided general guidelines of discernment which aimed at an always better realization of the Oblate charism in various missionary contexts.

The best introduction to the present article could be drawn from the proceedings of the Plenary Session of the General Council, held in Rome in January and February of 1979:

Since the mission «ad Gentes» is a major preoccupation of the Council and of the Institute, we spent a day reviewing the decisions and orientations taken since the Chapter of 1972. These concern (1) the purpose of mission: to implant the local Church and allow it to assume its own identity; whence the importance of forming local leaders and the need to imbue oneself as much as possible with the local culture and to respect it (acculturation); (2) evolution in the attitude of foreign missionaries who leave key posts to local priests; (3) relations with bishops: service to the local Church with the specific contribution of the Oblate charism.

Is it possible to evaluate the influence of these orientations on the life of the Congregation? Their first purpose is not to create something new but to meet the aspirations of the missionaries themselves, who are thereby affirmed in their work. What counts, finally, is the entire action of the Central Team, its concrete attitude: the founding of new missions, the support given to missionaries in difficult straits (e.g. Laos), and the visits of the Superior General and the members of the Council. This whole vital course of action is far more important than any specific directive<sup>1</sup>.

The last sentence illustrates the factual situation, confirmed by the Oblate documentation, at least since the 1970s: the contextual reality comes first; eventual directives of the central government are a reflection of the developments already taking place. In most cases the general administration or chapters endorse those developments as true expressions of the Oblate charism, very seldom are they critical or try to influence a different course of action.

Since the published sources concerning the analyzed issue are abundant and could illustrate the entire history of the Congregation, the chronological frames of the current study had to be limited, and a choice was made of the period between 1972 and 2006.

In 1972 the members of the General Chapter signed a document entitled *Missionary Outlook*<sup>2</sup>. It explicitly called for respect of various and diverse contexts in which the Oblates try to “serve the most abandoned (...) who have not yet experienced fully the love of the risen Christ” (p. 3). The members of the chapter were aware of the profound transformation the world and the Church – and with them the Oblate Congregation itself - was undergoing. They wanted to show respect and

appreciation for every single experience of an Oblate, which, as a consequence, meant respect for various attempts at the contextualization of the charism. It was clear, especially in the word of encouragement for “the minority tendencies among us” (p. 13). The document called for accepting them, “for we may be faced with tendencies which indicate the future direction of the Congregation”. Unfortunately, those tendencies were not named, and thus it is impossible to evaluate that prediction. However, there was an unquestionable sense of a great plurality within the Congregation:

Within the Congregation, as within the Church and the world at large, many desire to live an intensified spiritual life in community. This life, as both source and reflection of our mission, is pluralistic. It is lived in as many different ways as the mission demands; and, as we indicated in the first part of this message, the demands of the mission are vastly different from one socio-cultural milieu to another (p. 11).

The plurality was not only accepted as a fact, but even encouraged, and the preoccupations to maintain “unity” were dismissed in favor of minority experiences: “For now, we feel we should not try to impose too quickly a unity which can only be superficial if it silences some among us and thereby sacrifices their contribution to our common missionary outlook” (p. 11). The Chapter of 1972 called for creative and courageous dedication to the service of the most abandoned (“preference for the poor”), “integral development” and “authentic liberation”, as well as for the “solidarity with the Men of our Times” (p. 16-27). To sum it all up, it was a clear call for a contextual and individual realization of the Oblate charism.

In 2006, the superior general, Fr Wilhelm Steckling, repeated once more the question which resounded often in the Congregation in the course of the past 4 decades: “(...) it is essential for us Oblates to ask ourselves the mission question. We are sent to evangelize the *most abandoned* (C. 5) – are we doing our job?”<sup>3</sup> He reminded also, that in 2004, the Oblates gathered for the General Chapter decided not to issue any major statements concerning mission. The Chapter

was of the opinion that our missionary convictions, at this time in history, call for action. (...) After having spent much time in reflec-

tion over a number of years, let us then move on to actions. Mission means being sent, it means to get moving and fails if it remains as mere statements on paper! (p. 25)

Between 1972 and 2006 the Congregation went through many significant experiences: the beatification and canonization of the Founder, the resignation of the superior general, Richard Hanley, and the inspiring leadership of Fathers Fernand Jetté, Marcello Zago and Wilhelm Steckling, a restructuring process in many regions, as well as several revisions of the Constitutions and Rules. There was plenty of missiological reflection and reflection on the Oblate charism in the modern world. It is striking to realize that, in the year 2004, the General Chapter called for more action and fewer printed statements, as if returning to the awareness expressed already in 1979 and quoted above: the “(...) vital course of action is far more important than any specific directive!” Thus the date 2006 is chosen as the second limit for the chronological frame of this article – subsequent history is for the most part still our present, and we would need more distance to analyze it historically. At the same time, the reflections of the superior general published in 2006 allude interestingly to the discussions of the recent generations of Oblates.

Before proceeding with an overview of statements concerning the contextualization of the Oblate charism, a brief digression on contextual theology may be useful as a general background for an evaluation of the Oblate experiences.

#### CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY AND THE CHARISM OF RELIGIOUS CONGREGATION

The term “contextual theology” originated in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Protestant missionary circles<sup>4</sup>. In the decade following the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council, it became closely related to various Catholic theologies of inculturation (including liberation theology, etc.). The concept also became very important for fundamental theology (former apologetics) and, as such, was further analyzed, among others, by its illustrious representative, Hans Waldenfels. The latter’s idea of contextual fundamental theology was briefly summarized in the following words: it is a

frontier discipline, linking Christian and non-Christian perspectives and outlooks, creating the broadest context for theological investigations; given the hostility, misunderstanding or ignorance of the Christian message in other religions, atheism or even within the Church itself, contextual theology aspires to communicate [positively] the gift of salvation in Christ; (...) such positive apologetics of Christianity are understood as giving witness to Christian hope; it is addressed to believers and non-believers, and establishes a hermeneutics which shortens the distance between the Gospel message and the horizons of understanding of the contemporary person; finally, it creates a theology of dialogue which analyzes the communications process and understands communication as “giving oneself” to the other – an attitude requested from both sides of the dialogue equally, the speaker and the receiver of the message<sup>5</sup>.

The word “context” belongs to the common vocabulary of contemporary theology, both Protestant and Catholic. A Canadian Protestant theologian, Douglas John Hall, wrote, in 1989, that “Christian theology is contextual by definition. The term «contextual theology» is, accordingly, a tautology”<sup>6</sup>. Then he proceeded, in nearly 200 pages, with a “demonstration of this fundamental assumption of his study”<sup>7</sup>. A Brazilian Jesuit, Pedro Rubens, in 2004 put it more briefly: “(...) la dimension contextuelle de toute théologie est indéniable. Dans ce sens, l’émergence de *théologies contextuelles* – les «continents» de la théologie – et de *théologies spécifiques* – féministe, noire, indienne, etc., – relève d’un événement sans précédent, pour lequel l’apport latino-américain a été décisif”<sup>8</sup>. Some 20 years earlier a broad study of contextual theology in the missionary context was undertaken by a Divine Word Missionary, Stephen Bevans<sup>9</sup>. Referring to the existing literature, he defined “contextual theology” as a “«turn to the subjective» (...), central to modern thinking”. He stated that “although some forces in the Church would like to see it lag behind, there is a strong conviction among most theologians that, to paraphrase [Henri] Bouillard, theology which is not contextual theology – an expression of faith in terms of contemporary society, history and culture – is a false theology” (Bevans online, p. 185)<sup>10</sup>. In his opinion, contextual theology replaces the so-called “*theologia perennis*” of European origin embodied in the “Ro-

man documents”, because the latter was “oppressive” and unable to “answer questions that arise in Third World contexts” (ibid.).

The literature on contextual theology is abundant<sup>11</sup>. The already quoted Stephen Bevans has contributed greatly to this field of study and, in one of his recent studies, he suggested:

First of all, contextual theology understands the nature of theology in a new way. Classical theology conceived theology as a kind of objective science of faith. It was understood as a reflection in faith on the two *loci theologici* (theological sources) of scripture and tradition, the content of which has not and never will be changed, and is above culture and historically conditioned expression. But what makes contextual theology precisely *contextual* is the recognition of the validity of another *locus theologicus*: present human experience. Theology that is contextual realizes that culture, history, contemporary thought forms, and so forth are to be considered, along with scripture and tradition, as valid sources for theological expression. And so today we speak of theology as having *three* sources or *loci theologici*: scripture, tradition, and present human experience – or context<sup>12</sup>.

This brief reference to the idea of contextual theology leads to the question whether or not the charism of a religious congregation could be viewed in a similar or analogous perspective, where concrete human experience becomes a *locus theologicus* for the interpretation of the charism and the charism itself is understood as “contextual by definition”, as “a frontier discipline, (...) which shortens the distance between the Gospel message and the horizons of understanding of contemporary persons [and] creates a theology of dialogue” (see quotes above).

#### OBLATE CHARISM AND “THEOLOGY FROM BELOW” IN EARLY 1970S

Given the fact that the contextual theology was becoming more and more developed in the 1970s and 1980s, it may be surprising to realize that the words “context” and “contextualization” are not that often used in most official Oblate documentation. During my research I have focused on the series *Acta Administrationis Generalis* and on the official statements of the general chapters, published over the last four decades. When such words appear, they are usually free of their particular



theological significance and refer simply to a given sociological reality in which somebody lives and ministers. However, the constant attention to the “present human experience” of the Oblates and the people they serve is a common aspect of Oblate documentation, which means a constant contextual reflection.

Equally, it is difficult to find in the Oblate documentation straightforward directives as to how contextualize the Oblate charism. However, there are quite plentiful expressions of attention paid to the reality lived and experienced by the Oblates in various missionary contexts and sometimes some indications are given – usually based on that reality and not on any theoretical disputes. At least since 1970s it has become clear that whatever the Oblate governmental bodies have to say to the members of the Congregation is methodologically based on the practice of “theology from below”, which gives priority to the careful observation of the reality and only subsequently attempts at elevating such reality towards the idea of an accomplished Oblate charism. The reality of contextualization precedes any directive and provides primary material for reflection, which is further elaborated and expressed in an eventual instruction or official statement. Let me quote a few examples:

*The Superior General as the primary witness to the variety of contexts:*

(...) Wherever I go in the Oblate world, I am gratified to find our missionaries truly serving the poor, being acclaimed as the friends of the poor, the ones whom the poor trust. I have the impression that our Oblates are always ready to receive human enrichment from them, seeing the God whom no one has ever seen (Jn 1,10), revealing himself in the Cree, Métis, Eskimo, Zulu, Basotho, Lao, in the old woman, in the young boy. He sends us «to bring good news to the poor... to set at liberty the oppressed», and our humanity is liberated and made able to grow in the process. In announcing that Christ is already living among them, we ourselves are evangelized, and it is in our own transformation that the gospel is most effectively proclaimed and discovered<sup>13</sup>.

*The General Administration gives indications based on the actual reality in a given context:*

The last General Chapter is still fresh enough in the memories of the capitulars to recall vividly the Report on Asia. That document undeniably did make a lasting impact. The situation in Asia was carefully condensed into a few pages, with all the enormity, the seriousness and the urgency of the problems which confront that continent today<sup>14</sup>.

[“practical considerations” have followed, expressed in a few points, e.g.:]

(1) Local Churches: “The Oblates are present to a certain extent in Asia; this presence must be increased both in extension and in intensity. We Oblates have a special contribution to make in Asia because of our missionary values of love for the poor, care of the weakest and the most neglected, and the search for urgent evangelical needs. This extension of mission must not be made in an imperialistic or neo-colonial mentality of increasing the power of an institutionalized Church: it must rather be a humble witness of presence and service to the Asian peoples. (...)”<sup>15</sup>”

*The General Administration and the study of the contemporary reality:*

Plenary sessions always begin by having a look at the life of the Congregation. (...) The study questioned the Congregation as to its efficacy as an evangelizing force in the world today. The Council was aware of the preoccupation of the Universal Church, which chose as theme for its coming Synod: «Evangelization in the Modern World». The members made theirs the words of the Pope: «The condition of the society in which we live obliges all of us to revise methods, to seek by every means to study how we can bring the Christian message to modern man». The beginning of what surely must be an ongoing study emphasized two aspects: Evangelization and Oblate Ministry. [the methodology was always focused on the living experiences of Oblates; since there was much discussion on both terms (Evangelization and Oblate Ministry), more information was requested from the “base”]<sup>16</sup>.

The quotations above, dating between 1972 and 1974, may be multiplied, and similar examples are found in the following decades. The attitude of careful observation and study was accompanied at the central level of the Congregation by reflection rooted in the Oblate charism, which was in turn offered to Oblates as a tool for animation and self-examination. An eminent example of such interaction was witnessed during the General Chapter of 1974, when Fr. Fernand Jetté as vicar general presented his report, which included a long passage on “the missionary activity of the Congregation”:

*The report of the Vicar General at the General Chapter 1974:*

Our first observation is that the missionary spirit is still very much alive in the Institute, and that it shows itself in many ways. (...) The concern for the evangelization of the poor – even though the meaning given to the word «evangelization» is not the same for all Oblates – rests the overriding concern of Oblates as a whole. (...) From this aspect, the document on «The Missionary Outlook» and the discussion which it provoked before as well as after its publication, exercised a real influence in the life of the Institute. To a different degree, but almost everywhere throughout the Congregation, questions are asked on «the Oblate attitude» – Oblate authenticity and the apostolic commitments: is this work *missionary*? – is this work *concerned with the poor*? Arising out of this, some works have been transformed, some have been turned over to others and new works undertaken<sup>17</sup>.

Following these words, Fr. Jetté described the actions of the General Council over the past two years: the General Council has promoted a *revision* of Oblate commitments according to the Oblate charism of the evangelization of the poor, has encouraged *withdrawal* from ministries less conformed to that ideal, and has accepted *new invitations* (e.g. Bangladesh); it has given some indications as to the *missionary strategies* in some regions [cf. 3<sup>rd</sup> Communiqué, Annex II – Asia; 6<sup>th</sup> Communiqué – Latin America]; has revised some *contracts* with bishops, asking for more specific Oblate ministries, and has suggested a *revision* of Oblate structures (e.g. in Canada); has promoted involvement of *lay personnel* in the Oblate mission<sup>18</sup>.

Fr. Jetté underlined four specific areas of Oblate experiences that are of particular importance for the future of the Congregation and the fidelity to its religious charism:

- divergence in understanding the meaning of “evangelization” and the “aim of the missionary activity of the Church” (p. 119);
- “lack of evaluation of missionary experiments”, e.g.:

One does not like to reveal openly one’s experiments and to submit them to the scrutiny of others who probably think differently” (...). Almost all the Oblates living with the working-classes lean to the left, taking on the mentality of the revolutionary working man based on the Marxist analysis of society. They accept without question the conflict of classes with all the consequences. For all practical purposes, they keep their distance from the Congregation and the Church, and reject and criticize all parochial pastoral activity. Often these positions are abrupt and final... and that sets and hardens. The result is a dialogue between deaf-mutes: an impasse<sup>19</sup>.

– “place of *personal charisms* in the Institute”; the challenge was to form ourselves according to the idea of Fr. de Mazenod: “A Congregation is an apostolic group which has received a mission from the Church and which gives a mission to its members, not an apostolic group whose aim is to train a sort of a sharp-shooter in the evangelization of the poor, but leaving to each one to determine his work according to what he thinks to be his personal «charism»”<sup>20</sup>.

– “the development of local Churches and the role of foreign missionaries in such Churches” – this challenge corresponded to the ideas of “contextualized Christianity” and was illustrated by a quotation of Cardinal Joseph Albert Malula of Kinshasa, who was reported to say: “yesterday foreign missionaries Christianized Africa, today black Africans want to Africanize Christianity”<sup>21</sup>.

All those reflections and actions were based on a perception of radical cultural and sociological changes in contemporary societies. The Oblate responses to that change were multiple, from traditional to progressive. Giving priority to the living experiences of the missionaries whose aim was to serve the poor, the newly-elected Superior General suggested, in December of 1975, a few basic values as the frame in which various experiences of contextualization should be recognized.

### *Letter of the Superior General Fernand Jetté to the Congregation:*

Concerning *Oblate mission*, we must continue to go forward in the line of our missionary outlook, with the following characteristics: a greater insistence on explicitly announcing Jesus Christ whenever possible; the development of a feeling for the poor in every Oblate work, no matter what it may be; the development of a greater feeling for the Church and of being rooted in the Church's life, if we want missionary action to be authentic (...) <sup>22</sup>.

It is striking that, with all the intensified reflection on the variety of Oblate experiences and the awareness of the challenges present in contemporary societies, the directives of the Superior General concerning contextualization seem to be quite simple and universal: to announce Jesus Christ explicitly whenever possible, to focus on the poor in every Oblate work, to develop a greater feeling for the Church, and to be rooted in the Church's life. There is no contradiction between those indications and the creativity advocated by the 1972 document *Missionary Outlook*, just as there was no contradiction between the very concise definition of the missionary spirit in the 1926 version of the Constitutions and Rules and the flourishing of the Oblate missions of that period:

Cum sodales nostros ferventi dlatandae fidei desiderio ac promovendae salutis animarum magis derelictarum ardere oporteat, quilibet etiam ad ministerium in hujusmodi missionibus exercendum magis ac magis animum inclinare studebit, in iisque virtutibus praesertim caritatis erga Deum et proximum proficere, unde dignus fiat qui ad tam praezellens ministerium seligatur (c. 47) <sup>23</sup>.

#### THE LEADERSHIP OF FR. FERNAND JETTÉ AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

At the beginning of the 1980 General Chapter, during which Fr. Jetté was reelected as the Superior General, he pronounced the famous words:

The Congregation is at a turning point in its history. It shows signs of renewal but also signs of great fatigue. To enter renewal fully and to regain the clear vision and the missionary thrust of the Founder, it has to decide to go beyond itself and its internal difficulties, and to

take a step forward. It has to kindle afresh the gift that God has given it, a gift which is not a spirit of timidity, but a Spirit of power and love and of mastery of self (cf. 2 Tim 1,6-7). It has to renew its radical choice of Jesus Christ and its mission of evangelizing the world. To this end, the sincere and unanimous acceptance of the new Constitutions would be a grace for the Institute, as was the beatification of its Founder<sup>24</sup>.

While the General Administration, the Superior General and the General Chapters have continued to carefully observe the missionary situation, i.e. the process of expressing the Oblate charism in various contexts, the practical aspects of pursuing the goals of the local missionary bodies and creating strategies were entrusted to the regions, fully endorsed in the new Constitutions and Rules, as the basic larger structures of the Congregation. Upon regional initiatives rested the responsibility for permitting the Oblate charism to enter into a creative dialogue with the plurality of particular missionary situations and challenges (explicitly mentioned were the parochial ministry, action for justice, interreligious dialogue, ecumenism, inculturation, secularism, new means of social communication):

The General Council's role consists in helping Oblates to be faithful to evangelizing the poor in many different local situations. That is the line to which the Council wants to commit itself. It can do so only by taking into account the priorities chosen by the Regions and Provinces themselves. As its own primary objective in this area, the Council intends to help put the regional and provincial priorities into practice; this will be one of its main preoccupations in dealing with Provincials and with Oblates in the field, in communicating by letter, in its visits, and during participation in regional activities. It will also be kept in mind when appointing Provincials. The same kind of service will be given to individual Provinces; when Province have not yet chosen mission priorities, they will be asked to do so<sup>25</sup>.

The same concern was expressed during the plenary session of the General Council held in Rome from May 25<sup>th</sup> to June 12<sup>th</sup> that same year. Provinces were responsible for discerning their fidelity to the Oblate vocation in the missionary priorities they choose. Two particular areas were mentioned as fields for further dialogue: parish ministry "in

which so many Oblates are engaged, and action for justice, which «is an integral part of evangelization» and consequently the normal concern of every Oblate (Rule 9)”<sup>26</sup>.

Quite a number of documents published between 1974-1980 (Fr. Jetté’s first term) and 1980-1986 (Fr. Jetté’s second term as Superior General) confirm the constant interest of the General Administration in surveying missionary developments among the Oblates and assessing the process of adapting the Oblate way of life to the variety of new challenges in every corner of the world<sup>27</sup>. A summary of those efforts was offered during the General Chapter of 1986, which published a concise yet comprehensive overview, *Missionaries in Today’s World*<sup>28</sup>. This document described the Oblate realities and proposed further strategies concerning poverty and justice, secularization, inculturation, laity etc. Many similar observations were included already in the *Report of the Superior General on the state of the Congregation*, presented to the Chapter by Fr. Jetté<sup>29</sup>. It is noteworthy that it also included a reflection of the Superior General on contextual theology in relation to the Oblate charism, probably a unique occurrence in the official documentation so far published:

I will make but a brief mention of this point. There is more and more talk of “contextual” theology, that is, a theology which responds to the needs and aspirations of a given milieu: an African theology, an American theology, an Asian theology, a Latin-American theology, a theology of the Third World. It is linked to the current movement of inculturating the faith. This is a normal development in the Church’s life. It is also normal that we participate in it, according to our means. Nevertheless, in our formation houses we must, of necessity, strive to maintain a strong and solid common doctrinal base which unites us from one Region to another, and allows us to commune and share, in dialogue and mutual comprehension, values that we hold in common, a common spirit and a common spirituality<sup>30</sup>.

The Superior General considered contextualization of the Oblate charism a fact which had not resulted from any directive of the central government of the Congregation but was a fruit of the natural development taking place in the Church itself. Indeed, in the 1980s, the General Administration entered, on several occasions, into dialogue on those issues as they started to emerge spontaneously. For example, during a

plenary session of the General Council held in Garua, Cameroon, from January 14<sup>th</sup> to February 1<sup>st</sup> 1985, there was a meeting with the Oblates of Africa and Madagascar (January 14-19). One of the main themes of the sharing was the process of inculturation. Representatives of the General Administration confirmed that it is truly goal of every missionary, “that the Gospel message is well received and assimilated by the mind and heart of the African with his own particular sensitivity” (...) <sup>31</sup>. Thus the missionaries were encouraged to continue their efforts in searching for “authentically African expressions of the faith which is common to the whole Church”. Significantly, it was “the first time the Oblate Conference of Africa addressed this theme” and reflection on it was hoped to continue <sup>32</sup>.

The same process was observed in Latin America, and the Superior General praised the contributions of liberation theology as re-inforcing the Oblate charism of serving the poor. However, he called once again for more dialogue, and a reflection broader than just the Latin American horizon, stating that, without such dialogue, any system of thought would become closed upon its own limitations <sup>33</sup>. Following this observation, there was an important observation by Fr. Jetté concerning Oblate regions:

During this session [held in São Paulo, Brazil <sup>34</sup>] I reflected a great deal on the Congregation, its future, the development of the Regions. More and more the Regions will be different from each other, will take on their own character and personality. Such a development is normal: it promotes the growth of the Institute as a whole and of each of its parts. To achieve this, dialogue between the Regions must intensify and deepen in the measure that regional identities emerge. Otherwise, «regionalization» may lead to isolationism and becoming closed in on oneself. A universal and international character is a great source of strength for an apostolic corps such as we are. The Congregation, therefore, no matter how incarnated she may be in a given region or country or culture, must remain open to the world at large, and her members must remain capable of sharing, in communion and in dialogue, our common values, common spirit and common spirituality. This is one of the challenges the Congregation will have to take up in the years ahead <sup>35</sup>.



Once more – contextualization was perceived as the natural and ongoing process, it was encouraged and supported, and the only directive was focused on preserving the unity of the Congregation and the common values which could be shared by all Oblates, no matter in which culture they feel personally incarnated. In the last sentences cited above, Fr. Jetté mentioned the word „international” – in fact, since late 1980s, it was the “internationality” of the Congregation which attracted attention of the Oblates, an attitude which continues still today.

#### BETWEEN CONTEXTUALIZATION AND INTERNATIONALITY

The years 1986-1998 were marked by a vivid missionary expansion of the Congregation under the leadership of Fr. Marcello Zago. In practice it meant that the Oblates found themselves in many new contexts: Nigeria 1987, Guatemala 1988, Korea 1989, Belorussia 1990, Czech Republic 1991, Ukraine 1991, Venezuela 1991, Botswana 1992, Angola 1992-1997, Columbia 1994, Kenya 1997, Cuba 1997, Turkmenistan 1997<sup>36</sup>. On the level of the missiological reflection which accompanied those developments, there was continuity of thought with the ideas already expressed by the Oblates in the 1970s, when Fr. Zago served as the assistant general for mission, and which he presented to the whole Congregation at the Chapter of 1980. The headings of the following paragraphs of his report speak for themselves: “from Missions to the Mission”, “From stability to mobility”, “From centralization to regionalization”, “From autonomy to complementarity”, “From clerical to community”, “From ministries to evangelization”, “From the Church to the Kingdom”, “From a self-sufficient Church to the Church in the world”, “From the spiritual poor to the sociological poor”, “From homogeneity to diversification”<sup>37</sup>. During the plenary session of the General Council in Bangalore, India, held from 6<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> February, 1989 more or less the same line of thought was followed:

Our response as a Region and a Congregation might be fourfold: (1) a missionary presence with concrete strategies based on real needs which must be discerned in honest dialogue, with deep respect for the true human values present in the people and cultures of this continent; (2) a wider and deeper understanding of our mission; one not just based on Church membership as a final objective, but on the

building of the Kingdom of God through striving together for the dawn of a “Full Humanity”; (3) a deepening of our own experience of God – our personal spirituality – and this witnessing of a faith that is not just a theory or a theology but a living and liberating experience of a transcendent and immanent God; (4) a still greater attempt to inculturate ourselves; a kenosis, whereby we try to empty ourselves of any personal or cultural bias that might impede our understanding, acceptance of and cooperation with the peoples of this Region. The importance of a detached and simple lifestyle is one consequence of this kenosis. Our deepest response might be a commitment to a spirituality rooted in a true experience of God and incarnated in the service of the poor<sup>38</sup>.

In 1990, during the inter-chapter intervention, Fr. Zago returned to the implications of the process of inculturation for the “internal life of the Congregation”. It was one of those rare cases in which the word “context” was used in the documents aimed at the formation of the Oblate attitudes: “there should be an adaptation in our lifestyle so that it harmonizes better with the context in which we live and becomes more meaningful”<sup>39</sup>.

The idea culminated during the General Chapter of 1998 with a deeper reflection on the internationality of the Congregation. Internationality was explained as an attitude “to be more adaptable, generous, and open to other cultures, in giving and exchanging personnel in function of the worldwide needs of the mission”<sup>40</sup>. It was analyzed the following year from the more concrete points of view, concerning, for example, the policies of first obediences, cooperation within the regions as to the exchange of personnel, financial solidarity, etc.<sup>41</sup> More and more the internationality was seen as the necessary enrichment of the formation process. Already in the statements quoted above, Fr. Jetté had spoken about contextual theology, referring to the process of first formation (“a formation that is both contextual and Catholic”).

When the General Administration, under the leadership of Fr. Wilhelm Steckling tried to formulate its priorities, it spoke of internationality in the three following aspects: “utilize more our present international institutions, greater commitment to sharing finances and personnel, critical role regarding first formation”<sup>42</sup>. The Superior’s *General Report on the State of the Congregation* at the General Chapter of 2004, in

view of the mandate of the 1998 General Chapter, spoke clearly about internationality, placing it together with the issue of first formation<sup>43</sup>. Indeed, Fr. Steckling spoke about internationality at the early stages of formation on various occasions, both before and after the chapter of 2004. For example, in a letter to the young Oblates on the occasion of the Jubilee Year 2000, he stated:

You, the 900 young Oblates to whom this letter is addressed in the first place, come from about 50 countries. Two-thirds of you belong to the Regions of Africa, Asia and Latin America, the remaining third is equally split between East and West. This data means that the Congregation has undergone a great change, given that the 70% of the older part, the other 3770, come from the West. In the future, it will be up to the southern hemisphere and to the East to send out the bulk of missionaries. Are you ready to be sent *ad extra, ad gentes*? (...) I would even consider it normal for a missionary congregation like ours, if almost every scholastic or Brother spent at least one year abroad during his formation period, a practice which some provinces have now introduced. It could make us aware that, as missionaries, we have to reach out, to go to the home of those culturally different, to learn to listen to them and to share our faith with them in their languages<sup>44</sup>.

It was the ongoing evolution of the Oblate reality – demographic, geographic, economic etc. – which called for internationality, understood as “contextualization within the Congregation”: the Oblates were called not only to work in the context of different cultures, but also to be ready to detach themselves from the context of their provinces or regions of origin for the benefit of the larger picture of the whole Congregation. At the inter-chapter meeting in 2001, the Superior General said: “We need to enter into a re-founding phase, taking advantage of our internationality”. And he continued: “I have the impression that some sectors of the Congregation are thinking too nationally or even too provincially”<sup>45</sup>. Thus the true challenge posed before the Oblate Congregation at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seemed not that much a further contextualization of the charism, but rather its “inter-contextualization”.

Such a perception led to a slightly different evaluation of the functioning of the regional structures of the Congregation from the picture

offered by the previous General Administration. In 1992, the Superior General, Fr. Marcello Zago, viewed regions as structures which “are new and are leaving their mark on the organization and life of the Congregation. (...) they have helped promote unity within the Congregation as well as inculturation and the defining of our missionary priorities”<sup>46</sup>. Almost 10 years later Fr. Steckling wrote:

If we recognize that the Congregation is undergoing radical changes, we can easily become aware that there is a call for stronger leadership and organization. The structural change that this will imply, according to our view, should be located at the regional level. (...) In our judgment, the main structural problem is located right within our very strength, the fact that we are so decentralized. More than one have noted this issue. (...) The very unity of the Congregation is at stake. In a time when we are becoming truly multicultural and would need to build many bridges among neighbors, our organizational unity rests almost exclusively on the Superior General and his council. (...) I want to affirm that we are still an organizational unity as a Congregation, not a kind of federation of independent abbeys or national religious institutes. (...) Today we need to think about the cohesion of the Congregation beyond our decentralized Provinces and Delegations. Which way are we to go?<sup>47</sup>

Thus the idea of the unity of the Congregation beyond its various contexts has become once more a common concern discussed at the level of the General Administration. It could seem to be a paradox that an accomplished contextualization of the charism (promoted within regions and provinces) would in turn become an obstacle for the international exchange within the Congregation. Such a fruitful exchange could exist only on the basis of the common sense of unity of charism among Oblates. It is in itself necessary as a way to maintain a missionary thrust which leads Oblates to live according to their charism in diverse cultural and social contexts.

This missionary and contextual reality was by no means growing weaker in the past decade. In his letter to the Congregation, written in November of 2006, the Superior General once more dedicated a considerable amount of space to the description of the variety of Oblate missions, underlining the fact that “the Oblate spirit of bringing the Good News to those most in need and our sense of family is so similar.

(...) with time, it seems to me that the greatest diversity [within the Congregation] does not lie in the differences of culture but in the special missionary situations, we find ourselves in”<sup>48</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

This paper is necessarily rich in quotations. Since the issue of contextualization in the case of the Oblates turned out to be rather practical, preference was given to the statements of the general authorities of the Congregation and not to their theoretical interpretations. At this point it is possible to indicate 4 conclusions of the analysis presented above.

Oblates since the 1970s have spoken a lot about their charism in terms of a missionary call to be close to poor people, whenever they need such a presence. They used the word “inculturation” rather than “contextualization”, although the latter is also employed occasionally. The chapter of 1972 spoke in favor of creativity and an individual approach in “contextualizing” or adapting the charism to the contemporary challenges. Father Richard Hanley, as superior general, showed the concern of the General Administration for the local perspectives of the Oblates on their ministry, visiting countless communities in what was called a true *tour de force*. Despite the trauma of his resignation from office, the attention of the Oblate authorities was constantly focused on supporting regional initiatives which culminated in the acceptance of the new Constitutions and Rules by the General Chapter of 1980, which gave the Congregation a decentralized structure based on regions.

Fr. Fernand Jetté, with great delicacy, accompanied the Congregation in the period of transition. Far from imposing uniformity, he nevertheless underlined the importance of maintaining unity and sharing the most important common values when contextualizing the charism. Although he felt, in 1980, that the Congregation was at a turning point, such indication could also be placed in the year 1986, when, after careful examination of the missionary situation of the Congregation, the General Chapter issued an important document, *Missionaries in Today's World*, which was an expression of the Oblate experiences of the contextualization of the charism.

The new generalate of Fr. Zago brought territorial expansion of the Congregation (with new contexts enriching the Oblate charism) despite its numerical decline. Along with this policy of accepting more new

missions, the general authorities reflected more on inculturation and proposed a theology rooted in the experiences of the transition of the 1970s. It culminated in 1998 with the growing awareness of the internationality of the Oblates, an issue taken up by the following administrations under the leadership of Father Wilhelm Steckling.

Thus a new concept of “contextualization within the Congregation” started to take shape. It was never defined in such way, but the meaning of this evolution could be conveyed in those terms. “Contextualization within the Congregation” means to be more aware of the global perspective, more ready to participate in multiform Oblate experiences in a cross-cultural way. Such a need was perceived also as a result of the awareness of growing regional or provincial isolationism, which started to smudge the picture of the unity of the Congregation. Such unity was never questioned strongly, and the Oblate spirit and way of being present in the Church and society continued to show almost miraculously similar aspects all around the world, despite diverse missionary contexts.

It could be added that all the general administrations whose documentation was examined in the present study have invested a considerable amount of energy in supporting various initiatives of study and expertise aimed at a better understanding of the contemporary problems and challenges of the mission, in order to better contextualize the Oblate charism.

The present study ends with the year 2006, when the last major document concerning Oblate mission was published by Fr. Wilhelm Steckling. Let me remind everyone once more that the Superior General has recalled to mind the impression of the General Chapter of 2004: “After having spent much time in reflection over a number of years, let us then move on to actions. Mission means being sent, it means to get moving and fails if it remains as mere statements on paper!”<sup>49</sup> Thus, in other words, was repeated what Fr. Jetté had said some 30 years earlier: “This whole vital course of action is far more important than any specific directive”<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *Plenary Session, Rome – January 22 to February 9, 1979*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 4/2 (1979), p. 344-345. Increased spacing is mine.

<sup>2</sup> *Missionary Outlook*, Rome 1976.

<sup>3</sup> W. STECKLING, *Oblate Mission Today. A letter to the Congregation*, November 2006, „Acta Administrationis Generalis” 29 (2006), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> M. RUSECKI, *Kontekstualna teologia*, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. 9, Lublin 2002, c. 747.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 748. The translation and extended spacing is mine and is not an exact reproduction of the entry in the Lublin’s *Catholic encyclopaedia*, but rather a shorter and summarized version of the author’s interpretation.

<sup>6</sup> D.J. HALL, *Thinking the Faith. Christian Theology in a North American Context*, Augsburg Fortress 1989, p. 69.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> P. RUBENS, *Discerner la foi dans des contextes religieux ambigus. Enjeu d’une théologie du croire*, Paris 2004, p. 388.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bevans article <http://hiebertglobalcenter.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Reading-1-Bevans-Models-of-Contextual-Theology.pdf>, online, link active on May 15<sup>th</sup> 2015. See also S.B. Bevans, R.P. Schroeder, *Constans in Context. A Theology of Mission for Today*, Maryknoll 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Henri Boulliard is often quoted saying “a *theology* that is *not up-to-date* (French: *actuelle*) is a *false theology*”. See C. WESS DANIELS, *A Convergent Model of Renewal. Remixing the Quaker Tradition in a Participatory Culture*, Eugene OR, 2015, p. 53, available online at Google books.

<sup>11</sup> See a good summary of Bevans’ ideas on contextual theology in the chapter 2, *Stephen Bevans and Mission. Developing the Synthetic Model*, of the above quoted book by C. WESS DANIELS, *A Convergent Model of Renewal*...

<sup>12</sup> Stephen B. BEVANS, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Maryknoll 2004, p.3-4.

<sup>13</sup> R. HANLEY, *Christmas message from Father General*, 20.12.1972, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 1/1 (1972), p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> *Third Plenary Session of the General Council, Colombo, January 15-February 3, 1973*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 1/2 (1973), p. 219.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* [Appendix II, *Oblate mission strategy in Asia*], p. 231.

<sup>16</sup> Seventh Plenary Session of General Council, Rome, April 19-May 17, 1974, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 2,1 (1974), p. 179.

<sup>17</sup> F. JETTÉ, *Report to the XXIX General Chapter, Rome, 14.11.1974*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 2/1 (1974), p. 117.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120. Fr. Jetté reminded Oblates, in this context, of a necessity to understand that one belongs to “an apostolic group larger than one’s local community and larger than one’s province” and to be aware that one has “responsibility to that group”.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121-122.

<sup>22</sup> F. JETTÉ, *Letter written from Aix-en-Provence, 12.01.1975*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 2/2 (1975), p. 337.

<sup>23</sup> *Constitutiones et Regulae Congregationis Missionariorum Oblatorum (...)*, Romae 1928, p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> F. JETTÉ, *The State of the Congregation. Report of the Superior General to the 1980 Chapter*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 5/1 [supplement] (1980), p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> *Plenary Session, Rome – January 25 to February 20, 1981*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 5/1 (1981), p. 237-238.

<sup>26</sup> *Plenary Session, Rome – May 25 to June 12, 1981*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 5/1 (1981), p. 259.

<sup>27</sup> The comprehensive summary of their contents would be impossible in the limited space of an article – some indications as to eventual further reading will be given in the Appendix.

<sup>28</sup> Rome 1991.

<sup>29</sup> F. JETTÉ, *Report of the superior general on the state of the Congregation*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 9 (1986), p. 140-181.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>31</sup> *Plenary Session, Garua – January 14 to February 1, 1985*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 8 (1985), p. 82.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>33</sup> F. JETTÉ, *Letters to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate*, Rome 1984, p. 146-147 [*Letter to the Oblates of Latin America*].

<sup>34</sup> *Plenary Session, São Paulo – September 12-30, 1983*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 6/2 (1983), p. 285-293.

<sup>35</sup> F. JETTÉ, *Letters to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate*, op.cit, p. 147-148.

<sup>36</sup> M. ZAGO, *Superior General's Report to the General Chapter 1998*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 21 (1998), p. 46.

<sup>37</sup> M. ZAGO, *Report of the Assistant General for Mission to the 1980 Chapter*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 5/1 (1980), p. 99-122.

<sup>38</sup> *Plenary Session, Bangalore – 6-25 February 1989*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 12 (1989), p. 68.

<sup>39</sup> M. ZAGO, *At the Service of the Oblate Charism*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 13 (1990), p. 79.

<sup>40</sup> *Evangelizing the Poor at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 21 (1998), p. 140.

<sup>41</sup> *Plenary Session, Rome, September 3-27 2002*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 25 (2002), p. 124.

<sup>42</sup> *Plenary Session, Rome, December 28-January 22 1999*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 22 (1999), p. 40.

<sup>43</sup> W. STECKLING, *Report on the State of the Congregation*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 27 (2004), p. 68.

<sup>44</sup> W. STECKLING, *The Superior General's letter to the Young Oblates*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 23 (2000), p. 23.

<sup>45</sup> W. STECKLING, *Address of the Superior General at the Inter-Chapter Meeting*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 24 (2001), p. 55-56.

<sup>46</sup> M. ZAGO, *Report of the Superior General on the state of the Congregation to the 32nd General Chapter*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 15 (1992), p. 206.

<sup>47</sup> W. STECKLING, *Address of the Superior General at the Inter-Chapter Meeting*, “Acta Administrationis Generalis” 24 (2001), p. 61.



<sup>48</sup> W. STECKLING, *Oblate Mission Today*, „Acta Administrationis Generalis” 29 (2006), p. 28.

<sup>49</sup> W. STECKLING, *Oblate Mission Today. A letter to the Congregation*, November 2006, „Acta Administrationis Generalis” 29 (2006), p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> *Plenary Session, Rome – January 22 to February 9, 1979*, „Acta Administrationis Generalis” 4/2 (1979), p. 345.



## DIALOGUING WITH ASIAN CULTURES AND RELIGIONS A WAY OF LIVING THE OBLATE CHARISM IN CONTEXT

GERARD DE ROSAIRO, OMI

This write up focuses our attention on dialogue with Asian cultures and religions as a way of living the Oblate charism in context. The contemporary needs of Asia demand that the *missio dei* to the poor, to be fully realized, religious in Asia should become a part of the inter-religious force. What is the way? It consists of two parts. The First describes the nature of Asia with its cultural and religious diversity and the response of the Church with the leadership of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC). The second part outlines the varied responses of the Oblates living the charism in the Asian context. Finally, we finish up this work, with a briefing of some challenges to be addressed and some concluding notes on the furthering of our mission among the Asian peoples, inspired by our charism.

### THE MULTI-CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF ASIA

Asia, the birthplace of many of the world's ancient civilizations and religions, is a continent blessed by vibrant communities with their colorful mixture of cultures, religions and philosophies, many of which are more ancient than Christianity.<sup>1</sup> While Asia is home to some two-thirds of the world's population, nevertheless it remains the continent with the smallest Christian population, notwithstanding almost two millennia of Christian missionary activity, beginning with the tentative steps taken by the early Assyrian Christian missionaries, who ventured to India and China in the first Christian millennium. At the beginning of the third Christian millennium, Christians accounted for only approximately 4% of the total populations of Asia, and presently the only Asian

countries with a significant Christian population are the Philippines, South Korea and East Timor.

About 85% of the world's non-Christians live in Asia. In Asia only 4.5% of the total population is Christian and only less than 3% of Asia's population is Catholic. The Church in the Philippines and in East Timor is in a unique position. In East Timor about 97% of the population is Catholic and in the Philippines about 82% of the population is Catholic. In fact, about 63% of all of the Catholics in Asia are in the Philippines and East Timor. So of all of the Catholics in Asia, less than 3% of Asia's population, only slightly more than 1% of them live outside of the Philippines and East Timor.<sup>2</sup>

### *Asian Common Belief*

The Asian Church, with the leadership of FABC, acknowledging the rich cultural and religious diversity, shares in a common belief, namely, God's vision for the whole creation is oriented towards harmony and peace. With this Asian common faith affirmation, one can assert that Asia is blessed with a chance to forge a rich unity out of the diversity of the Asian cultural milieu, the necessary motivation and enlightenment to facilitate mutual understanding, appreciation and respect for one another, and to forge a peaceful co-existence which was fully missing. This is unfortunately due, to a great extent, to the non-involvement or ineffectiveness of the four world religions and Spiritual Schools in the living context of people, who look forward for a 'life in Full' (Jn.10:10). It is in religious contextualization that the Church in Asia hears the call for *mission dei* in Asia.

### *Asian Ecclesial Affirmations*

The First FABC Plenary Assembly itself recognized that "the great religious traditions of Asia are significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design and salvation. In them, we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values".<sup>3</sup> Because, over many centuries, they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation

and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations.<sup>4</sup>

### *Asian Response - Dialogue*

In face of this multi-religious and minority situation of Christians in Asia, positively appreciating this cultural and religious pluralism and diversity as enriching and complimenting, the Asian Bishops, right from the very beginning, affirmed that “dialogue with our fellow Asians, whose commitment is to other faiths, is increasingly important.”<sup>5</sup> One of the resolutions of 1970 says: “We pledge ourselves to an open, sincere and continuing dialogue with our brothers of other great religions of Asia that we may learn from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to work more effectively together on our common task of total human development.”<sup>6</sup>

Commenting on FABC’s affirmation, Dialogue as its theological response, Felix Wilfred, a leading Asian theologian, said, “if we were to summarize the orientation of the FABC in one word, then it is dialogue. It is around this focal point that the understanding by FABC of the Church and its mission revolves.”<sup>7</sup>

### *Call to the Asian Local Churches*

It has been the earnest concern of the FABC that “The local churches in Asia concretely become churches of continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions – in brief, with all the life realities of the people, in whose midst, it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, this statement from the first assembly in 1974 itself evidences a positive view of other religions and how these religions have been a source of spiritual strength for their followers, and that God has drawn people to himself through them. It is realized that in dialogue, the Church can receive much and learn new ways of expressing its own faith and, through dialogue, can rediscover the riches of its own faith. The Church also discerns and has a gift to offer in the process of dialogue. It proposes a theology of harmony as a foundation for dialogue.

In order to enhance and find out different ways to implement the process of dialogue with the people of other faiths, the Bishops’ Institute

for inter-religious Affairs (BIRA), in the process of their search for the promotion of inter-religious dialogue, says “to promote interreligious dialogue at the local level, we encourage the forming of Basic Human Communities, composed of adherents of various faith traditions and having a common concern and goal of living together in a brotherhood which can work together to promote peace through dialogue.”<sup>9</sup> The final statement of the fourth session says the following: “The culture of dialogue should grow from below. Basic Human/Christian Communities should be used as springboards for the promotion of the dialogue of life.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Call to Religious in Asia*

While promoting interreligious dialogue in the service of learning from one another, in search of better understanding of life’s meaning, in view of working together for sustainable development and a just society, at the dawn of this century, the Asian Church, with the leadership of FABC, invites also the religious in Asia to be the vanguard in dialogue of life. It acknowledges that religious are a small group in the Church. Apart from Christianity, other religious in Asia also have their own religious people: monks, nuns, sannyasis. In this situation, Christian religious are called to reach out to peoples and religious of other faiths, in Mission *inter-gentes*. Dialogue is the key attitude and approach in their mission of proclaiming the Reign of God. In view of responding to this call pastorally, religious are called to contextualize and reinterpret their congregational charism.<sup>11</sup>

A cursory look at history tells us that contextualization and radically reinterpreting the Founder’s Charism with the same prophetic thrust had been our ‘Founding Charism’<sup>12</sup>. It had been the result of an awareness of the contextual needs, read in the light of the Word of God (Lk. 12:56; *GS* 4). Contextualization is also the outcome of ‘sensed Obedience’, not a given one, and to a life of communion in the context. Such contextualization of a charism is evangelical, ecclesial in character, resulting in a complementarity and collaboration with respect to diversity and difference in a concrete context<sup>13</sup>. Further, the ecclesial Communion demands of the ‘people of God’ (*LG* 9-17), that various components can and must unite their strength in the attitude of collaboration and make an exchange of various gifts, in order that they may

participate more efficaciously in the mission of the Church.<sup>14</sup> In Asia, this mission is envisaged as mission *inter gentes*.<sup>15</sup>

## OBLATES IN ASIAN INTERRELIGIOUS CONTEXT

### *Oblates in Sri Lanka*

Sri Lanka was among the first Provinces in Oblate history. Among the Oblates in the early pioneering period, let me take note of a few for their missionary endeavour among people of other faiths. *Bro. Gaspard de Steffanis* (1821-1878), an Italian charged with the management of the temporal affairs of the Jaffna mission, learning the Tamil language and the local customs, was “respected by Protestants, Non-Christians. The Catholics of the district hardly knew how to show their love for him. Hundreds came to visit him, and placed their services at his disposal”.<sup>16</sup> *Fr. John Peter Perreard* (1826-1879), from Port-Jussy, Savoys worked among the estate laborers and Buddhists in Kandy. In Kandy, “he had the privilege of winning over a condemned Buddhist criminal, resulting his conversion”<sup>17</sup>

*Archbishop C. Bonjean* (1823-1892), from France, in a time when the Catholic Schools were limited and deficient, he, besides placing Catholic education before the public, corresponded with the Government and the then School commission with the object of shaking off the bondage to which Catholics of those days were subjected. Thus, responding to this need for reform in the educational system, in dialogue with the Government, he forced it to adopt a more liberal policy on educational matters. Accepting his recommendations for reform, then Government in 1869 decided that any religious denomination could open schools for its children. The government also was willing to give grants to such schools, if they provided a sound secular education. The Denominational or Associated School system, which would benefit the children of all religions, thus came into being and would last a century, until the takeover of schools by the State in the year 1960. Bonjean came to be known as the ‘Father of the Denominational School System’.<sup>18</sup>

*Fr. Isidore Joseph Belle*’s (1816-1931) apostolic ministry in Kegalle, towards Kandy, was not limited only to the estate labourers, but he had contact also with the many Buddhists living in the area and

developed a good relationship with them. Through the apostolic and civic activities of Fr. Belle, Kegalle was rapidly transformed into a little beautiful multi-cultural religious city.

In mid nineties, *Fr. Swaminathapillai Gnanapragasar*, (1875-1947), a Sri Lankan Tamil from the North, popularly known as Swami Gnanapragasar with his Hindu family background in his ministry, his simple and ascetical way of life fitted well into the popular image of a Sannyasi whom the Hindus respected. He was, in fact, known among them as ‘Nallur Swami’ (Nallur is in the heart of the city of Jaffna, housing the famous Temple of *Saiva* Heritage). He was a linguist, an historian, and a litterateur. Together with some minor religious writings, he carried on with great perseverance a campaign for supplying the Tamil reader with first rate literary works of doctrine, apologetics, asceticism, Church history, and liturgy, both in prose and poetry. Fr. Gnanapragasar was at his best in his writings on Hinduism. His mastery of the language and his first-hand knowledge of Hindu Philosophy and mythology from the Sanskrit and Tamil sources, made him irresistible in any controversy on the subject. All his prodigious learning was used by him as a handmaid to his missionary work among his countrymen.<sup>19</sup>

*Fr. Peter A. Pillai* (1904-1964) a Sri Lankan Tamil from the North, an intellectual genius, he was the Founding Rector of Aquinas University College, in Colombo Diocese. He started new societies for human and social development and new movements for restoration of the Social Order based on Social justice. He edited a magazine called ‘Social Justice’ and campaigned vigorously for social-economic reforms in collaboration with others. He served on the Divorce Commission, the Social Service Commission and on the Education Commission appointed by Mr. C.W. Kannangara, the then Minister of Education.

*Fr. A.J.B. Antoninus* (1905-1973) hailed from the North of Sri Lanka, an educator and social reformer, he had contributed in both fields so that Sri Lankans of all religions profited. With his social reformist policies, he worked among the plantation workers and the rickshaw pullers, a much neglected species of humanity. He wielded influence not only with the poor and the illiterate, but with the high strata of society. “I loved justice and hated iniquity and therefore I die in exile”. These words of Pope Gregory the VII aptly fit into his life, one who sacrificed



his Oblate vocation to fight injustice and bring about social equality in multi-religious Sri Lanka.<sup>20</sup>

*Fr. Felix Mevel*, a French missionary (1925-1984), among his pastoral achievements, besides being the forerunner in the formation of Basic Christian Communities, his service to the Children of Sri Lanka stands out. He founded the *La-kri-Vi* movement, envisaging it as a radically new technique of teaching catechism through the actions of children. Later on, he opened up the movement to all children irrespective of their religion, so that the children of Sri Lanka would learn to rise above petty religious differences to build up a better world for themselves and others.<sup>21</sup>

*Fr. Michael Rodrigo* (1927-1987) from the South of Sri Lanka, after his second doctorate in Paris on the Paschal Mystery in Christianity and the Living Faiths in Asia, on his return to Sri Lanka while being a visiting lecturer at the Ampitiya seminary, he was attached to the Centre for Society and Religion, founded by Fr. Tissa Balasuriya. Two years after, he moved to work in the UVA uplands in the then newly made diocese of Badulla. There, as director in the formation of the diocesan priests, he worked out an action-reflection program based on the multi-reality environment of Uva. His work consequently led him to dedicate himself to the village apostolate of presence. He chose to live in a predominantly Buddhist village called Buttala, Lower Uva. There, setting up a small house, *Suba Seth Gedera*, he worked with two axes: 1. Justice and development for the farming community; 2. Dialogue of Life with the Buddhist rural folk in Wellasa. He joint services on Buddhist, Christian feast days, recycled drop out youth back to school, organized pilgrimages for the Buddhist folk and set up a mothers' union, among a host of other things. He wrote in 1983, "with faith, prayerfully and in a non-violent way, we have to struggle with evil forces today". He envisaged that Buddhism and Christianity must grow together. This demanded for him radical self-emptying and *anatta* of the *Buddhist Sasana*. Evil forces gunned him down on 10<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1987.<sup>22</sup>

*Fr. Marcelline Jayakody* (1902-1998), the well known musician, poet, lyricist, author and patriot, in the South of Sri Lanka, in keeping with the teaching of Vatican II on religions and cultures, contributed much to the art and Buddhist Sinhala culture in Sri Lanka for over six decades. His contribution in and through the Sinhala Poets' Association

was such that Ven. Ittapane Dhammalankara Thera, a Buddhist prelate, wrote a book about him. This was the first time in the world that a Buddhist prelate wrote a book about a Catholic Priest.<sup>23</sup>

*Fr. Tissa BalaSriya* (1924-2013 graduated from Oxford and Paris University respectively in Agricultural economy and Theology. In 1971, he began the Centre for Society and Religions, whose objective was to help in the integral human liberation and fulfillment of the people of Sri Lanka, by their realization of human values in economic development with social justice and a deepening of cultural values. In this respect, his work was many-sided. He promoted inter-religious, inter-gender, inter-generation understanding and environmental preservation; formed the Citizen Committee for national harmony, and the Civil Rights Movement (CRM), People's Action for Free and Fair elections (PAFFREL), the International Forum of Religious for Global Solidarity, the Forum of African Asian Spirituality, the Asian Meeting of Religious (AMOR), The Ecumenical Association of the Third World Theologians (ETH-WOT) and was editor of Logos, Quest, Social Justice, and Voices of Third World Theology.

### *Oblates in India*

The Oblate Mission in India began in 1968, responding to the invitation by then Archbishop R. Arulappa of Madras-Mylapore Diocese. *Frs. Mariampillai Emmanuel* and *Stanislaus Philips* were the pioneers from the Sri Lanka Oblate Province. Oblates chose to be in Kanchipuram, a South Indian city of Hindu heritage in Tamil Nadu, where the Christians were scattered. Their focus was on the poor of the area. Their ministries in villages consisted of non-formal education on a variety of issues such as health care, family care, home management, education for poor children, empowerment of poor women, rehabilitation of Sri Lankan repatriates and the integral welfare of the tribal communities. The main focus being health education, health workers were trained, a syllabus was proposed to be followed in Schools. Such ministries involved a living dialogue with people at the grass roots and with the decision-making people in ruling Government and ecclesiastical circles. Such a dialoguing presence of the Oblates in India resulted in both the State government of Tamil Nadu and the Central Government appreciating and encouraging the ministry done for and among people.

It was a mission *integentes*. In the 1990s, the Oblates, with the initiative of *Swami Amalraj*, one of the first Indian Oblates, and *Swami Joseph Samarakone*, a Sri Lankan missionary, began the Aanmodaya Ashram in Enathur, on the outskirts of Kanchipuram. It was meant for furthering their presence in a Hindu milieu and their continuing dialogue with the Saivaite social, cultural, and religious reality.

### *Oblates in Pakistan and Bangladesh*

In an interview with *Fr. Basil Silva*, one of the first among the pioneering Sri Lankans to go to Pakistan in 1971, he said that, in his twenty years of experience there in an Islamic State, where Christians and Catholics were only 2%, he had experienced both cordiality and hostility from the majority. Working among Christians, migrants from Goa, India, and the landless who had been working under the Muslim landlords in the Rangpur, Derekabad and Azizabad areas, it was a matter of relating and dialoguing with them. In Quetta, the Grammar School and, in Faisalbad diocese, Gojra Parish School, were places which provided an opportunity for being in dialogue with the Islamic majority. However, with the rise of the Jammahat Ullah Islamic fundamental faction and the implementation of Sharia law there, a conflict situation has erupted. It seems to be demanding from the Oblates a new mode of presence and a way of dialogue with such an Islamic milieu. “The work we had to do was fundamental, like fostering Christian virtues, forming good habits, etc. which anyone can accomplish” said another veteran missionary from Sri Lanka, *Fr. Joseph Theogenes*.

The Oblate mission that began in Bangladesh, an Islamic State, in 1973, by the Sri Lankan missionaries along with a few European Oblates, was focused on working among the indigenous people/Trib-  
 alas called Khasis, Garos, and Uraos, who do not speak the language, Bangla, of Bangladesh.

### *Oblates in the Philippines*

In 1939, with an official invitation by the Holy See, the Oblates accepted the mission in Cotabato and Sulu which were the exception in a predominantly Christian country in Asia. The two civil Provinces in the Southern part of the country have been recognized as Muslim Prov-

inces. Before the advent of Catholicism and the Spanish colonization of the Philippines in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Islam had already gained a strong foothold in the Southern part of Mindano. Islamization in Sulu, Cotabato, and Lanao was propounded as having followed a pattern similar to that in Southeast Asia. There was tension and resistance by the Moros of the South as attempts were made to preserve their independence and to protect their Islamic heritage and culture. It is in such a backdrop that the Oblates arrived in the Philippines, and the mission has been continued.

In later periods, when Oblates started missions in other parts of Asia, such as Laos, Thailand, Japan, Vietnam, etc., they had to face Shinto-Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism which had an appeal to people there. On the whole, such contextual experiences come into conflict with the doctrines and practices of the Church, which call for a deeper reflection and critical evaluation. As such they have posed challenges to seek a better pastoral expression and have demanded a sincere search together to carry out the mission *inter gentes* with the goal of the Reign of God.

In short, the Oblate response in Asia before and after Vatican II was the result of their sensitivity to the context and burning zeal for mission among the peoples of Asia. History has proved that the Oblates, living their charism with certain contextual sensitivity, have left behind them a rich legacy and a tradition to be followed. Our continuing presence and being with peoples here in Asia leaves us with some challenges as well.

### *Challenges*

- There is the need to move from a dialogue of mutual appreciation to inter-religious collaboration for the common good of the people, facilitating the religions to play a transformative role in society.
- In some parts of Asia, efforts made with respect to reconciliation, without the active competent co-operation of civic and religious leaders, have become mere political efforts. In such contexts, the well-being of our people is abandoned into the hands of politicians. The history has been a witness to misuse of

religions by politicians. There is a need for the active involvement of religious leaders, with the collective prophetic thrust found in religions.

- On the other hand, there are religious extremists or fanatics who misuse religions for their own misconduct or racism. Their extremism is at times fanned by selfish politicians or other interest groups. In such a context, because of the silence and apolitical stance of religious leaders, the extremists flourish with their conduct and have played their role in destructive way, harming the peaceful coexistence of our people and violating the vision of unity in diversity. Our contextual experiences make us aware of the fact that the passivity of the good does more harm than the activity of the bad.
- There is a need for an inclusive vision in view of enabling people of different faiths and spiritual persuasions to live as a basic human community. There is also the need to address the emerging popular religiosity, which house and accommodate people leaving from institutional religions and other persuasions.
- There is a need for an inclusive vision in view of enabling people of different faiths and spiritual persuasions to live as a basic human community.
- Today, religions being more institutionalized, they begin to lose their Founder's visions. As a result, there is the emergence of 'popular religiosity', which houses and accommodates people from institutional religions and other persuasions.

## CONCLUSION

In order to do the mission in an Asian inter-cultural and religious context, we religious in Asia need to return to the basic sources: 1. the core characteristics and visions of the Founders of the religions and the visions of Spiritual Schools. 2. This places before the religious also the need to return to the Founders and to their founding experience – radical openness to God's Spirit in a given context, a burning awareness of the contextual need, daring initiative and creativity in response (*PC* in *Vat. II*). The visions of these Founders are more charismatic, liberative, prophetic, inclusive, contextualized, life-oriented and communion focused.

It was Pope Paul VI, who introduced the expression “charism of the Founders” into official documents of the Magisterium, who said that ‘founders were raised up by God’. He used this expression to show that this is the particular characteristic of God’s Spirit in them which became the formative element in them, which they transmitted to their followers. Vatican II recognized such persons “under the inspiration of God’s Spirit” as persons with special gifts, charisms (*PC 1*).

The charism of a Founder became alive in the way the life was lived by those first members in their context, taking into account the reality. In other words, the original inspiration of the Founder, his faith response to a contextual need, his initiatives with his radical openness to God’s Spirit, developed into a collective and communitarian charism. This places before the religious the need to return to the Founders and to the founding experience of the first members. Returning to this foundational experience is fundamental for spiritual fruitfulness and to be persons of mission *inter gentes* in an inter-cultural and religious context.

Religious in Asia are also to be part of a ‘new way of being a Church’ incarnated, under girded by a commitment and service to life, inspired by an overarching vision of harmony, oriented toward a three-fold dialogue with Asian cultures, religions and the poor, and seeking to build the Kingdom of God in Asia.<sup>24</sup> Thus, being imbibed by this growing ecclesial vision is imperative for Oblates in Asia. Our Founder himself was a person with a burning ecclesial zeal (Oblate Preface).

Religious in Asia are called to follow Jesus, who was in dialogue with a multi-faceted people of his society, in different contexts. There are, for an example, the twelve Apostles, the seventy-two disciples, the Centurion, the Syro-Phoenician woman, Zacchaeus, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the woman at His feet at the Pharisee’s house, the Gerasene demoniac, the Roman at the site of Jesus’ crucifixion, and all the others who related themselves at various levels with Jesus. Their encounter with Jesus was real. Even though they were not part of the “disciples” of Christ, certainly they were in the community of Jesus.

Felix Wilfred, commenting on this scenario says “viewing from a Christian perspective we can say that there is an invisible community of those who encounter Jesus Christ in one or other dimension of his life

and teaching. We are led in this way into that mysterious plan of God and the communion of the kingdom with which the Church can never be fully equaled. The words of Augustine are a powerful reminder against such an identification: “many whom God has, the Church does not have; and many whom the Church has, God does not have”.<sup>25</sup> His comment indicates that the experiences of such partial encounters could be a starting point for the further development of ‘new way of being’ a religious in a multi-religious context.

Religious with their specific charisms are hence challenged to question more their present ways of living their Charism, and to find better ways of articulating it pastorally that can suit the multi-religious context. Through dialogue of life in the inter-cultural context, we are collaborating with God in Jesus, who is gathering all things together (Eph. 1:8-10), reconciling all of us with each other and with God Himself (Col. 1:15-20), so that God will be all in all” (1Cor. 15:28).

With the words of Rabindranath Tagore, I would like to wind up this article: “When old words die out on the tongue, new melodies break forth from the heart. And where the old tracks are lost, a new country is revealed with wonders.”

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<sup>1</sup> B.G. ROSALES & C.G. ARÉVALO, eds. *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents From 1970-1991*, Vol. I, 1992, Maryknoll, Orbis, p. 4; JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, 1999, nos. 5-9.

<sup>2</sup> FABC Papers, nos. 106, 138, 139.

<sup>3</sup> LG 16, 17; *Ecclesia in Asia*, n. 6.

<sup>4</sup> FABC Office of Ecumenical & Interreligious Affairs, *A Glimpse at Dialogue in Asia*, FABC Papers no. 131, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> ROSALES & ARÉVALO, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> F. WILFRED, “The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: Orientations, Challenges and Impact,” in FAPA I, p. xxiv-xxv.

<sup>8</sup> ROSALES & ARÉVALO, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> FAPA III, no. 3. 4, p.123.

<sup>10</sup> FAPA. III, p.145.

<sup>11</sup> FABC Papers, no. 72i, p. 10-11; see also *LG* 44; *PC* 5: *MR* 10, 14.

<sup>12</sup> A. ROMANO, *The Charism of the Founders, The person and charism of Founder in contemporary theological reflection*, 1994, Uk, St. Paul, p. 129.

<sup>13</sup> The Synod of Bishop on 'State of Life' in 1987, 1990, 1994; *VC* 47a; 48a; 49b; 57; 58.

<sup>14</sup> Y. CONGAR, *Diversity and Communion*, 1982, London, SCM Press, p. 70-76.

<sup>15</sup> G. DE ROSAIRO, *Church in Asia and Mission Inter gentes*, 2015, Sri Lanks, CSR Press.

<sup>16</sup> P. JESUTHASAN, *Our Tribute*, V. I, 2001, Colombo, CSR Press, p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.85.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162-164.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, V. II, part. II, p. 225-231.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, V. III, part I, p. 273-275.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, part II, p. 117-119.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171-173.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, V. III, part II, p. 320-322.

<sup>24</sup> J. YUN-KA IAN, "A New *Way* of Being Church in Asia: The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) at the Service of Life in Pluralistic Asia", *Missiology: An International Review*, XXXIII, no. 1, January, 2005, p.72.

<sup>25</sup> F. WILFRED, *On the banks of Ganges*, 2002, ISPCK, p. 218.



## CONGO, LA NAISSANCE D'UNE PROVINCE AUTOCHTONE : CHANGEMENTS DANS LA VIE ET LA MISSION DES OBLATS

JEAN-BAPTISTE MALENGE, OMI

**C**omment oserais-je parler de la naissance d'une province autochtone, celle du Congo, ce pays devenu aujourd'hui la République démocratique du Congo après s'être appelé aussi la République du Zaïre ? J'ai 55 ans. Les Oblats sont arrivés au Congo-Belge en 1931, année de naissance (officielle) de mon propre père. L'Oblat congolais le plus ancien, Mgr Louis Mbwol, a prononcé ses premiers vœux en 1955. Il est né lui aussi en 1931.

Je ne peux donc parler en journaliste-reporter. Je ne peux pas non plus parler en historien. Mais je peux faire comme l'auteur des Actes des apôtres. Sans prétention, je peux esquisser le sens qui se dégage des récits des anciens et de la mémoire qui tient lieu de notre Tradition.

L'histoire peut ainsi se raconter comme par le bas, à travers les yeux de personnages proches ou lointains, témoins crédibles ou simples acteurs. Ils ont laissé des marques qui disent, par exemple, ce qui les aura guidés comme Oblats de Marie Immaculée. Ces marques dessinent aussi des lignes de ce qui doit se lire comme le charisme d'Eugène de Mazenod en RDC.

Mais qu'est-ce que l'autochtonie dans ce cas ? Et si l'autochtonie sous-entendait aussi de quelque manière l'idée d'autonomie ? On en vient facilement à rechercher un tel sens de ce côté-ci du monde appelé Tiers-Monde, dans l'ancienne colonie belge.

L'autochtonie, j'en épingle trois repères et trois défis. Les repères peuvent s'appeler : la formation, le développement et la conscientisation. Les défis s'appelleront : piété, appartenance, ouverture.

## L'AUTOCHTONE, ENTRE L'UNIVERSEL ET LE PARTICULIER

Le 22 août 2006, à Kinshasa, lorsque la Province du Congo célébrait ses 75 ans d'âge, le Supérieur général d'alors a signé une lettre qui fait notamment remarquer: « Sachez que la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée et votre pays comptent sur chacun de vous. » Wilhelm Steckling a constaté combien les Oblats célébraient les 75 ans de leur histoire « en étroite proximité avec l'histoire du pays ». Joindre l'histoire d'un pays aux attentes de toute une congrégation, n'est-ce pas indiquer, sans le rechercher, l'enracinement dans un particulier qui ouvre en même temps à l'universel ? N'est-ce pas indiquer ainsi l'être autochtone ?

Considérons ainsi que la Province du Congo n'est pas autochtone à l'arrivée des tout premiers missionnaires. Bien plus, l'oreille francophone entend que l'*autochtone* rapproche de l'*autonome*. Mais l'autonomie par rapport à qui et à quoi ? Et suffit-il de recruter des Congolais pour s'assurer l'autochtonie ?

La question de l'articulation entre l'universel et le particulier bien vive en Afrique et dans l'Église d'Afrique, sonne comme recherche acharnée de l'indépendance. L'Afrique s'interroge encore et toujours, comme dans les années 1950, sur sa place particulière et sur la reconnaissance de l'égale dignité des enfants de Dieu dans l'humanité puis dans la maison-Église ou dans l'Église Famille de Dieu, comme on dira en 1994 lors sur Synode spécial des évêques pour l'Afrique.

La question serait aussi de cerner, dans le contexte oblat d'aujourd'hui, l'articulation entre l'universel et le particulier. L'universel est au cœur du particulier, comme on devrait le comprendre. En l'occurrence, comment mesurer notre appartenance commune à la congrégation des Oblats de Marie Immaculée et partager le même charisme dès lors que nous parlons des différents fuseaux horaires ? Le Français Eugène de Mazenod aurait sans doute rêvé des liaisons numériques grâce auxquelles il aurait pu penser autrement la mission et l'envoi de ses fils aux quatre coins du monde.

Et maintenant : Comment chemine-t-on vers le cœur d'un particulier pour atteindre l'universel ? Comment pouvons-nous saisir le particulier du charisme oblat vécu sur l'Équateur, dans l'ex Congo-belge ? Et comment le nom et le visage du saint français du dix-neuvième siècle

cle passent-ils concrètement dans les diocèses d'Idiofa, de Kikwit, de Kinshasa, d'Isangi, de Lolo ? Et comment, du Congo, franchir ensuite la frontière pour atteindre Luanda, Ondjiva, Caxito, en Angola ? Et ailleurs en Afrique, en Amérique et en Europe ou en Asie ?

Cette question de l'inculturation est éminemment aussi la question non-exprimée de l'histoire de la mission oblate au Congo. Elle est l'axe sur lequel reconnaître trois repères et trois défis.

### TROIS REPÈRES POUR LA RECONNAISSANCE : FORMATION, DÉVELOPPEMENT ET CONSCIENTISATION

Les trois premiers missionnaires arrivés en 1931 du Basutoland dans le vicariat d'Ipamu au Congo-Belge viennent « évangéliser les pauvres », selon le mot de leur Fondateur, à la suite de Jésus. Évangéliser, on devra bien savoir ce que cela signifie. Les Jésuites et les Scheutistes qui cèdent une partie de leurs territoires respectifs ont préparé le terrain, de sorte qu'il n'est pas nécessaire de rappeler que les Oblats viennent parler de Dieu de façon différente de la manière ancestrale. Dieu, on le connaît depuis toujours...

Et jusqu'en 2015, il n'est pas sûr que bien des Africains ne vivent pas une « double appartenance » ou une double épistémologie, qu'ils ne croient pas carrément en un Dieu différent. La mission retentira longtemps encore d'une certaine épreuve de force. La formation, le développement et la conscientisation seront trois modalités et trois lieux d'action pour répondre à ce défi de la différence. Il s'agit de poser la religion dans la connaissance de soi-même et de l'autre.

### FORMER ET SE FORMER

Les Oblats viennent donc évangéliser les pauvres. Mais qui leur a dit qu'ils se trouvent chez des pauvres ? Et que disent les hommes et les femmes qui les accueillent ? La pauvreté, les missionnaires doivent bien la mesurer pour que leur dévouement ne soit pas illusoire. La pauvreté, il faut bien que les peuples et les personnes la reconnaissent et veuillent en sortir.

Si la contrainte ne peut constituer le chemin d'une évangélisation véritable, il faut bien travailler à convaincre les consciences. La mission n'a pas toujours respecté ni les personnes ni les peuples et leurs

cultures. Pourtant, la prudence et l'attention, la sagesse et l'intelligence n'ont pas manqué de la part des missionnaires.

Les missionnaires oblats ont vite compris qu'il fallait, suivant le mot de leur Fondateur, à la suite du Christ, « rendre les hommes raisonnables, puis chrétiens, enfin les aider à devenir des saints ». Et voilà pourquoi ils vont s'investir dans la formation et dans l'enseignement. Ils vont former des catéchistes et ils vont créer des écoles pour tous. Les premiers catéchistes deviennent des enseignants. Les écoles se construisent avec les subsides du gouvernement colonial.

Les missionnaires eux-mêmes doivent se former à la connaissance des peuples et des cultures en se renouvelant aussi dans la théologie, la doctrine, et la sociologie, et les langues. Mais l'œuvre missionnaire consistera aussi, dans les premières décennies, à former les personnes à évangéliser. D'où le fait que presque tous ont œuvré dans l'enseignement. Les écoles doivent apprendre à lire et à écrire. La Parole de Dieu qu'ils apportent est essentiellement écrite. Et la langue même changera, à la faveur du Concile Vatican II.

En 2015, sans revendiquer le charisme d'une congrégation enseignante, les Oblats du Congo sont encore engagés dans l'enseignement. Mais ils s'interrogent sur ce besoin fondamental de travailler au développement de la culture pour préparer les cœurs à adhérer au Christ.

La relève oblate, on l'a pensée dès les années 1950. Le noviciat est ouvert à Ifwanzondo en 1954. Les vocations seront le fleuron de l'autochtonie.

Les péripéties et avatars de l'histoire du peuple congolais ont conduit les Oblats à élargir la compréhension de la relation entre foi et raison. De l'enseignement, ils en sont arrivés à travailler pour ce qui s'est appelé le « développement ».

## DÉVELOPPEMENT DES PEUPLES

Le charisme oblat résonna dans le « développement des peuples » compris au Concile Vatican II et dans l'encyclique « *Populorum progressio* » du pape Paul VI. Il faut articuler foi et raison, mais aussi foi et développement humain.

De 1931 à 1960, le temps était trop court pour recueillir les fruits de l'évangélisation dans la paix. La violence éclata en 1960, année de l'indépendance politique du pays. Ce fut la cristallisation du conflit de

la rencontre des cultures congolaises et de la culture occidentale portée notamment par la mission. La politique a dicté sa loi. La propagande politicienne n'a pas toujours été exempte de démagogie. Et le peuple n'avait pas toujours la capacité critique pour résister à des appels à la violence.

L'autonomie signifiait la destruction des infrastructures héritées de la colonisation. Dans la région desservie par les missionnaires oblats, l'idéologie marxiste encouragea les mains destructrices de la rébellion de Pierre Mulele. 27 des 31 missions oblats furent détruites et pillées. A Kilembe, trois missionnaires oblats furent tués dans la nuit du 22 janvier 1964 : les pères Defever, Hardy et Laebens.

Au lendemain de la rébellion, les « missionnaires » qui étaient venus s'occuper des « pauvres » et qui avaient construit des écoles, n'avaient qu'à constater la pauvreté grandissante. Dans les années 70, la mission allait ainsi impliquer davantage ses agents dans les œuvres de « développement ».

Il fallait reconstruire les infrastructures. Il y avait les écoles mais aussi les dispensaires et maternités, les ateliers de menuiseries, les garages... Mais il fallait surtout insister sur le développement « communautaire ». Et la conscientisation s'est imposée dans la foulée. Elle vise à reconstruire les personnes et les communautés dans leurs relations avec l'environnement mais aussi avec le monde invisible.

#### CONSCIENTISATION POUR LA COMMUNAUTÉ

Pourquoi le peuple s'est-il mis à détruire l'œuvre réalisée en sa faveur ? L'histoire de la mission retiendra que le développement a été conçu et organisé sur terrain comme processus pour mettre le peuple debout. La conversion attendue comme fruit de la prédication du baptême par le missionnaire porte sur l'individu, mais c'est en communauté que les personnes vont se mettre debout. On vise à faire changer le monde grâce au changement de comportement des personnes.

Très concrètement, les missionnaires oblats ont constaté combien les énergies déployées par certains jeunes gens pour le développement du village ont manqué de lendemain. Les jeunes sentaient qu'ils ne comptaient pas. Les jeunes gens avaient « peur ». De quoi ? Des esprits, de l'invisible, c'est-à-dire de l'impondérable dans la vie humaine. C'est la croyance à l'ensorcellement qui phagocytait les énergies. Les jeunes

quittaient les villages pour la ville. Les milieux les plus pauvres devenaient ainsi plus abandonnés encore.

La méthode pastorale de la conscientisation est née ainsi comme pratique de dialogue autour du feu ou sous l'arbre à palabres. Les membres de la communauté s'adonnaient à un exercice communautaire de discernement, d'analyse de leur situation en vue de s'encourager mutuellement. Ainsi s'agissait-il essentiellement de la réconciliation comme ce moment où restaurer les relations brisées. Et c'est la Parole de Dieu, la foi en Jésus-Christ qui s'offrirent comme nouveaux cadres de référence pour l'intégration sociale.

La conscientisation, menée en équipe pastorale en faveur de la communauté, se révéla ainsi comme une naissance des communautés ecclésiales de base.

En fait, on intégrait les acquis du développement et le besoin fondamental d'émancipation. Dans les années 1970, l'allure politique de l'authenticité invitait à la reconnaissance de l'identité congolaise et de l'homme noir. L'Église se retrouva comme en antagonisme avec le pouvoir politique du président Mobutu. On parla même de persécution. Le président Mobutu se faisait passer pour un nouveau messie.

Sur ces entrefaites, le noviciat oblat rouvre à Ifwanzondo en 1975. Jean-Pierre Bwalwel, premier de la nouvelle cordée, a prononcé ses premiers vœux en 1977. Le fil ne s'est plus rompu. La nouvelle génération des Oblats arrive ainsi dans le champ de la conscientisation. Les vocations religieuses et sacerdotales fleurissent dans le pays.

L'ouverture du scolasticat et du théologat saint Eugène de Mazenod, à Kinshasa, en 1982, finit par enlever tous les doutes sur la reprise du recrutement.

L'année 1994 posait une pierre blanche avec la tenue d'un colloque international sur les « nouveaux appels de la mission ». Et l'Institut Africain des Sciences de la Mission était créé pour penser la mission, former à la mission voire transformer la mission.

La Province oblate du Congo n'a pas fini de naître. Mais les missionnaires oblats ne travaillent-ils pas en vain si le développement et la conscientisation ne les ramènent pas à la foi, à la consécration et à l'oblation ? Trois défis à relever s'imposent : la piété, l'appartenance et l'ouverture à l'universel.

Le Supérieur général actuel a écrit récemment une lettre à la Province du Congo pour la soutenir dans sa croissance. Le père Louis Lougen salue notamment les efforts consentis pour la prise en charge économique-financière. C'est bien là un défi pour une Province autochtone dont le sort économique dépend plus que tout de l'environnement socio-économique du pays et du combat général pour sortir du sous-développement.

Mais le Supérieur général attire l'attention sur l'enracinement dans l'essentiel, dans la spiritualité et dans la consécration religieuse oblate. Trois défis peuvent effectivement rejoindre cette interpellation du Supérieur général. Il s'agit de la piété, de la fraternité et de l'ouverture à l'universel.

### *Formation à la piété*

Les Oblats entendent bien l'avertissement répété du Saint-Père François. À maintes reprises, le pape met en garde contre la mondanité, et il insiste pour que notre action pastorale ne se réduise pas à un travail humanitaire semblable à celui d'une Organisation Non Gouvernementale. Quelle sera la différence ?

Dans la Préface aux Constitutions et Règles, saint Eugène de Mazenod indique la piété comme premier mouvement de notre élan missionnaire et qui nous distinguera certainement des autres bienfaiteurs de l'humanité : « *Que fit en effet Notre Seigneur Jésus Christ, lorsqu'il voulut convertir le monde ? Il choisit un certain nombre d'apôtres et de disciples, qu'il forma à la piété, qu'il remplit de son esprit, et après les avoir dressés à son école, il les envoya à la conquête du monde, qu'ils eurent bientôt soumis à ses saintes lois.* »

Les Oblats du Congo s'évalueront à l'aune de leur pratique de la piété, dans la formation et dans la vie missionnaire, jusque dans les efforts pour la prise en charge matérielle de leurs communautés. Quand peut-on dire que les communautés oblates sont construites autour de valeurs spirituelles ? Physiquement, à quel moment la chapelle est-elle érigée lorsque s'établit une nouvelle communauté oblate ?

Bien plus : La spiritualité oblate commande que la richesse des Oblats servira premièrement au culte. Il est donc à remarquer qu'il ne

s'agit pas d'abord de boire et de manger pour survivre, pour tenir dans la vie physique et matérielle. Il s'agit de soumettre le matériel au spirituel. Les Oblats du Congo ne l'oublieront pas lorsque les impératifs de la vie économique les emmènent à penser et à vivre la vie économique et financière. Ils ont à se poser la question de savoir dans quelle mesure la lutte générale et légitime contre la pauvreté considère et suppose l'option pour la pauvreté volontaire. Cette option est dans la conscience d'une profession religieuse qui doit aller à contre-courant d'une société angoissée qui court après l'argent et risque fort d'oublier le ciel.

L'appel à la piété pose également la question de savoir si la table qui réunit les Oblats est aussi et d'abord la table eucharistique et non le partage de meilleurs festins à la Corinthienne. La piété invite ainsi à vivre autrement les relations, la fraternité. Le vœu de chasteté rencontre ainsi les vœux de pauvreté et de persévérance.

### *La fraternité au-delà de la fraternité*

La pastorale de la conscientisation héritée des aînés missionnaires a insisté sur la réconciliation, sur une nouvelle vie menée ensemble dans la foi. Plus que jamais, les Oblats congolais seront désormais conscients de prêcher la fraternité universelle comme une marque de la foi chrétienne. Les Oblats s'appliqueront aussi cette marque du charisme d'Eugène de Mazenod, fondateur d'une congrégation internationale.

Comment inciter les chrétiens à vivre en communauté nouvelle si nous n'avons pas goûté nous-mêmes à la vie nouvelle dans une famille nouvelle et si nous ne nous soumettons à aucune autorité ? Le défi de l'appartenance signifie radicalement l'affermissement de l'autochtonie. Mais il induit celui de l'ouverture à la grande famille oblate universelle.

### *Ouverture à l'universel*

La charité entre Oblats de toutes les appartenances et identités ouvre le chemin de l'internationalité comme témoignage dans le monde d'aujourd'hui. Les Oblats se reconnaîtront comme témoins de l'internationalité, dans un monde menacé par le racisme, le nationalisme ou



le tribalisme. C'est le défi de l'appartenance. C'est le défi du vœu de la persévérance et de la chasteté.

Le fruit éminent de la reprise du recrutement chez les Oblats du Congo se donne à percevoir dans l'ouverture à l'universel. L'Institut Saint Eugène de Mazenod et l'Institut Africain des Sciences de la Mission auront été le lieu de cette rencontre. Les étudiantes et étudiants proviennent d'Afrique, d'Amérique, d'Asie et d'Europe.

Une autre marque oblate est l'envoi d'Oblats congolais en mission, aux quatre coins du monde. Mais pour parfaire l'échange entre le particulier et l'universel, de plus en plus d'Oblats congolais interpellent le Supérieur général de la congrégation, lui qui donne la première obédience à tout Oblat parvenu à la fin de sa formation première. La Province du Congo est fière de compter des fils qui incarnent l'internationalité de notre congrégation. Mais la Province du Congo peut aussi s'attendre à recevoir des confrères étrangers qui viennent non seulement pour la formation mais aussi comme signe éloquent et revitalisant du charisme oblat au milieu de notre peuple. Les laïcs associés au charisme oblat et tous les chrétiens qui cherchent à savoir qui nous sommes verrons plus nettement le visage de notre saint Fondateur et de son œuvre. La mémoire de nos missionnaires fondateurs se ravivera et nous revivrons au présent l'épopée missionnaire...

## CONCLUSION

La formation scolaire, la catéchèse, le développement et la conscientisation, voilà qui a marqué et qui marque l'œuvre oblate en RDC. Les vocations fleurissent encore par la grâce de Dieu et par la brillance du charisme d'Eugène de Mazenod. Les défis demeurent ceux de la piété, de la fraternité et de l'ouverture à l'autre.

Et si j'avais à conclure, je me recommanderais à la mémoire d'un missionnaire oblat. Plusieurs fois, chez lui, en Belgique, je l'ai entendu dire, en sa langue flamande : « Bij ons ». Et lorsqu'il disait ainsi « chez nous », il parlait du Congo et de mon village.

Le père Louis Sebreghs est mort en Belgique le 7 janvier 2012. Il a fondé la paroisse de Lozo en 1966, voilà donc quelque 50 ans. Le missionnaire a laissé dans mon village l'image d'un homme au cœur bon, toujours tout proche des pauvres. Après la mort de trois confrères à Kilembe, en 1964, il est parti, comme les disciples après la mort

d'Etienne, à la recherche d'une nouvelle terre pour la mission. Il a posé ses bagages à Lozo, accueilli par un chef de village qui deviendra son ami et protecteur mais qui ne recevra jamais le baptême. Le développement communautaire du village, le curé de Lozo l'avait promu en conscientisant païens et chrétiens, catholiques et protestants. Il m'a donné la première communion à 9 ans, et c'est lui qui m'a inspiré l'envie de devenir prêtre.

Deux autres Oblats ont donné à l'adolescent de 15 ans l'envie de devenir Oblat. L'année de la béatification d'Eugène de Mazenod, en 1975, au petit séminaire de Laba, j'ai compris que les deux Oblats, un Congolais et un Belge, Benoît Kabongo et Roger Durant, étaient, parmi mes professeurs, des frères, par-delà la couleur de leur peau.

Le charisme oblat, pour moi, c'est là qu'il se trouve. Rendre les hommes raisonnables, puis chrétiens, enfin les aider à devenir des saints. Et très concrètement, c'est le flambeau allumé voilà 200 ans que nous portons humblement aujourd'hui au Congo, en Angola et ailleurs. La Province autochtone du Congo est née, elle continue de naître sur la brillance d'hommes au cœur bon, au cœur du Christ.

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## **“GIVE US A PORTION OF YOUR SPIRIT”: OBLATE ASSOCIATES AND THE OBLATE CHARISM**

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**W**hen they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?” “Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied [2 Kings 2:9].

“Give us a portion of your spirit.” Oblates of Mary Immaculate today hear a request from the laity for a sharing of the Oblate charism. “Give us a portion of your spirit,” Oblate Associates ask, not to diminish the charism within the Oblates, but to unleash it in new ways in the church and in the world. “Give us a portion of your spirit,” the Associates ask, risking a Spirit-led impulse to become evangelizers with the Oblates, sharing an Oblate heart and spirit.

It is a daring request that can be made only because of a prior invitation: “We are not the owners of our charism: it belongs to the Church,”<sup>1</sup> the Oblates have said, “Let us call, invite and challenge laity to share the Oblate charism and welcome those who express the desire to do so.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it is an invitation extended warmly, “. . . we are happy to see that lay persons who are called by God want to share [the charism].”<sup>3</sup> In Canada and around the world, at the invitation and with the welcome of Oblates, lay men and women have become Associates, living a deep connection and commitment to the charism and the Congregation. At the same time, they are asking for that connection to be deepened.

The Oblates engage in a Charism Congress in preparation for the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their founding, knowing that the charism of a Founder, in the words of Pope Francis,

matures and develops, engaging new members in new geographic and cultural contexts, and giving rise to new ways of exercising the charism, new initiatives and expressions of apostolic charity.<sup>4</sup>

New ways of exercising the charism, new initiatives and expressions of apostolic charity: Oblates have always been willing to be creative and daring in doing things in new ways, in finding new means to respond to the urgent needs and demands of the times. Might embracing Association in a deeper, more intentional way be part of that newness? What concretely would it mean for the Oblates to embrace the Associates' request for a portion of the Oblate spirit? Might it open up new ways of being in relationship and new opportunities for mission? If it is a Spirit-led initiative that calls some laity to be sharers of the charism, companions in community and cooperators in mission, in a word, 'Oblate Associates,' are Oblates daring enough to encourage that to happen? Is it a part of the new heart and the new spirit the Triennium calls us to?

My purpose in this paper is to engage that conversation, but I do so within certain parameters. The first is to recognize there are many ways lay men and women feel connected to the Oblates: as Honorary Oblates; in the Missionary Associates of Mary Immaculate; in various secular and religious institutes; as employees; and as pastoral staff, to name but a few. As such, it has become customary in the Congregation to speak of 'the Oblate family,' a term introduced and made familiar by Oblate Fr. Frank Santucci. It acknowledges the variety of relationships Oblates and laity share. My focus in this paper is on 'Lay Associates', that is, those who draw their identity from the 1996 Congress on the Laity, in Aix-En-Provence.

Second, my lived experience of Oblate Association is within the Canadian context, and it is from this perspective that I write. Within the Oblate Provinces and Units across the Congregation the experience of Associates varies considerably. It is a diversity which the Aix Congress welcomed. As a participant in that Congress and as one of the ten Associates invited to address the 1998 General Chapter, I have seen the understanding of Associates in the Congregation evolve over the years. In working locally, nationally and internationally in Oblate Association for over twenty years, my appreciation and admiration for the diversity

of Associate groups throughout the Congregation has deepened. Still, it is the Canadian context I know best and the one presented here.

I begin by naming some of the signs of our times which have contributed to the emergence of Associate groups within the Church, then briefly trace the Oblate response to those signs, primarily as seen in Oblate General Chapter documents. I turn to the Aix Congress on the Laity to provide a defining identity for ‘Lay Associates’ and then describe how that has taken shape in the Province of OMI Lacombe Canada. I conclude by exploring some of the tremendous possibilities and challenges Association offers to the Congregation for the future.

### IN VIEW OF THE CHARISM, WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES?

The request, “Give us a portion of your spirit,” arises as a response to a movement of the Spirit in our church and in our world. With regard to Associates, we can point to three particularly relevant signs: the emerging role of the laity in the Church; the call for a new evangelization; and the awareness that religious institutes can share their charism. There is a counter-sign, which shows that many of these currents within the church are not yet fully realized.

The first sign of our times has to be the emerging role of the laity in the Church. Pope Francis’ clear statements in *Evangelii Gaudium* regarding the role of all the baptized as evangelizers are reflective of a 21<sup>st</sup> century movement in the church.<sup>5</sup> It is a movement grounded in the ecclesiology of Vatican II, embraced in subsequent Church documents, lived by many throughout the Church and yet still not fully embraced.

A major gift of the Second Vatican Council was its recovery of a total ecclesiology. Correcting an over-emphasis on the Church as hierarchical institution, the Council presents the Church as the entire People of God. The Council Fathers speak of the fundamental equality and dignity of every member. It precedes any differentiation on the basis of diversity of ministries and is grounded in a common participation in the priestly, prophetic, and royal mission of Jesus Christ. Drawing on a renewed sacramental theology of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist, the Council Fathers point out that, from that common matrix which all believers share, flows a common mission: “The apostolate of the laity is a sharing in the salvific mission of the Church. Through Bap-

tism and Confirmation, all are appointed to this apostolate by the Lord himself.”<sup>6</sup>

The Decree on the Laity, *Apostolicum Actuositatem*, furthers the insights of *Lumen Gentium*, expanding on its core ideas and describing in more detail the rightful roles and responsibilities of the laity and encouraging the laity to take up their roles.

It is a theme we hear throughout the next decades. Pope John Paul II’s *Apostolic Exhortation Christifideles Laici* takes up the Council’s teaching and discusses the vocation of the laity in the church and in the world. It too seeks to awaken the laity to both their rights and responsibilities in cooperating in the building of the Reign of God. Years later, Pope Benedict XVI will remind laity that they are co-responsible for mission and ministry in the Church and what that means in terms of understanding their place in the Church:

Co-responsibility demands a change in mindset especially concerning the role of lay people in the Church. They should not be regarded as “collaborators” of the clergy, but, rather, as people who are really “co-responsible” for the Church’s being and acting.<sup>7</sup>

This co-responsibility requires a change in mentality, he says, calling for a committed laity who would each make a specific contribution to the Church’s mission.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis sees this emerging role of the laity as the work of the Spirit. Reiterating that the Church is the entire People of God, he draws the necessary conclusion with regard to mission: “In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization.”<sup>8</sup> It is, for Francis, a sign of the new evangelization:

The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. . . Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are “disciples” and “missionaries”, but rather that we are always “missionary disciples.”<sup>9</sup>

Contributing to this is the fact that in many places we now have an educated laity fully capable of taking up the call to evangelization. Notably, this includes women, who, Pope Francis points out, are asking

to take up their rightful roles and responsibilities within the church and the world.<sup>10</sup>

The second sign also involves a renewed role for the laity. The call for a new evangelization looks to the places where evangelizing happens. While affirming the primacy of missionary efforts in places and to people where the Good News has never been proclaimed, the new evangelization acknowledges, increasingly, the many places where Christ has been proclaimed but belief has become lukewarm and Christ is either rejected or ignored. The so-called Christianized countries of the First World, marked by secularism, become the arenas for new evangelizing efforts.

The new evangelization also makes an essential connection being evangelization and justice. The Second Vatican Council set the stage for this understanding, notably with *Gaudium et Spes*. Unprecedented in its pastoral concern, the now famous first line, “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the [people] of our time,... are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ,”<sup>11</sup> denotes a care and concern for humankind and the world that stretches beyond ‘planting the church,’ to wanting to transform the world in the light of the gospel.

The Good News, the Council recognizes, is about human flourishing, equality, peace and justice for all. It is about the reign of God which Jesus came to establish where right relationships rule. It sees the world from the viewpoint of the outcasts and the marginalized and seeks to bring about change. Paul VI put it this way:

The Church seeks to upset the criteria of judgment, prevailing values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of information and models in life which are in contrast to the Word of God and the plan of salvation.<sup>12</sup>

In the challenge is the announcement of something better, “What is called for is an evangelization capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others, and to the world around us, and inspiring essential values.”<sup>13</sup> Evangelizers then are to be cooperators in bringing about that reigning of God.

This means that, in ways that are still unfolding, the laity is called to the task of evangelizing. If the primary audience is the unchurched, those who have abandoned their faith or those who see no use for faith

at all, then it is the baptized faithful who precisely are present where these people are: in workplaces and social places; in the marketplace, the board rooms, the factories, the shopping malls and the classrooms. Immersed in the milieu of family, work, and everyday life, the laity carry the gospel values everywhere they go. In dialogue with all people of good will, they enter into all the realms of human existence: political, economic, social and cultural. These are places where the transforming power of the Spirit is already present and at work, and the lay evangelizer seeks to cooperate with that Spirit, promoting and fostering those gospel values which promote the equality and dignity of all. Evangelizing of this type will take place not so much through teaching or preaching but through the witness of a Christian life well lived, one which radiates the joy of the gospel.

There is a third movement of the Spirit that is apropos and which also arises from the Council's ecclesiology: Pope John Paul II, writing in *Vita Consecrata* to the religious institutes, describes how, after the Council, many institutes saw the possibility of sharing the charism of their Founder with the laity. When we truly understand the Church as a communion, he notes, we see that the gifts given to some are meant for the benefit of all and that such cooperation and exchange of gifts allows for a more effective participation in the Church's mission. Such sharing with the lay faithful can occur at the level of spirituality and the apostolate. Further, where it happens, it is a source of life for both.<sup>14</sup> Religious congregations responded enthusiastically, and many embraced new relationships with laity.

With such currents in the background, the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first part of this century saw a rise in the number of lay movements within the church, so much so that Father General Marcello Zago saw their emergence as part of a wider ecclesial movement and a sign of the times.<sup>15</sup>

However, we must make note of a further sign: these spirit-led movements are not yet sufficiently heard or heeded. Pope Francis makes this eminently clear: "At the same time, a clear awareness of this responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation, does not appear in the same way in all places."<sup>16</sup> He lists several reasons: lack of formation for the laity; an excessive clericalism that limits possibilities for the laity and excludes them from decision-making; a



view of ministry for the laity that sees it limited to church activities and not connected to transformation in the world; and the failure in Church circles to create broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence.<sup>17</sup>

It is, Pope Francis declares, a situation that needs changing:

It is insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for the personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized.<sup>18</sup>

These then are some of the ‘signs of the times’ which engage the Oblate charism today as it looks at its relationship with laity: the entire Church is missionary; there is an urgent need for an engaged and active laity willing to take up their roles and responsibilities as evangelizers; evangelization and building the reign of God go hand in hand; and the charism of a religious congregation can be shared among all the People of God to the mutual enrichment of both groups.

#### THE OBLATE RESPONSE

When we look at the Oblates and the charism today, we see a sensitivity to the signs of the times and a creative response: “The Church who evangelizes is the people of God including all its members – laity, priests and religious,”<sup>19</sup> we read in *Evangelizing the Poor at the Dawn of the New Millennium* and we instantly make the connections. We sense the Spirit’s movement as the Oblates take up the cause of the laity:

It is urgent that we accord the laity their full responsibilities. It is equally urgent that we help form them for mission. This must be a priority. Everyone who is baptized is called to be an evangelizer<sup>20</sup>

We applaud the intuition that encourages them to share their charism. Oblates are to,

... meet laity, not only to work with them but also to share what animates us both: rootedness in the same baptism, the experience of living the same charism of the Church in a common missionary vision.<sup>21</sup>

In pouring out a portion of their spirit upon men and women by calling and forming them to be Oblate Associates, the Oblates respond to the Church's need for a laity worthy of its name. In promoting Oblate Associates for mission, the Oblates free their charism to be leaven in the world. In sharing their charism, they set people on fire for Christ, the Church and the poor. However, even as we affirm the good work that has begun, we look towards the future. In reimagining the charism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we dare to ask, in what new ways is the charism waiting to be unleashed?

We begin that conversation by going to the beginning. There is an evolution of understanding which moves from supporting an 'engaged laity' to recognizing that some feel called to the charism itself, an evolution that occurs over a period of time in the Congregation. Father Marcello Zago, OMI, while he was Superior General, was an insightful proponent of such a shift. In a series of speeches given throughout the Congregation in the 1990's to Oblate and Associate groups, he expanded upon the idea that Associates share in the Oblate charism for the purpose of mission. "For the Oblates, promoting lay association means promoting the mission of evangelization, as St. Eugene intended it and, in an integral way, as the Church is asking of us today,"<sup>22</sup> he wrote.

As we read the texts of those speeches, their relevance is striking. "The challenges of the new evangelization and of the first evangelization, especially here in the West, will not be resolved by the Church without the commitment of lay people,"<sup>23</sup> Father General told one assembly. He knew the importance of the lay role,

Evangelization in our times cannot be accomplished exclusively by chosen groups of religious. It must be done together with the laity. I would even say that lay people could better and more effectively reach out to those distant from the Church and to non-Christians.<sup>24</sup>

Fr. General Zago was aware that the laity exercise such an influence, not because they are sent by the hierarchy, nor because they work in the name of the hierarchy, but because they are the Church by virtue of their Baptism. His promotion of Association shows a fidelity to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, and a discerning reading of the signs of the times.

## SOME HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The history of the Congregation's developing relationship with laity and associates is provided in the article 'Laity' in the *Dictionary of Oblate Values*.<sup>25</sup> Here it is necessary to provide only a brief overview.

Close connections between Oblates and the laity have always been part of the Oblate charism, starting with St. Eugene himself. Father Frank Santucci OMI outlines the many ways Eugene manifested this intimacy in his article "Close to the People" *Eugene de Mazenod, Man, Missionary and Bishop*.<sup>26</sup> Mentioned are Eugene's willingness to speak in the local dialect whenever needed, his friendly relationships with people, seen in his relationships, for example, with the fishwives and the dockworkers, and his closeness to the people of his diocese, witnessed by the affectionate and pastoral letters he wrote while Bishop of Marseilles.

Furthermore, St. Eugene had an instinctive awareness that all the baptized were called to holiness, and that each should be exercising his or her gifts in service to the Church and to the world. We see, for instance, in his 1813 Lenten sermon at the Madeleine, that it is with eyes of love that he looks upon these marginalized men and women in order to point out to them their dignity as sons and daughters of God. We hear in that sermon a foretaste of *Lumen Gentium*: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood," he tells the people, urging them to turn to Christ.

In this, he understood Vatican II's universal call to holiness: "We must teach people to be human, then Christian, then saints,"<sup>27</sup> he tells his Oblates. His desire was for all to know Christ as he did and to respond as he did. To that end, he formed the various sodalities; identified community leaders to witness during parish missions, and with the Oblates, set up reconciliation tribunals in mission towns to help heal community wounds. In a word, he wanted people to be involved, be connected and to live their baptismal calling.

Oblates have always invited men and women to work closely with and minister with them. Oblates share ministry in parishes, schools, retreat centres, wherever they are. Truly when Fr. Frank Santucci OMI talks about the Oblate family, it is a rich and varied reality.

After Vatican II however, and with an expert reading of the signs of the times, there emerged in the Oblate congregation an awareness that

lay people were feeling called to something more than simply ‘working along-side’ the Oblates. There was an expressed desire from some to ‘share the charism.’ *Missionaries in Today’s World* devoted an entire chapter to the laity, treating their mission in the Church in a general way, but with a distinct sensitivity to collaboration. Chapter IV “*Mission with the Laity*,” Articles 68-85 recognized how important it is to look with the laity for new forms of evangelization adapted to today’s needs and being especially attentive to the aspirations and demands of women regarding their place in the world and in the Church.<sup>28</sup>

*Witnessing as Apostolic Community* supported *Missionaries* and encouraged new ways of associating with the laity. It also made the significant statement, “We are not the owners of our charism; it belongs to the Church. And so we are happy to see that lay persons who are called by God want to share it.”<sup>29</sup> Articles 39 – 44 promoted active development of Association across the Congregation, calling it a ‘priority’ for the Congregation.<sup>30</sup>

Four years after *Witnessing* was written, a decisive step was taken. The ‘*Aix Congress for Laity*’ was held, the first international gathering of Lay Associates and Oblates. From May 18 to 21, 1996, thirty-two lay men and women and eleven Oblates from each of the Oblate regions, came together in the house where the Oblates were founded. The resulting ‘*Aix Document*’<sup>31</sup> has become a charter document within the Congregation, setting out the Associate’s identity and presenting steps to create and support Associate groups throughout the Oblate world.

A further significant step occurred in 1998 at the General Chapter where, for the first time, laity were invited to speak at a plenary session. Ten lay representatives, from each Oblate region, prepared an intervention where they told capitulars, among other things, “*Your charism makes us live.*” Chapter delegates responded enthusiastically, amending Rule 27 to become Rule 37a, where it was officially recognized that lay people share in the charism of Saint Eugene de Mazenod, “... in a spirit of communion and reciprocity amongst themselves and with the Oblates.” It further named the reality that some lay people were gathering in associations and it called upon Oblate Provinces and Delegations to, “foster the development of such associations.”<sup>32</sup>

According to then Father General, Wilhelm Steckling, OMI,

The new rule has as its goal to better express the actual thrust in the Church, focusing on the laity and the appeal from certain men and women to be allowed to have a deeper and more active involvement with their dioceses or a closer cooperation with religious groups such as missionary congregations.<sup>33</sup>

Subsequent years saw a commitment in the Congregation to continue developing Association in the spirit of the Aix Congress and the Chapter documents. Lay representatives for Associates continued to be invited to address General Chapters, International Congresses were held and various Commissions of Associates and Oblates appointed.

In 2010, members of the 2007-2010 Oblates and Associates Commission addressed the 35<sup>th</sup> General Chapter. Mr. Vincenzo Teodori, one member, offered a summary of the findings of the three years of the Commission's work: "In examining the existing forms of collaboration among the Oblates and laity across the congregation," he stated, "the Commission discovered a common spirit which extended across the various cultures and environments." The spirit that united everyone, Mr. Teodori explained, was,

... a request from the laity for a closer communion with the Oblates, a communion characterized by a co-responsible sharing in the mission of evangelization of the most abandoned, one which shows our complementary vocations.<sup>34</sup>

Commission members went on to challenge the Chapter delegates, "Can you see the laity as partners with whom together you face the challenges of evangelization in different cultures, and with whom you find the most effective solutions?"<sup>35</sup> They finished with several concrete proposals for realizing a closer connection between Oblates and Associates.

The capitulars' response expressed an appreciation and support for the Associates, acknowledging the 'voluntary, complementary and co-responsible role that lay groups and Associates assume in the Congregation's missionary endeavors,'<sup>36</sup> as well as the Associates' desire to participate more fully in the Oblate charism and mission. They invited Associates to live the charism as enunciated at the Aix Congress, and urged all Oblate units to work together with Associates for further development and evaluation.<sup>37</sup>

## DEFINING ASSOCIATES: THE AIX CONGRESS ON THE LAITY

Even as Association developed in different ways throughout the Congregation, a common denominator has been a willingness to accept the Aix Congress and the document produced there as a touchstone for defining Associates.

The Aix document begins by defining the ‘Lay Associate,’

In response to a call from Christ, Lay Associates live their baptism, enlightened as they are by the charism of Eugene de Mazenod. Animated by a family spirit, they share, among themselves and with Oblates, the same spirituality and missionary outlook.<sup>38</sup>

Lay Associates are further described as being ‘impassioned’ for Christ, and for Mission, and as having a deep love for the Church. They maintain a ‘living link’ with the Oblates, i.e. a community connection, which acknowledges their need for one other. Between Oblates and Associates is a living relationship of reciprocity characterized by openness, trust and respect for each other’s vocation.

Further identifying with the main characteristics of St. Eugene’s charism, the Aix document describes how Lay Associates are drawn to serve the church by going to the most abandoned, being close to people, being people of prayer, all done in close relationship with Mary.

In the Aix definition, the distinctive element that delineates Lay Associates from other members of the Oblate family and the one that brings them into communion with the Oblates is the sense of being called to share the Oblate charism. The connection is more than simply shared tasks. There is something deeper here, something which Father General Zago describes as a sharing of charism, mission, and community for the purpose of ministry.<sup>39</sup>

Simply put, it is not about Oblates hiring people to work with them, or even inviting them to work along-side them. Instead, it is to recognize that Oblates and Associates share a common calling and a shared inspiration: that of the spirituality and charism of St. Eugene. It certainly is lived in different vocations, religious and lay, but it arises from the same source and calls us to the same thing: mission.

The key developments that define Association, Father General Zago pointed out, are these: Association is:

- a movement from Oblates and laity being ‘cooperators’ to Oblates and laity being fellow disciples of Christ, in the spirit of Eugene.
- a transition from lay dependency on Oblates to a true sharing in decision-making and the execution of plans.
- a move from external support to cooperation, where laity support Oblates not only through prayer or financial assistance but by cooperating in the apostolate.
- a movement from cooperation on ‘doing’ to a communion in ‘being.’ It is a ‘doing’ that sees shared ministry is not enough; this is a call for the baptized to share the spirit, the motivation, and the life of the Oblates.<sup>40</sup>

The Aix document calls for support and encouragement of Associate groups, but also recommends openness with regard to structures. It warns about being premature in trying to define a single model or form. There is the sense of wanting to see what might evolve if the Spirit were free in creating this emerging reality.

The Aix Congress document guided the development of Association within the Congregation and that is certainly true in the Province of OMI Lacombe Canada.

### THE CANADIAN EXPERIENCE

The development of Association in Canada mirrors that within the congregation in that there has been a gradual development and a deepening of understanding over time. In some ways, we have ‘lived our way’ into the reality we are now experiencing.

In 1996, at the time of the Aix Congress, there were six English-speaking Oblate Provinces in Canada. Each had its own way of being connected to the laity, and each had varying degrees of interest in taking up the invitation of the Aix Congress to develop Association. As a result, over the following years there were very different approaches taken with laity, with some Provinces having very active involvement of Associates, and others very little or none at all.

OMI Lacombe Canada was formed in 2003 from the six Provinces, and it was seen as an opportunity for a refounding of both apostolic and community life. Association was seen as part of that refounding: one of the four ‘particular dimensions’ underlying the new Province was

‘providing for the more active presence and life of associates within the community.’<sup>41</sup> The Preamble to the Statutes states: “We actively promote the participation of women and men who share the charism and mission of St. Eugene de Mazenod.”<sup>42</sup> Attentive to the currents within the Church, Article 5 of their Statutes states:

The Oblate charism, a gift of the Spirit, is lived in a variety of ways. According to circumstances,.. persons who are not vowed members of the Congregation may share in the life of both the local and province community. Lacombe Province encourages the sharing of its life and mission with those who are called to live the spirit of St. Eugene de Mazenod.<sup>43</sup>

With this in mind, OMI Lacombe Canada worked to make Association a Provincial reality. The five local Districts of Lacombe were encouraged and supported in their efforts to promote and foster association in their area. Over time, building on the existing relationships and the variety of expressions, a common identity for Associates was named and implemented. Policies and common practices were accepted and formation materials are being developed. District Animators, an Oblate and an Associate, serve in each District to support and foster association. Further support is offered by a part-time Provincial Animator and an Associates’ Commission. Currently there are over sixty Associates in Associate groups across Canada.

OMI Lacombe Oblate Associates take their identity from the Aix Congress. While there is some variety in their lived experience in the districts, there are five common identifiers which they share.

The first identifier, and the one that underlies the other four, is the sense of being called to be an Associate through the charism [Aix 1]. The call is experienced as an invitation to live the Oblate charism intentionally in service to the marginalized, and in connection with the Oblate community. Association is, for Associates, the way they live their baptismal identity. It encompasses a deep love for St. Eugene and the Oblates as they have come to be known through formation and lived experience.

Making my commitment and becoming an Oblate Associate of OMI Lacombe Province has been a very concrete step on my journey. Walking in relationship with the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, shar-



ing in the charism of St. Eugene de Mazenod and embracing a deliberate way of living is how I am able to respond to God's call to me.  
Oblate Associate Ms. E.R., Ottawa, ON, Canada.

The call to the charism and Association can come from a variety of sources: prayer, Scripture, other people and events. It might arise from within the individual or be a result of close relationships to Oblates and their ministries. It is always discerned in connection with the local community and the District Animators.

A second identifier for the OMI Lacombe Associate is the connection to Oblate community. Aix describes it as a 'living link' [Aix 5,6,7], but notes that it is essential.

In Canada, this 'living link' is expressed in a variety of ways. Most notably, it is not about Oblates and Associates living together under one roof, although this is not precluded. Rather, the desire is for a shared faith and life which supports and enriches both groups. Commonly this happens in the 'Basic Oblate Community [BOC].' BOC's are the living cells of the Province, the foundational unit where Oblates gather, either in a geographic area or in an intentional community. In many of the BOC's, Associates are members and they meet regularly and take part in the BOC's activities and life. Where BOC's are not available to Associates, the Associates meet in their own groups. Always, the purpose is for deepening the relationships and communion, to the mutual benefit of both.

As we strive to live our lives in a manner faithful to our baptismal call, we have found companionship and love among those who have dedicated their own lives to doing the same according to the charism of Eugene de Mazenod. We truly believe that, with God's help, we can create a society in which justice, peace, love, and forgiveness are commonplace.... Our hope, as a family, is to instil in others the hope and love inspired in us by the charism of St. Eugene; and we pray that, with God's grace, we are able to do so in the company of others who are driven by that same charism. Oblate Associates M. and D. L. and family, Saskatoon, SK, Canada.

Further connections take place as well. In most Districts, the Associates participate in retreats and assemblies, and delegates for the Associates attend Provincial Convocations. Most Districts have Associates

serving on District Leadership teams, and lay advisors, often Associates, sit on the Provincial Leadership team. In all cases, the Associates serve in an advisory capacity, always respecting the boundaries of internal Oblate activity and concerns.

Communication is fostered by Associates receiving all local and provincial communiqués, except those reserved strictly for Oblate business, and by Associates being listed in local and Provincial Directories. On the newly designed OMI Lacombe website, Associates have a dedicated page.

Both the Oblates and Associates have found that their shared life together has been mutually enriching. At the beginning of the Triennium process, Fr. Ken Forster, OMI Lacombe's Provincial, asked the Oblates to consider inviting Associates to participate in the Triennium faith-sharing groups: "The presence of our Associates may be a catalyst to provoke a deeper sharing among us," Father Ken wrote, and indeed, many found it to be so. Associates, it was noted, brought a new level of depth to these gatherings so that they became graced moments of sharing struggles, insights and faith.

I am always encouraged to have the associates with us, since I am a person who likes community and, when in authority, I like to work as a team. And here is where I always appreciate our ASSOCIATES. They are such good support to us as Oblates and I feel that we, the Oblates, would be much poorer if we did not have the Associates with us. I find that they give new life where it could have grown old... I can honestly say we, the present Oblates here... would be lost without the help, support and prayers of the Associates. Rev. Bill S., OMI, Saskatoon, SK, Canada.

A third constitutive element of Canadian Association is the call to service [Aix, 2,3,4]. Like vowed Oblates, Oblate Associates have a heart for the most abandoned and for those on the margins. Service takes shape in the Associate's life through a commitment to live the charism in some visible way that unites "head, heart, hands and feet," especially in service to the poor.

Mrs. L.L is an Oblate Associate in St. Albert, AB, Canada. She has been a volunteer chaplain at the Women's Correctional Centre for almost nine years. Each time she goes to the prison, she deliberately

wears the small Oblate cross that Associates are given when they make their commitment. The response from the women inmates has been remarkable. Many comment on it and ask her about it. One woman reached up to grasp it and gazing at it, she breathed out, “It’s so beautiful.” As L. wears the cross throughout the prison, she feels a real connection with St. Eugene, his prison ministry, and his love for the most abandoned.

Association recognizes that ministry and service are broader than being involved in Oblate works or even Church related tasks. The Associates’ service is most often in the world, so while some Associates do work in diocesan offices, parishes, and retreat centres, others work or volunteer in prisons, schools, and offices. Some are chaplains, others catechists, while still others are care givers for their families or visitors to the sick and the elderly. Some help in their parish, or volunteer with local food banks or St. Vincent de Paul societies; some are advocates for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, and others offer prayer ministry and support. The common understanding however is that wherever they go and in whatever they do, they take the Oblate charism with them.

The fourth identifier or constitutive element of Associates in Canada is their commitment to formation. Their desire is to be formed and transformed unto Christ, as was St. Eugene. They know their need to grow in their understanding and knowledge of St. Eugene and the mission and spirituality of the Oblates. So, before becoming an Associate, each engages in an initial formation process over a period of time. Once they make their commitment as an Associate, they make a further pledge to on-going formation. “Ongoing formation in the charism of Eugene and the mission and spirituality of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the life of the Oblate community is asked of Oblate Associates.”<sup>44</sup> This is usually done in the gatherings and the Basic Oblate Communities.

In learning and studying about St. Eugene and the Oblate charism to the poor and abandoned I have discovered and embraced a more intentional focus in my personal relationships, activities and ministries. I haven’t so much had “to do more” but rather I am learning day by day to deepen more prayerfully with an Oblate heart what I already do. This spirit-led awareness has been opening up more

gratitude, patience, freedom and joy in my life and ministries. Oblate Associate, Mrs. L.L., Edmonton, AB, Canada.

The fifth identifier for Oblate Associates of Canada is the common commitment which they make, renewable annually for the first three years and subsequently for three year periods. This public commitment is done in the presence of Oblates and Associates and made only after formation and discernment. It requires the approval of the District Animators, and both District and Provincial Leadership Teams. The commitment is to the Province but is lived primarily at the District level.

As a sign of their commitment, the Associates receive a small Oblate Cross. In receiving this uniquely Oblate symbol, Oblate Associates look to Cn 63: “The Oblate cross which is received at perpetual profession is a constant reminder of the love of the Saviour who wishes to draw all hearts to himself and sends us out as his co-workers.” While the Oblate Associate’s commitment is not a perpetual profession, it is a freely chosen decision to live, as Eugene did and the Oblates do, under the power of the cross, serving as witnesses to it.

[O]ur [commitment] celebration was truly a gift and grace for me. I was filled with joy and such a strong sense of completion after years of haphazardly following along with the Oblates, not knowing if there would ever be something large enough to hold my spirit in commitment. This was definitely the kind of commitment I’ve been longing for... Everyone’s faces glowed on receiving their crosses.... That was perhaps the most moving and meaningful part of the celebration. Oblate Associate, Ms. L.L., St. Albert, AB, Canada.

A final element connects the Associates: they are people of prayer. A desire to deepen their spiritual life, and to be supported by a community in doing so, is a powerful draw for them, and it is St. Eugene’s spirituality that shapes them. The personal encounter with Christ; the experience of God’s merciful, saving love; the centrality of the Cross; a love for the Church; a hunger for holiness; a heart for community, a devotion to Mary: these are some of the Oblate elements that resonate in their hearts. They desire, furthermore, to share their experiences where they can, to “*give witness to the living presence of Christ in the midst of the world.*” [Aix 2]. Our Associates make a commitment to both per-

sonal and communal prayer. There is a special and deep love for the practice of oration.

In a world where philosopher Simone Weil can write, “We, in our materialistic culture, are in danger of spiritual starvation, not because there is no bread but because we have persuaded ourselves we are not hungry,” Associates know their ‘bone-deep’ need of God and they witness to that in their lives. It is a driving motivation for them, to deepen their prayer and faith life and to have support in doing so. In Canada, this is fostered by their participation in Oblate retreats, novenas and feast days.

The Oblate Associate of Canada, then, is called to the charism, and lives that call in communion with the Oblates and other Associates, and in mission and service to the Church and the world. He or she undertakes formation in the charism, both initial and on-going, and shares with other Associates a commitment to living as an Oblate Associate. Association is a pathway to a deeper faith and prayer life and a more committed way of living one’s baptismal vocation.

In embracing Association as a Provincial reality, the Oblates of OMI Lacombe Canada have committed themselves to journeying in a new way with some of the baptized. There have been challenges and even resistance over the years, but steady progress has been made in the hearts and minds of the Oblates. Evidence for this progress was provided at the Province’s recent Convocation, April, 2015. Approximately twenty Associates were present, and they participated fully. Many expressions of appreciation for their presence and commitment came from the attending Oblates. There was an ease and comfort with each other’s presence and an appreciation of the gifts each brought. Such experiences bode well for the future of Oblate Associates in Canada.

I’m deeply thankful for my rich experiences of community and ministry over these years, always highlighted by mutual collaboration with laity. These relationships have nourished me and given me an ever deeper appreciation of our Oblate charism, a gift to the Church at large since our founder’s canonization.... I believe the Spirit, in our time, is calling men and women to be integrally involved in the renewal of our Oblate life and mission; to be creative in birthing new expressions of our Oblate charism, new models of community

living, and new responses to current needs. Rev. R. B. OMI, Ottawa, ON, Canada.

## INTO THE FUTURE

The purpose of this Congress is to consider how St. Eugene de Mazenod's charism, a gift to the Church, can and should be lived into the future; how it can, in creative and in life-giving ways, respond to new ecclesial and global realities. With regard to Oblate Association, there are tremendous possibilities but also tremendous challenges. We must ask, if Association truly is a Spirit-led response to the signs of the times and the needs of the church, how do the Oblates engage it today and into the future? How do they respond to the request, "Give us a portion of your spirit?" and how do they reach out, "Let us call, invite and challenge laity to share the Oblate charism?" What creative, daring steps might Oblates be willing to take in reimagining their charism and their Congregation with regard to Associates?

In considering these questions, I will focus on four particular areas: sharing the charism; stretching the boundaries of community; witnessing to a new facet of the Church; and enhancing our missionary efforts.

### *Sharing the charism*

Oblate Association fundamentally is about the charism. While acknowledging that all the baptized are called to be missionary, Association goes one step further to say that there are men and women who have felt the Spirit call them to carry out that role, inspired, formed and guided by an Oblate heart and spirit. Furthermore, they want to do so in relationship with the Oblate community.

The tremendous possibility is that the Oblate charism will be released into the world in new and perhaps astonishing ways through new agents, the Associates: "O, the places you will go," suggests Dr. Seuss albeit in a slightly difference context.<sup>45</sup> To introduce all people to Christ's saving love, to proclaim to them the joy of the gospel, is this not what the evangelizing heart of the Oblate desires? Is it not possible

that, as we look to the future, increasingly it will be Associates who will do so?

The tremendous challenge is whether or not Oblates will actively encourage and support such a thing. The essential question is this: do Oblates really believe that their charism can be shared, as *Vita Consecrata* suggests, with the laity? Can the spirit of St. Eugene be poured out on men and women who remain in a 'lay' state, do not take religious vows, and do not live the evangelical counsels? Can we even imagine how a clerical congregation of priests and brothers welcomes lay people into their world?

Furthermore, if Oblates do believe the charism can be shared, how willing are they to do so? Are they eager to invite men and women into their lives in the relationship called Association?

The question needs to be asked because various General Chapters have recognized a certain reluctance among the Oblates to embrace this kind of connection with laity. *Missionaries in Today's World* speaks of inviting lay people to be full partners in evangelization but goes on to say that, this will require, "a conversion of heart, thought, and action, as well as greater trust, openness and willingness to share power and responsibility with the laity."<sup>46</sup> Six years later, at the next General Chapter, *Witnessing as Apostolic Community* warns that the aspirations of lay people are often, "more comprehensive than our response."<sup>47</sup> They then comment, "Without the conversion and commitment of each individual Oblate, we risk missing an opportunity given to us by the Spirit."<sup>48</sup>

Again though, six years later, capitulars at the 33<sup>rd</sup> General Chapter found it necessary to write,

"It will take time to overcome the resistance and the fears that can easily arise in us in the face of this new reality; it will take time to support and sustain those Oblates more directly engaged in the common journey and learn from their experience; to cultivate the dialogue and reciprocity needed between the laity and ourselves in order to share with each other how the charism of Eugene de Mazenod gives us life."<sup>49</sup>

Certainly, we know that progress has been made in the years since those Chapters, but it is naïve to think that each and every Oblate welcomes the idea of the laity knocking on his door asking for a share of

the Oblate spirit. Truthfully, Oblates can bar the doors, with responses ranging from paying lip service to the idea to outright refusal to engage. Oblates can claim they have no time, no energy or no resources; it is easy enough to maintain a status quo.

What then of a charism that desires to be shared? A religious congregation is the privileged carrier of its charism but not, as the Oblates have noted, the possessors of it. The Congregation carries the history, the documents, the traditions, the unique stories, and the experiences of Oblates as the charism is lived over time. If members of the Congregation are not willing to share it, it will not be shared. It is thus a serious query: on a personal level, how willing are Oblates to share their charism?

A further question arises: how is the charism made known? One Canadian Oblate has asked, “The Oblates are close to the people, but how close are the people to the charism?” In order for people to come forward because they are drawn by the charism, the charism needs to be both known and attractive.

In a recent presentation, Father General Louis Lougen OMI pointed out that what appeals to people about Pope Francis, i.e., his approachability, his heart for the poor, his emphasis on God’s mercy, his simplicity of life and style and his warmth and compassion, is what also appeals to people about the Oblates.<sup>50</sup> That these qualities could be used to describe St. Eugene and are descriptive of the charism, is perhaps not as widely known. In many places St. Eugene still seems to be a rather unknown saint in the Church’s rich communion, despite the canonization which brought him onto the world stage. But it seems that once people do hear about him, they are drawn to him for all the reasons listed above. Given the high media profile of Pope Francis, which has translated into a renewed global interest in all things Catholic, there are perhaps new possibilities for making St. Eugene and his charism better known. Oblates and Associates have a role to play in making the charism accessible.

There is both possibility and challenge regarding Association when we look at vocations. We rightly pray fervently for vocations to the Oblate Congregation, but it usually means vocations to the vowed religious life of Oblate priest or brother. Associates feel a call to live their baptismal call inspired and shaped St. Eugene’s charism. Is this not the



very definition of vocation? An increase in the number of Oblate Associates would spread the Oblate charism in missionary service to more people and in more places. Surely this is what we desire? How then do we foster and promote vocations to Oblate Association? Can we speak of a vocations culture that includes calling people to be Associates? What might a vocations strategy look like in that situation?

Connected to that is the issue of formation - for both Associates and Oblates. The goal of formation for Associates is not to re-create them as 'mini-religious.' Rather, Associates' formation respects their lay state, knowing they live the charism in family relationships and in the world. Our understanding of how the charism is lived in the lay state is still evolving, another case of 'living our way' into the reality. Included in the formation though, certainly will be processes that allow Associates to grow in their knowledge of, and relationship to, St. Eugene, the Oblates and the charism, as well as to understand and deepen their understanding of the spirituality and theology of laity within the Church. Rule 37a promises that that Oblate Provinces and Delegations, in fostering Associations, will "contribute to the formation of the laity by giving them access to the sources of the charism." Concretely, we need to ask how this is being done across the Oblate world.

With regard to formation for Oblates, Aix 3.2.1 declares that formation for the Oblates is necessary in regard to the theology of the laity and Vatican II ecclesiology.<sup>51</sup> In creating new ways of being in relationship, Oblates and Associates both need to understand the invitation of the Spirit, looking at what is possible and what is not, at what is desirable and what is not. Formation for both is key. There is possibility and challenge in developing materials and processes for Associate' formation, and in inviting Oblates to form themselves to welcome and walk with Associates.

Finally to reach men and women in order to share the charism with them, the Oblates must be willing to go 'out': *'We are sent'* is part of their genetic code. St. Eugene went out among the people, beyond the walls of the institutional church to the dockside, tenements, back streets and prisons. He sought people out, especially the outcasts, and he called them into a new dignity and life. Oblates have a heart for the marginalized, calling them to their dignity, to faith, and to holiness. Might they not also call them into the closer relationship of shared faith, life and

spirit? Might they not also invite them to Association, and thereby empower and form them to take up their rightful roles and responsibilities in the church? Are they prepared to call people to share a portion of their spirit?

What personal and communal conversion might be required, what change of thought, heart and action is needed in order to truly see, welcome and walk with Associates as bearers of the charism? To believe that giving a portion of your spirit is possible is one thing. To risk doing so: there is where the new and the daring is to be found!

### *Stretching the Boundaries of Community*

There are tremendous possibilities and challenges to be found in the way Oblate Association stretches the boundaries of community.

To be Oblate is to be in community. St. Eugene knew that it was the community life of the Oblates that would sustain them, both personally and corporately. It would be in their communion that they would find fraternal support in their personal pursuit of holiness as well as encouragement in their various missions and ministries. The Oblates were never intended to be lone-ranger style ministers,

We acknowledge the limits of the individual and the fruitfulness of community. We can be effective evangelizers only to the extent that our compassion is collective. . .[W]e give ourselves... as a united missionary corps.<sup>52</sup>

In asking for a portion of the Oblate spirit, Associates are asking for a sharing in Oblate community. Without being prescriptive, and while respecting the freedom and rights of both parties, Association assumes a deep connectedness with the Oblates, with a bias towards inclusivity. Such communities go beyond Oblates and Associates working alongside each other to a real commitment to sharing faith, prayer, mission and life. It requires a stretching of heart and mind to cross the boundaries of Oblate/lay, man/woman, to forge such bonds of communion. However, where they are in place, they are life-giving: “We already know from experience that such a sharing in our life and mission is a source of life, dynamism and fecundity for both Oblates and lay persons alike.”<sup>53</sup>

The tremendous possibility is that in creating such communities, Oblates and Associates are a prophetic sign for the world.<sup>54</sup> In an increasingly fragmented and isolated world, marked by individualism and factionism, to bring together men and women, religious and lay, in an authentic community, is itself a powerful sign of God's intention.<sup>55</sup> When Oblates welcome Associates into their communities, when they cross the barriers which separate us, in a spirit of mutuality, respect and cooperation, they model the unity of heart, mind and spirit that God desires for all God's people. It is a witness the world desperately needs.

The Aix Congress document describes the community connection between Oblates and Associates as a 'living link' but leaves open how this link is to be lived out. What is clear is that, for Associates, the community, as for the Oblates, is in view of personal holiness and mission. In taking up their roles as evangelizers, in service and mission, it is in Oblate communities, among and with Oblates and fellow Associates, that the Associates find empowerment and support for their service.

It is a support acutely needed: Pope Francis reminds us in *Evangelii Gaudium* that there are places where the laity are not yet sufficiently living the roles they to which they are called.<sup>56</sup> Associates are not looking to the Oblates for specific jobs or ministries, although either may evolve, but they are looking for a community where their essential dignity is respected and their mission is supported and encouraged. Oblates have a unique opportunity in their communities to empower Associates in their quest to offer their gifts in service to the church.

The challenges that arise for the Oblates around community and shared life with Associates strike close to home. How do Oblates and Associates share life while respecting the appropriate boundaries of each? What forms might that life take? *Witnessing as Apostolic Community* speaks of 'creating structures of communion that are at the service of mission,'<sup>57</sup> and we ask how well we are doing this? What is already in place and what more might be needed?

### *Witnessing to a New Facet of the Church*

Oblates often speak of going to the edges, of crossing borders. Oblate Association has the tremendous potential to break down some of the boundaries found in the Church, thereby revealing a new facet of the Church.

There is within our global church a conserving movement that wants to reassert the clerical and the hierarchical. As noted, Pope Francis warns that certain structures and clericalism create barriers and boundaries for lay people, effectively excluding real lay participation. Oblate Association speaks of an alternate spirit and a different lived reality: relationships of mutuality and reciprocity among Associates and Oblates. It is not divided between those who form and those who are formed. All are involved in the process of mutual growth in faithfulness to their Baptism.<sup>58</sup> As the most fundamental gift which we all receive, we are all responsible for living fully our baptismal calling. Together, we help one another to become more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

In Oblate Association, the divisions between cleric/religious and lay are broken down. The relationship between Oblates and Oblate Associate is one of partnership and co-responsibility. In this it stands over and against excessive clericalism, top-down structures, the dominating use of power, and the barriers that leave laity on the outside, powerless and voiceless. It is a model of church that is non-hierarchical in calling all the baptized, religious, cleric, and lay, to cooperate in the life and mission of the church, and one where people serve according to their gifts. Oblates and Associates do this with the belief that calling the laity to mission is not a temporary solution to a perceived crisis in priestly vocations but a true unfolding of the role of all the baptized.

In modelling this ecclesiology, the Oblates invite Associates into more meaningful roles within the Church itself, a movement supported by Vatican II.<sup>59</sup> While the laity's primary mission is in the world, promoting the gospel and building of the Kingdom, they are nonetheless also responsible for the life of the Church. There is a real danger in considering the life of the Church as the responsibility of the clergy, while mission in the world is the task of the lay people. A true 'shared spirit' uses the language of co-responsibility, where religious and laity, Oblates and Associates, cooperate in the life and mission of the Church. Different gifts, charisms and ministries of all baptized peoples are enlisted to build the Kingdom - in the Church and in the world.

We see this especially with regard to Oblate Association as it contributes to breaking down for women the barriers they face in the Church. Pope Francis concedes that in many cases, women have not been able to take up their rightful roles: "I readily acknowledge that

many women share pastoral responsibilities with priests... but we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church.”<sup>60</sup> He further admits that women’s voices need to be heard not only in the life of society but in the various settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures.

It is a concern that the Oblates have taken up.

We shall be attentive to the aspirations of women and the demands they are making in respect to their place in the world and the Church. We shall support their participation in decision-making in the areas of pastoral ministry and mission.<sup>61</sup>

In Canada, there are many personal stories from women Associates who have been empowered and supported by the Oblates. Many say it is within Association and with the Oblates that they find a home in a Church which too often marginalizes them. The Oblates have encouraged women to study theology at graduate levels, have invited them into ministry with them, called and formed them as Associates, and given them leadership roles in their institutions and on their Leadership Teams. Within Oblate Association, women have found themselves treated with respect and invited to take up their role as disciples and evangelizers.

The tremendous possibility in this is that Oblates and Associates together reveal ‘a new facet’ of the church.

Where these forms of association already exist, they are a positive influence on the faithfulness of persons and communities to the gospel. They therefore affect the quality of our witness and reveal a new facet of the Church. Together we are in a more credible way prophets of Christ’s Passover, from this Passover a world based on the equality and dignity of each human person is born.<sup>62</sup>

To create faith communities where power is shared, relationships are equal and mutual, and where all are called to use their gifts in service, is to create a church that is a more credible witness to Christ. It is a tremendous opportunity indeed!

There are tremendous challenges arising from this thought. It will require from the Oblates a willingness to share power and authority, a relinquishing of the ‘special’ status that so often accompanies the cleri-

cal role. Such an emptying is never easy. It means a willingness to cross the boundaries that too often exist between hierarchy and laity. There will also perhaps be an additional challenge in certain parts of the world in providing genuine support for the legitimate demands of women. There are still too many places where women's rights are not supported in the society, so empowering them in the Church becomes additionally difficult – but consequently even more prophetic.

#### ENHANCING OUR MISSIONARY EFFORTS

“All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal [...] if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion”<sup>63</sup> Even as we claim that Association is about sharing the charism, we assert in the same breath that it is for the purpose of mission. Associates come to the Oblates because they have been drawn by the Spirit; they are searching for a way to live their faith more deeply, desiring to serve God, the Church and the world.

There is a pertinent story told about Brother Anthony Kowalczyk, OMI, a Polish-Canadian Oblate [1866-1947].

As a young man, the Polish-born Anthony worked as a laborer in Germany, but he had long felt a call to the religious life. Upon being told to try the Oblates, he went knocking on the door of their Novice House. The Novice Master opening the door and seeing the simply dressed laborer, said to Anthony, “And what do you want? I suppose you are looking for a job?” Anthony answered simply, “I was told here I could serve God”.<sup>64</sup>

“I was told here I could serve God.” It is a line which resonates in the Associate's heart. As the millennium unfolds and we critically survey the global situation, the new evangelization invites us to re-examine everything. Globalization has shone a spotlight on the ‘poor with their many faces,’ as well as the prevailing forces which cause their plight. More than ever we need the visions and voices of prophets who stand over and against such forces, prophets willing to speak truth to power and foster action on behalf of justice. Gospel witnesses are desperately needed to proclaim Good News.

Oblates and Oblate Associates are called to be those gospel witnesses. Oblates have embraced the link between evangelization and

kingdom building: “Action on behalf of justice, peace and the integrity of creation is an integral part of evangelization,”<sup>65</sup> Rule 9a tells us. The Oblate desire is to bring the Good News of God’s love to the world, to raise in men and women an awareness of their dignity, to work against all that oppresses or demeans, and to do especially among the marginalized and voiceless.

It is a desire at the heart of the charism: to go to, walk with, and live among the least, to be bearers and proclaimers of Good News there. St. Eugene knew himself to be sent, driven, and drawn to proclaim Christ to all, especially those on the outside. To the domestics and artisans, the prisoners and the prisoners of war, to working men and women, and unemployed tenement dwellers, he wanted them all to know they were God’s beloved. As we look to our world today, we still see the ignored, the forgotten and the rejected. Oblates and Associates take up that call, with a ‘heart’ for the kingdom and a desire to bring it everywhere.

The tremendous opportunity here is to see that Associates carry the charism into the world and in doing so, they expand the Oblate missionary outreach. “The vocation and mission proper to lay faithful is the transformation of worldly structures, to let all human behaviour and activities be informed by the gospel.”<sup>66</sup> Associates, as ‘workers in the vineyard’, are primary agents in this new evangelization. Associates evangelize precisely in their everyday world of family, work and culture. Fired with missionary zeal, their desire is to transform structures and systems that are contrary to gospel values. This kind of evangelizing is not so much about preaching and teaching as it is about working together with all people of good will in order bring about a new world vision, in biblical terms, the reigning of God. Jim Wallis, a prominent First World evangelist, speaks about the impracticality of going into the public sphere with bible verses, dogmas and catechisms. Rather we need compelling arguments which speak to universal human values and the common good.

The tremendous challenge will be in making a shift from seeing laity as passive recipients to seeing them as active collaborators. It will be necessary to form them so they can truly take up their roles as transformers of culture, at once prophetic, provocative and practical.

One of the challenges of Vatican II, still unmet, is to create a laity worthy of the name: “The entire church is missionary,” the Council

tells us, but we are not yet living that reality. As a Church, we still have to make it happen. With two hundred years of missionary experience, might not the Oblates take up that challenge? Could a new mission of the Triennium be intentionally calling laity forward as evangelizers, and forming them unto the Oblate charism as we do so? Might this be one of the *new initiatives* Pope Francis calls for?

## CONCLUSION

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?” “Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied” [2 Kings 2:9].

To ask for a portion of another’s spirit is not to lessen the spirit of the other. Like love, Spirit is not diminished in being shared. Rather, like love, it is in being given away that it grows, expands and is made richer and deeper. For Oblate Associates to request a portion of the Oblate spirit is not to lessen the spirit or the charism of the Oblates. It is not about Associates replacing Oblates. Instead, it is about recognizing that the charism is free to move through the world in new agents, in new places, in new ways.

Such freedom is in the recognition of the dynamic nature of charism itself. A Founder’s charism is supposed to mature, develop and engage the world in new ways. Responsive to the signs of the times and the prompting of the Spirit, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate are willing to reimagine their Founder’s charism as it relates to laity. We look at the trajectory of Association within the Congregation and place it in dialogue with the needs of the Church and we see a graced movement.

St Eugene’s spirit is present in the world today through the Oblates who carry it AND through the Associates who share in it. Oblate Associates and Oblates each carry the charism to where they are called and in the way they are called. The writings of the General Chapters, the growth of Association in Oblate units, but most of all the lived experience of Oblates and Associates across the Congregation witnesses to the authenticity of this phenomenon. Oblates know that ministry, community life and ecclesial witness are enriched when shared with Associates. Thus, they acknowledge“... [O]ur relationship with lay persons is a priority for the future of our Congregation and our religious life.”<sup>67</sup>



In 1 Thessalonians, St. Paul warns the community, “*Do not stifle the Spirit,*” [1 Thess. 5:19]. That he should even need to give such a warning should give us pause. The Spirit, it is true, cannot be stifled forever, but perhaps we can ignore its promptings long enough to make a difference. “I will pour out my Spirit,” God promises, and today Oblates hear Associates ask, “Give us a portion of your spirit.” How and with whom will the Oblates of Mary Immaculate carry their charism into the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

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<sup>1</sup> Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, *Acts of the 32rd General Chapter 1992: Witnessing as Apostolic Community*, (Rome: Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, 1992) # 40.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, # 44.3

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, # 40.

<sup>4</sup> Pope FRANCIS, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life* (Rome: Nov 21, 2014) # 1.

<sup>5</sup> Pope FRANCIS, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Consecrated Persons, and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (Ottawa: CCCB Publications, 2013; reprint, 2014) # 119, 120, 121.

<sup>6</sup> F. AUSTIN, O.P., ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Revised Ed. (United States: Dominican Publications, 1988) The Council affirms the equality of all members of the Church by declaring that “everything that has been said of the people of God is addressed equally to laity, religious and clergy,” *Lumen Gentium* # 30. See also Ch IV, ‘*The Laity*’ in *Lumen Gentium*.

<sup>7</sup> Pope BENEDICT XVI, *Address to 6th Assembly of the International Catholic Action Forum*, [Rome, Aug. 10, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Pope FRANCIS, *ibid*, # 119.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, #120.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, # 103.

<sup>11</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, # 1.

<sup>12</sup> PAUL VI, “Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi”, The Holy See [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html) , #19.

<sup>13</sup> Pope FRANCIS, *ibid*, # 74.

<sup>14</sup> JOHN PAUL II, “*Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrata*,” The Holy See: [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_25031996\\_vita-consecrata.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata.html), March 25, 1996, # 54, 55,56.

<sup>15</sup> M. ZAGO, ‘Lay Associates in the Context of the Church, *Vie Oblate Life* 55/2, (Ottawa: Canada, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Pope FRANCIS, *ibid* # 102.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid* # 102, 103, 104.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid* # 120.

<sup>19</sup> Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, *Acts of the 33<sup>rd</sup> General Chapter: Evangelizing the Poor at the Dawn of the New Millennium*, 1998, (Rome: Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, 1998), # 13.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> Missionary Oblates, *Witnessing*, # 44.2.

<sup>22</sup> M. ZAGO, “Evangelization and Lay Participation on the Oblate Charism”, *Vie Oblate Life* 57/2 (Ottawa: Canada, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>25</sup> M. ZAGO, “*Laity*”, Oblate Dictionary of Values.

<sup>26</sup> F. SANTUCCI, “*Close to the People*” *Eugene de Mazenod, Man, Missionary and Bishop*. Oblate Vie III - 2014/2, pp. 163 – 193.

<sup>27</sup> OMI Constitutions and Rules of the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. (Rome: Grafica Ginette, 2012), Preface.

<sup>28</sup> Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, *Acts of the 31st General Chapter: Missionaries in Today’s World*, 1986, (Rome: Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate) 1986, Chapter 4, # 68-85.

<sup>29</sup> Missionary Oblates, *Witnessing*, # 40.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, # 39.

<sup>31</sup> Congress of Lay Associates, *The Lay Associate’s Identity and Orientations*, Aix-en-Provence, May 18-21, 1996.

<sup>32</sup> OMI Constitutions, *ibid*, Rule 37a

<sup>33</sup> W. STECKLING, with E ALLEAUME, “Partners in Mission Inspired by the Charism of Saint Eugene.” Presentation given at Oblate Lay Associations Congress (Rome 26 – 28 June, 2007), # 2.

<sup>34</sup> Missionary Oblates, Acts of the 35th General Chapter 2010: *Conversion*. (Rome: Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, 2004), Report of Lay Associates, “The Oblate Family: Religious and Lay together, the New Subject of Evangelization?” September 11, 2010, pp 1-12.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>36</sup> Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, *Conversion: C*. “A Declaration of the 35<sup>th</sup> General Chapter to Oblates and Associates,” # 1

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, # 2-7.

<sup>38</sup> Congress of Lay Associates, *ibid*, intro.

<sup>39</sup> M. ZAGO, “Oblates and Laity can Cooperate in the Light of the Charism,” *Vie Oblate Life*, 54/1 1995, # 3.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, # 3

<sup>41</sup> Missionary Oblates of OMI Lacombe Canada, *Statutes*, [Canada) 2003, Preamble.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, Preamble.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, Statute # 5.

<sup>44</sup> Missionary Oblates of OMI Lacombe Canada, (Canada), 2014, Oblate Associates Policy Manual.

<sup>45</sup> Seuss, Dr., *O, The Places You Will Go*, (Random House: New York, 1990).

<sup>46</sup> Missionary Oblates, *Missionaries*, # 74

<sup>47</sup> Missionary Oblates, *Witnessing*, # 44.3.

<sup>48</sup> Missionary Oblates, *ibid*, # 44.7.

<sup>49</sup> Missionary Oblates, *Evangelizing*, # 36.

<sup>50</sup> Lougan, Rev. Louis, OMI, unrecorded talk, OMI Lacombe Canada Convocation, April 15, 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Congress of Lay Associates, *ibid*, Aix 3.2.1

<sup>52</sup> Missionary Oblates, *Witnessing* # 7.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, # 41.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, # 42.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, # 8.

<sup>56</sup> Pope FRANCIS, *Evangelii*, # 102.

<sup>57</sup> Missionary Oblates, *Witnessing*, # 41

<sup>58</sup> Missionary Oblates, *Witnessing*, # 44.2

<sup>59</sup> Flannery, *ibid*, *Apostolicum Actuositatem*. Throughout the decree, the writers affirm the role of the laity is to exercise their apostolate in the church and in the world. See # 10 which describes their participation in ‘church communities.’

<sup>60</sup> Pope FRANCIS, *Evangelii*, # 103.

<sup>61</sup> Missionary Oblates, *Missionaries*, # 79.

<sup>62</sup> Missionary Oblates, *Witnessing*, # 41.

<sup>63</sup> Pope FRANCIS, *Evangelii*, # 27.

<sup>64</sup> P.E. BURTON, *Blacksmith of God* (Canada) 1960, p. 52.

<sup>65</sup> OMI Constitutions, *ibid*, CN 9a.

<sup>66</sup> XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*, 7-28, (October, 2012) Proposition 45.

<sup>67</sup> Missionary Oblates, *Witnessing* # 39.



# Local Section Manila, Philippines

June 30 – July 3, 2015

FRANCIS EFREN C. ZABALA, OMI

There is this story about a bishop who was looking for missionaries to help in the mission work in his diocese. Another bishop advised him to seek help from the bishop of Marseilles: *“Go to Marseilles. There is a bishop there whose Congregation is still small, but the man himself has a heart as big as Saint Paul’s, as big as the world.”* This bishop in Marseilles was none other than Charles Joseph Eugene de Mazenod, the founder of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Even when they were just a small, fledgling group, in the mind and heart of Eugene, his Oblates must respond to the Church’s most urgent need, even far beyond his native France: *“Their ambition will be to encompass in their holy desires the immense breadth of the entire world.”* His words to his Oblates still echo up to this very day: *“Leave nothing undared for the the Kingdom of God.”*

On the eve of the 200th anniversary of the Oblate Congregation, a world-wide Congress on the Oblate Charism took place. The charism of St. Eugene has already traversed the wide expanse of the world. The local meeting alone, held in Manila, attracted representatives from the following Oblate units in the Asia-Oceania region: Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Philippines, Thailand-Laos and Vietnam. And, among the representatives, various nationalities were also to be found: Italian, Polish, Sri Lankan, Thai, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Guatemalan, and Filipino—

each with their various subcultures and backgrounds, speaking other languages and dialects. This was just the local section of the world-wide Congress. If the other sections around the globe, which simultaneously participated in the Congress, would also be taken into account, then it can be said that indeed the Congress on the Charism in Context was a *Pentecost experience*!

Paradoxically, one thing common to Asia-Oceania is its diversity. Yet, all the participants of the Congress, despite their differences, were united in the charism of Eugene de Mazenod. The charism given to Eugene has the power of bringing out unity. Among the participants were veteran missionaries (*ad extra* and *ad intra*), young Oblates, scholastics with vast promise and potentialities, and a lay co-worker and mission partner. There were still others who would have liked to come but, for various reasons, were not able to join the event. From different contexts, conditions, and circumstances, using different lenses and perspectives, each participant shared about the Oblate charism. Among the written texts presented are the following:

- 1 - Four Forms of Dialogue: Planting the Seed, by Fr. Roberto C. Layson, OMI.
- 2 - New Evangelisation According to The Vision of St Eugene De Mazenod: Role of Community (1802-1826), by Daniel Szewc, OMI.
- 3 - Entering Japan with the Heart of St. Eugene, by Hiran Indika, OMI.
- 4 - Experience with Indigenous Peoples and the Oblate Charism, by Rafael Tianero, OMI.
- 5 - Significant Experience of How the Oblates Have Lived Out Their Charism in Various Historical and Cultural Contexts, by Bradley Rozairo, OMI.
- 6 - The Indonesian Oblates History, by Antonius Sussanto, OMI.
- 7 - The Oblate Charism in Laos, by Claudio Bertuccio, OMI.
- 8 - The Oblate Charism: Its Impact on Filipino Oblate Aspirants, by Fr. Ross B. Kapunan, OMI.
- 9 - Quo Vadis?, by Rey Emmanuel Amancio, OMI.

It was a rich and enriching Congress. Some of the topics and themes generated in the event connected with the Oblate charism are: the poor and the most abandoned, *missio ad extra* and *ad intra*, in-

terreligious and intercultural dialogue, inclusion and multiculturality, ministry to Indigenous Peoples, formation work, lay participation and empowerment, New Evangelisation, inculturation, missionary daring and martyrdom, and so on. Based on the presentations and exchanges, an attempt at a synthesis was made (cf. *Congress on the Charism in Context: An Attempt at Synthesis*) and presented to the participants to culminate the event.

So many other gifts have been generated by Eugene's charism. It is inviting, allowing, and empowering other charisms to share and participate in whatever good that it does. For example, in the Congress, it was the charism of Eugene which inspired Fr. Rodel Lopez to use his expertise in modern technology, particularly the computer and the internet, to connect the local Congress to other Charism gatherings world-wide; it was also the same charism which animated Fr. Eduardo Vasquez and his collaborators to use their technical know-how in audio-visual production and documentation as a support for the event; it was the same charism which energized Fr. Federico Labaglay, the Overall Coordinator of the local Congress, to do his work, and so on. May the charism of Eugene continue to remain as God's gift to the world long after the Congress.

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## FOUR FORMS OF DIALOGUE: PLANTING THE SEED

ROBERTO C. LAYSON, OMI

“**E**xtra Ecclesiam, nullas salus.” This was the theology that dominated Catholic teaching for many centuries. Outside the Church, there is no salvation. The teaching reflected a triumphalistic attitude of the Church which excluded non-Catholics from salvation unless they were baptized into the Church.

During the Second Vatican Council, the Church modified this teaching, admitting for the first time, that yes, people of other faiths could also be saved. The Council marked a new beginning in Muslim-Christian relations. It went on to exhort Catholics to engage in dialogue with peoples of other religions and to work together for the common good.

### CHURCH TEACHINGS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE

Number 16 of the Conciliar document, *Lumen Gentium*, declared, “The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, among whom are, in the first place, the Muslims.”

Nostra Aetate, also known as the Magna Carta of Muslim-Christian Dialogue, stated clearly, “The Church also has high regard for Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to humankind.”

The Document went on to say, “Over the centuries, many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. This sacred council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding. For the benefit of all, let them together preserve, and promote peace, liberty, social justice, and moral values.” (3)

The church document, *Redemptoris Missio*, in 1990, also stated that “dialogue is an integral part of the evangelizing mission of the Church...dialogue is a path towards the Kingdom.”

In February, 2007, Pope Benedict emphasized that “inter-religious dialogue is not an option, but a vital necessity of our time.”

Then, more recently, in 2013, Pope Francis, in his Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* document, repeatedly said that “Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities.”

Indeed, to be religious nowadays is to be inter-religious. The 1998 OMI General Chapter put it more clearly, “...Today inter-religious dialogue must become a way of life. Irrespective of where we live and work, those who believe in other religions are becoming ever more numerous in our environment. Hence, inter-religious dialogue is not just an activity for trained theological specialists, but a matter for all of us.” (nos. 20-22, pp. 228-29)

The Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) identified four forms of Dialogue. These are dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of words or discourse, and dialogue of faith or religious experience.

## DIALOGUE OF LIFE

“This is the dialogue where believers of different religions bear witness to their religious values and convictions in their everyday life, in their homes, neighborhoods, farms, workplaces, schools, marketplaces, terminals, streets, etc. In other words, this dialogue is taking place when spiritual and human values shape the day-to-day interactions of peoples of other faiths. It is a dialogue that can be carried out by all persons from all walks of life.” (Edmund Chia, FSC)

I was assigned in Jolo for 5 years. The Church there built housing projects where Muslims and Christians live together in the same neighborhood. Over the years, there have been a number of mixed marriages between Christians and Muslims. It is not unusual anymore to see Muslims inside the cathedral attending the funeral mass of their dead neighbor or one of their relatives. Even in the weddings of Christians, usually there are Muslim witnesses, normally their neighbors, friends or of-

ficemates. During Christmas, Muslim and Christian children go around caroling in the neighborhood regardless of who the occupants are.

Then, last February 19, 2004, at around 7:00 o'clock in the morning, Rachel Ann Gujit, the daughter of a Marine seargent, was riding a pedicab on her way to school at Notre Dame of Asturias in Jolo, Sulu. When she neared the gate of the school, unidentified armed men suddenly blocked the pedicab and tried to snatch her. The old pedicab driver tried to hold onto the girl to protect her. That may have been the greatest mistake of his life. One of the kidnappers turned on him instead, and shot him on the head. He died on the spot. The kidnappers sped away in a yellow Tamaraw carrying the girl.

On March 9, combined military and police elements rescued Rachel Ann from the hands of her captors. She survived. But the pedicab driver left a widow and 10 children, many of them still young. His name was Salip Iston Abubakar. For Salip, it may not have been a mistake after all. A Muslim, he died to save the life of a Christian girl.

I also lived in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi for 4 years. One of my best friends there was an ustadz. His mosque was just across from the church. We were so close that, whenever we met in formal gatherings, we would exchange “beso-beso”, him with his religious garb and me with my soutane and big cross. At the end of the holy month of Ramadhan or Hariraya Puasa, he would send somebody to fetch me at the convent to join their kanduli. They would not start the community celebration until I arrived.

Pikit town, where I am based now, is actually the site of the first agricultural colonies established by the Americans in 1913. Christians from Cebu settled in this town and, since then, have been living with Muslims. Some of them grew up together, went to school together, played together and helped one another on the farm.

Already, I have witnessed 5 major armed confrontations between government troops and MILF forces – 1997, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2015. Muslims from the interior of Liguasan Marsh would be evacuated from their villages. Some would leave many of their precious belongings to the care of their Christian friends. Then, they proceeded to the evacuation centers where they stayed for months. When things had been normalized, then they would start to return and retrieve their precious belongings from their Christian friends and neighbors.

There was a time when Datu Musim, a well-loved Muslim in Pikit and a friend of many Christians, was implicated in the bombing incident in Kidapawan city that killed and injured a number of civilians. He was taken into custody by the military, pending a case filed in court by the Philippine National Police. Believing in his innocence, the Christian friends of Datu Musim, some of them his classmates during their elementary days, members of the Knights of Columbus, and retired police officers, trooped to the Army Brigade headquarters and later to the Provincial Capitol to give support to their former classmate and friend. Governor Pinol and CIDG officials were surprised to see the support we gave to Datu Musim. Two days later he was released from military custody.

There was also a time when somebody was selected by the Christian community of a particular chapel to be their Lay Minister. He had to undergo three-days of formation together with others who were chosen by their communities. Normally, the community sponsors the expenses of their lay minister. In the case of this fellow, he has also Muslim friends. When they knew that he was to become a religious leader, they collected all sorts of vegetables in the Muslim neighborhood (string beans, eggplant and squash in small plastic sacks) and delivered them on a tricycle to the parish where the seminar was held, saying that they also wanted to contribute because their friend was now going to become a religious leader.

I also stood as a sponsor in the Muslim wedding of one of our Muslim community volunteers. Every time one of them sees me in public places, he or she blesses my hand, to the wonderment of those who know that they are Muslims and I am a priest. One time, I also officiated at a wedding at the parish church. Some of the sponsors were Muslims. Not only that, some of the bridesmaids were also Muslims, beautifully dressed in their gowns but with their headdress or ‘tundung’.

“This dialogue of life is the most important type of interreligious dialogue and, ideally, all other forms of dialogue should lead to the dialogue of life. In other words, the dialogue of life should become a way of life for all persons of religion.” (Edmund Chia, FSC)

## DIALOGUE OF ACTION

“When believers come together to address common social concerns, they are engaged in this form of dialogue. Problems posed by globalization, consumerism, drug addiction, illiteracy, displacement, exploitation of peoples, ecological destruction--these are some of the issues which the dialogue of action handles. Not only does it provide a forum for believers of various religious traditions to work together for the common good of society, it also allows them to discern the common elements which undergird the religions.” Edmund Chia, FSC.

I was the parish priest of Mt. Carmel Cathedral in Jolo when Bishop Benjamin de Jesus was brutally murdered in front of the Cathedral on February 4, 1997. I left Jolo with bitterness and resentment. I guess I took Bishop Ben’s death personally. My room had been next to his. He was like a father to all of us in the vicariate. He had known no enemies and he was a man of peace. His only dream was for Muslims and Christians on the island to live together in peace and harmony.

I was transferred to Pikit, in Cotabato. But, 12 days after I arrived, in June, 1997, war broke out when government troops launched a military offensive against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in camp Rajmuda. 30,000 civilians fled their villages and sought refuge in the town center. Suddenly I found myself in the midst of the “murderers of Bishop Ben.”

But human suffering is hard to bear. After all, when you hear the sounds of mothers weeping and children crying in evacuation centers, you don’t ask whether they are Muslims or Christians or Lumads. It was then that I began to understand what Bishop Ben had truly lived in his life – that of the poor, whoever they are and whatever circumstances they are in. I thought about Bishop Ben and I realized that helping the poor is not a matter of choice. For any Christian, it is a duty and a social responsibility.

The incident in 1997 was my baptism of fire. Three years later, the war would be repeated in catastrophic proportions, when the Estrada administration declared an all-out-war against the MILF in March, 2000. That war brought havoc and untold suffering to our people in Central Mindanao. – Muslims, Christians and Indigenous people alike. About 500 barangays were affected. 6,000 houses were destroyed. Close to

1,000,000 civilians were forced to leave their homes. In Pikit alone, at least 41,000 civilians were displaced, out of a total population of 59,000 in the town.

It was at this time that the parish got involved in emergency response on a large-scale basis. We organized the Disaster Response Team, composed of about 40 dedicated young Muslim and Christian volunteers. Whether under the scorching heat of the sun or under the pouring rain and amidst bullet fire, together, these young volunteers brought food to the starving evacuees, demolishing the myth that the war in Mindanao was religious in nature. Many of them knew nothing about the theology or spirituality of Dialogue nor had even heard about it. But they worked together as if they had been working together before.

Normina, a typical young Muslim lady who wears a “tundung” or headdress and a long sleeved blouse to cover her arms, even stayed with us for six months. She was only 18 years old then. Her parents entrusted her to us. She stayed in a room, accompanied by another lady, a Christian volunteer. Her room also became her prayer room. Then, she was noticed by Marilou Diaz-Abaya, the producer of the movie *Bagong Buwan*, who, together with Professor Randy David of UP, decided to send her back to school. Normina came to the convent regularly. Sometimes, I would find her before the television sitting quietly alone by herself, watching a TV program.

Later, she graduated from the University of Southern Mindanao. After the graduation ceremony, she, her family and some close friends went straight to the convent where she prepared a *kanduli* for the parish staff and her family.

From November to December of that year, we mobilized around 800 Muslim and Christian mothers in the 42 villages of Pikit. For two months, we implemented a supplemental feeding program providing food, five times a week, to 10,000 Muslim, Christian and Lumad children.

After the 2000 war, we trained 35 Muslim and Christian volunteers in stress debriefing and trauma healing. We then sent them in teams to three villages severely hit by the armed conflict. For two months they conducted psychosocial activities with traumatized Muslim and Christian children. For the culminating activity, we prepared delicious food. We distributed new pairs of slippers. The children played. They laughed

like they had found a new life. The volunteers shed tears to see the faces of the children so full of joy. Then, we left the children to their mothers and we went to another village for the same activity.

Barely an hour later after we left, government troops conducted a hot pursuit operation against suspected kidnappers believed to be hiding in the same village, also in MILF territory. Heavy firefighting took place between government troops and MILF forces. The civilians hurriedly fled. The kids were back in the evacuation centers. In just the blink of an eye, their joy turned into sorrow again.

When I met our volunteers later at the evacuation centers, they looked at me with blank eyes, as if searching for an explanation. One of them asked, "Why is this happening to us, Father? This is already too much." I patted her shoulder and said nothing.

During the February, 2003 war, 45,000 were displaced in the town of Pikit. Up until midnight on February 8, we were still evacuating civilians from the interior of Liguasan marsh. As we drove through the night, I could not help but shed tears when I saw people sleeping by the roadside. Some on their sleds. Some under the trees. Many on the grass. They did not make it to the town center due to sheer exhaustion.

At least two hundred Muslim families sought refuge at the parish gymnasium along with Christian evacuees. They stayed there for 5 months, and the parish took care of them--babies, women and the elderly. When night fell, Muslim and Christian children would play on the parish grounds while the adults were smilingly watching their children. The Muslims were teary-eyed when they left in June to return to their ancestral home in the interior of the Liguasan Marsh.

But what many people do not know is that, during the arrival of the Japanese Imperial Army in Pikit in 1941, the Christians in the population of Pikit sought refuge in the interior of Liguasan Marsh. There, according to the late judge Samuel Fernal, they put up makeshift tents made of cogon grass. The Muslims would come and visit them, bringing rice and chicken. They were the evacuees and the Muslims took care of them.

War is like a rolling ball. The longer it rolls, the more dust it gathers. The war was beginning to be dirty, with bombs exploding in public places. And so in April, 2003, when there was no sign that the war would stop, together with Muslim and Christian peace advocates and

leaders of the evacuees, we went to Manila to dialogue with the President, legislators, military officials, foreign embassy officials, church leaders, and human rights groups. The delegation pressed for a ceasefire to end the violence in Mindanao. We made a similar appeal to the central committee of the MILF through public statements.

When the ceasefire did not happen, in June, we decided to bring our appeal to the streets. In a peaceful demonstration of Bakwit Power, 8,000 Muslim and Christian evacuees occupied the Cotabato-Davao National Highway in the three towns of Pikit, Pagalungan and Pagaganwan, to pressure the government and the MILF to halt the violence and to go back to the negotiating table. The following month in July, both the government and the MILF declared a ceasefire.

The Muslim evacuees who stayed at the parish gymnasium were teary-eyed when they left the parish to return to their places of origin in the interior of the Liguasan Marsh. Later when, a student anthropologist interviewed them, they told him that they never thought Christians would reach out to help them. Their outlook and attitude towards the Christians had changed since then, they said.

The colonial legacy of biases and prejudices continue to divide Mindanao. Mutual suspicion has brought about deep mistrust between these two faith communities. And worse, a majority has lost confidence in the Peace Process and in Peace itself. People would rather support a protracted war than a protracted peace.

Real dialogue in Mindanao, I found out, is often a very slow and tedious process. It is like building blocks. No one builds by placing the blocks on top. It has to start from the bottom up. We are trying to bring dialogue and the peace process to the grassroots. We've realized that the Peace Talks cannot guarantee instant peace in our communities as long as there is an unseen war going on in the hearts of our people.

And so the parish, together with Muslim peace advocates, engaged in establishing "Space for Peace" communities, turning former conflict areas inhabited by Muslims, Christians and Lumads, into peace zones. We then implemented socio-economic projects such as seeds distribution, provision of farm equipment, construction of post-harvest facilities, livestock dispersal, construction of water facilities and latrines, health education and trauma healing.



Along with these projects, we also rehabilitated the strained relationships of people through the Culture of Peace and Dialogue seminars. The content of the seminar includes tri-people history of Mindanao, conflict analysis, conflict resolution skills, cultural sensitivity, interreligious dialogue, healing of biases and prejudices, and visioning.

Perhaps the most emotionally charged session of the three-day seminar is the healing session, where all the participants are seated in a circle. Then, each one is given the chance to tell his or her painful story of the past. They later realize that they are all victims, and that his or her cultural and religious group has actually inflicted pain on the other, directly or indirectly. The session ends with reconciliation, where all the participants either shake each other's hands or embrace one another.

These communities expanded to other neighboring villages. The official declaration was on November 29, 2004. It was a culmination of a long process that included two separate negotiations with the military and MILF Central committee conducted by the barangay captains of GINAPALAD TA KA and support groups, which included the Immaculate Conception Parish.

The day began with children of GINAPALAD TA KA carrying flaglets and escorted by fathers and mothers, marching to Takepan National High School where the program was held. The highway was decorated with streamers and 'bantalas'. The sound of 'agong' filled the air.

The highlight of the event was the public reading of the declaration and the symbolic signing by different stakeholders including children. The declaration carried an appeal addressed to the military, MILF, MNLF, CAGU, CVO, and other stakeholders to respect and support the desire of the people to rebuild their communities.

"We recognize and respect the declaration. These initiatives are building blocks for that larger peace we aspire for in Mindanao. I wish that this would be sustained, followed in other areas, as I assure you of the government's support in the quest for peace", Secretary Teresita Quintos-Deles of OPAPP said in her message to 3,000 people that included visitors from the International Monitoring Team led by Malaysia, the US Institute for Peace, the Joint Ceasefire Committee, LGU, government line agencies, military, local and international NGOs, church, academia and media.

Mr. Von Al Haq praised the effort in the message he delivered on behalf of the MILF Central Committee. “Indeed, this is a very laudable undertaking that deserves the support of everyone. Let me congratulate all of you, especially your leaders in the community, for trying to contribute alongside the pathways of peace being undertaken by the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in trying to find an honorable negotiated political settlement of the conflict in Mindanao,” the MILF representative said.

These communities have been hosting different groups of exposurists the whole year round, both local and international. A good number of religious orders have also chosen GINAPALAD TAKA for their IRD exposure, namely the Franciscans, Jesuits, CICM, MJ and, of course, the Oblates. Most of the exposurists stay in the homes of Muslim, Christian and Lumad families.

At that time, the parish employed 12 full-time staff, 3 of them Muslims. Of the three Muslims, two were women. The staff occupied one room, right at the back of the church. One lady Muslim staff member brought along her prayer mat and prayed in the same room. She admitted that she was not a very religious person before she joined the parish staff. But since she got involved in the parish three years before, she had become a religious woman, to the delight of her parents.

This kind of dialogue, therefore, sees religions “as institutions not so much for the service of each one’s own religious community as for the service of life and society in general.” Chia.

#### DIALOGUE OF WORDS OR DISCOURSE

“This is the dialogue which often takes place on the formal level, among trained scholars, religious leaders and theologians of religion. It is academic dialogue, which sometimes looks at the scriptural texts, beliefs, theologies, stories, myths, and histories of the various religious traditions. Principally, it serves as the venue where experts come together to discern points of convergence and areas of divergence.” Chia

Perhaps, the best example of this type of dialogue is the Bishops-Ulama Conference. Every six months, Christian and Muslim religious leaders in Mindanao gather together to discuss certain issues affecting both communities, or to share certain teachings that are common to both religions. In the Kidapawan diocese, they have the Ulama, Priests, Pas-

tors Interreligious Forum (UPPIF). In Pikit, we have interfaith councils in the GINAPALAD TA KA Space for Peace communities. During the last celebration of Ramadhan, we had a religious forum in every barangay, where an ustadz explained the significance of fasting to Christians. The lecture was followed by fellowship prepared by the host community. We call this Duyog Ramadhan. This December, we will have Duyog Pasko. This time it will be a Lay Minister who will have the chance to explain to the Muslims the meaning and significance of Christmas.

During those difficult days in Pikit, while everybody was talking about war, we were discussing peace. An ustadz presented the Islamic concept of peace and a Catholic lay minister presented the Christian concept of it.

One of our Muslim friends later found himself explaining to his fellow Muslims, who inquired what was the intention of the Church in helping them. Then he told them the reason why the Christians help them in times of war. He said, “The Christians have ten commandments. Then, they summarized them into two, love God and love your neighbor. They consider us their neighbors. That’s why they helped us in the past, even though that work is reserved to DSWD.”

For Muslims and Christians, working together is indeed difficult. But it is not impossible, I found out. I have often been told that Muslim-Christian dialogue has no future and that I tend to romanticize my involvement. Well, I’ve discovered that sometimes romanticism is the only thing left to a person. It helps one to persevere and move on. One must continue to dream, not to create more frustrations for oneself, but to move a little farther from the shore of apathy and the sea of mediocrity, even as one tries to make a sense of it all.

I remember being invited to a symposium in a remote village in the neighboring town of Carmen, a scene of frequent encounters between Muslim and Christian farmer inhabitants. Up until midnight, the merriement at the multi-purpose center could be heard from the house where we stayed. The sounds of laughter reverberated in the entire village situated at the foot of the mountain. The voices could not have come farther. Muslims and Christians were enjoying the second night of the 3-day celebration of the inter-barangay Peace Festival.

“It was a very slow and long process. It took us three years,” admitted Gilbert Camino, the head of an NGO that has been accompany-

ing the community as they rebuild their lives through socio-economic projects and peace-building activities.

Gilbert was right. It was only in 1997 that the Christian inhabitants started to return to their farms. I blessed the new chapel that the community built. The old one was razed to the ground during those turbulent years. Back, then, I remember not seeing a single Muslim walking around the village.

I remember the complaint of one of the chapel leaders. “Father, it’s very difficult here. I don’t know if I could persevere. You see, we guard the whole night and during the day we work in our farms. We don’t get enough sleep,” he said, his garand rifle standing beside him.

They had a street parade, Quran reading, a symposium on Christian-Muslim dialogue, ballgames, poster and slogan making contests, a singing contest and cultural presentation. It was difficult, indeed, to imagine how former enemies could forget the past and become friends and neighbors again. The idea is to continue talking and dialoging.

#### DIALOGUE OF FAITH OR RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

“Also referred to as the dialogue of spirituality, this is the spiritual dimension of dialogue. How do we pray? Why do we pray? Who is God for us? What motivates us to live virtuously? These are some of the questions addressed in this kind of dialogue.” Chia

Over the years, I have developed a friendship with Muslims, including ustadztes. My house in Pikit is no longer just the convento of the Christians now. It has ceased to be a private space. It is now a public space. Muslim friends feel at home once they are in the convent. We eat at the same table. Sometimes, a Muslim leads the prayer before meals, sometimes a Christian.

Muslims pray a lot. I opened my room for them as a place to pray. I once asked, “Look, my room is a Catholic room with many images and symbols. Are you not distracted when you pray?” They said, “No, Father. We know you’re a priest.” The respect that we have for each other keeps the bond of friendship strong, even with violence and so much hatred around us.

Some of our Christians used to comment about why I allowed Muslims to pray inside my room. I asked them, “Why are you so disturbed?

You should be happy when people pray and feel disturbed when people don't."

Every patronal fiesta, we usually invite our Muslim friends to share the joy of the occasion. We prepare halal food cooked by one of our Muslims friends. A few years ago, there was an ordination in the parish. Our Muslim friends also came and joined us in the celebration. A Muslim performed the 'sumbali' before the cow was butchered.

Then, during the celebration of Eidl Adha, the Muslim feast of Sacrifice, we had a kanduli right inside the parish grounds, together with the staff and Muslim friends in the NGO. We butchered a small cow as a 'sacrifice'. The ustadz explained the significance of the feast. Then we ate together. We were about fifty, on the same ground that saw the suffering of people during the four wars.

Ustadz Gafor is one of our second-liners in peace-building. One day, we were together on my vehicle coming back from Davao City. "Father, before I could not imagine a priest and an ustadz riding together on the same vehicle," said the ustadz. "Worst," he said, "an ustadz entering church premises and working for the church."

Every Sunday in Pikit, the Mass is sponsored by a different group. The sponsoring groups would bring in offerings for the altar, such as vegetables, sugar, milk, fruits, sardines, etc. The Pikit Market Vendors sponsor the last Sunday afternoon Mass of the month. It is an association of vendors composed of Muslims and Christians.

There was this lady that goes around collecting the offerings from the Christian vendors. The first time she went around to collect, Muslim vendors also wanted to give, but she refused, saying that the offering would be used during the celebration of the Mass. The Muslim vendors did not insist. However, the second time the lady went around, the Muslim vendors insisted that they also be able to give saying that they also wished to be included in the prayer through their offering. Besides, they said, during times of war when they were at the evacuation centers, the church also helped them. This practice has been going on for sometime now.

I think the biggest challenge in Muslim-Christian dialogue, is to change the way people look at themselves and the way they look at others. People need to accept the reality that we are not just a brother or a sister's keeper to the other. We are more than that. We are, in fact, real

brothers and sisters, worshipping the same God and living in the same world beset by so many problems.

Hans Kung said, “There is no peace in the world as long as there is no peace among religions. And there is no peace among religions as long as there is no genuine dialogue among believers.” The challenge for churches is not so much to build their own kingdom, but to build the kingdom of God. To realize this, churches must recommit to the Gospel, and be ready to become instruments of God’s goodness to every human being regardless of who they are.

On my part, it has not been very easy. The most painful part of my experience in dialogue is not having to risk one’s life in the battlefields to save others. It’s when people, sometimes your own, let you feel that what you are doing is wrong.

## CONCLUSION

“Let’s continue to plant the seed of peace, Father. Allah will not fail us,” says one of our parish staff, a Muslim who was a former combatant. Indeed, it is this faith in the Merciful God that keeps us going, even in times of great tribulation.

What we have started in Pikit may be a small initiative in the archdiocese, and may not deserve the attention of the media. But I’d like to tell you a story. One thing I love to do as a priest is to go to the barrio to say Mass. There, I would pass by the vast fields. In June, when the rain starts to fall, you see the fields totally bare. It does not mean, though, that nothing is happening just because you don’t see anything on the ground. Actually the seeds have been planted and soon they will grow.

In Pikit, we continue to plant the seed of goodness, not even knowing if and when it is going to grow. But we trust in God’s Providence that, whatever goodness we have planted will blossom only in goodness, and that goodness alone will remain in the end.

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## NEW EVANGELISATION ACCORDING TO THE VISION OF ST EUGENE DE MAZENOD. ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY (1802-1826)

DANIEL SZEWC, OMI

The term New Evangelization has made a great impact on the theology and pastoral activity of the Catholic Church. Archbishop Salvatore Fisichella, the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation, remarked that, after his nomination, he came across nearly 30 definitions of the term. My intention is not to create another one, but, in this paper I would like to place our Oblate beginnings in the context of what is called the New Evangelization today. This reflection has been inspired by the remarks of Fr. Marcello Zago, OMI, our Superior General at the time of the Founder's Canonization, who, in his letter to the Congregation in May, 1996, shared his reflection on the time following that memorable celebration:

Among numerous impressions of the canonization, I remember in particular that of John Paul II, who meeting me on January 11 told me that he has taken St. Eugene as his patron, and that he has placed his relic in his private chapel. He saw in him, in fact, a model and a protector for the evangelisation of modern times.<sup>1</sup>

John Paul's perception of St. Eugene de Mazenod as "a model and protector of the evangelisation of modern times" has triggered my interest in the New Evangelisation in the context of the history and spirituality of our own religious family, founded by St. Eugene de Mazenod. It has led me to exploring how a nineteenth century Frenchman could be "a model and protector" for the evangelisation which a twenty-first century Church community wants to undertake.

When visiting Poland in 1979, Pope John Paul II spoke of the New Evangelisation<sup>2</sup> for the first time:

The new wooden Cross was raised not far from here at the very time we were celebrating the Millennium (of Poland's Baptism and subsequent Christianisation – ed.). With it we were given *a sign* that, on the threshold of the new millennium, in these new times, these new conditions of life, the Gospel is again being proclaimed. *A new evangelization* has begun, as if it were a new proclamation, even if in reality it is the same as ever.<sup>3</sup>

During his visit to Haiti in 1983, the Pontiff continued the thought as he spoke to the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM):

The commemoration of this half millennium of evangelization (of the New World – ed.) will have full significance if, as bishops, with your priests and faithful, you accept it as your commitment; a commitment not of re-evangelization, but rather of a new evangelization; new in its ardour, methods and expression.<sup>4</sup>

Originally the Pontiff saw it as a prolific vision for the Church in his homeland, but the vision has already made its way to the wider Church community and theological reflection.

As the theological and pastoral discussion of the New Evangelisation continued within the Catholic Church, in 2010, with the promulgation of the apostolic letter *Ubicumque et semper*, Pope Benedict XVI established the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation, defining the Council as “at the service of the particular Churches, especially in those territories of Christian tradition where the phenomenon of secularization is more obviously apparent.”<sup>5</sup> That directive of the Holy Father, given to the Council, is the most recent recognition of the application of the New Evangelisation to the contemporary Catholic Church milieu. In 1979, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, as Archbishop of Munich, attended that Mass in Poland when John Paul II chose to use the term for the first time. Two years after establishing the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation, the same Pontiff recalled his participation in John Paul II's visit to Mogiła and his words on the New Evangelisation. This time Pope Benedict was speaking to the Italian Bishops gathered at their General Assembly. First, he drew the attention of his audience to the reality of the district, which became the stage for John Paul II's reflection on the New Evangelisation, called “Godless city”<sup>6</sup>. The socio-political context to John Paul II's homily



was a systematic application of the Communist Party's program to establish an exemplary atheistic community.<sup>7</sup> In the midst of such a socio-political context, the new Church community was looking for the meaning of their identity and mission. In his retrospective on the homily from June 9, 1979, Pope Benedict draws a conclusion that workers' determination led them to erect, first a cross and later a church. In those two realities: the cross and the Church, according to Benedict, his Predecessor "recognized the beginning of what, for the first time, he described as the "new evangelization".<sup>8</sup>

The present Pope, Francis, also embraced the theme of the New Evangelisation, summarizing the work of the 2012 Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelisation. In Bergoglio's *Evangelium Gaudium*, published in 2013, we read:

a "missionary option", that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.<sup>9</sup>

His original contribution to the topic of the New Evangelisation begins with a new language when he writes about "a community of missionary disciples" or "evangelising community"<sup>10</sup> which becomes a recurring expression of his discourse.

John Paul II's homily in Mogila, Benedict XVI's *Ubicumque et semper*, and Francis' *Evangelium Gaudium* evoke in my Oblate mind the request of St. Eugene de Mazenod and his first companions presented to the Capitular Vicars General at Aix, France, on January 25, 1816, to authorise the establishment of their first community. They "knew the callousness or indifference of the people of Provence who have almost completely lost the faith."<sup>11</sup> They also "preferred to form a regular community of Missionaries...in an effort to be useful to the diocese."<sup>12</sup>

By situating the vision of St. Eugene de Mazenod and his first companions in the context of the framework given to the Pontifical Council, and in the light of the recent Pope's teachings, I believe that the term New Evangelisation can be applied to the pursuit which, in 1816, brought together Eugene de Mazenod, François de Paule Henry Tem-

pier, Jean François Sébastien Deblieu, Auguste Icard, Pierre Nolasque Mie and Emmanuel Fréjus Maunier.

First we need to recognise the particular church of which Eugene was a part. When the young Count de Mazenod disembarked at Marseille in October, 1802, after a decade long exile in Italy, he found a new structure of the Catholic Church in Provence. As the result of the 1801 concordat, the ancient see of St. Lazarus was suppressed and, like the dioceses of Arles, Frejus, Riez, and Toulon, was amalgamated with the Archdiocese of Aix. That new establishment, though artificial and not reflecting the diversity of the region, was the living particular Church where our Founder experienced “a missionary option.” In the Catechism of the Catholic Church we discover that:

particular church,” which is first of all the diocese, refers to a community of the Christian faithful in communion of faith and sacraments with their bishop, ordained in apostolic succession. These particular Churches “are constituted after the model of the universal Church; it is in these and formed out of them that the one and unique Catholic Church exists.<sup>13</sup>

Paul VI, in his encyclical *Evangelii nuntiandi*, offers a theological background to such a perception of particular churches:

Nevertheless this universal Church is in practice incarnate in the individual Churches, made up of such or such an actual part of mankind, speaking such and such a language, heirs of a cultural patrimony, of a vision of the world, of an historical past, of a particular human substratum... a Church *toto orbe diffusa* would become an abstraction if she did not take body and life precisely through the individual Churches.<sup>14</sup>

Although that particular church, into which Eugene immersed himself in 1802, was badly damaged after the Revolution and struggling in the Napoleonic era, it was a living organism. The young man, after his return home, discovered that he was not only a “citizen de Mazenod” he was a Christian within a Christian community. It didn’t take him long to identify himself with that particular church of Aix. In 1804, writing to his father, he speaks of “us” as he reports various activities of the diocese.<sup>15</sup> This identification with the Church of Aix grew stronger and

stronger and eventually led Eugene (and his companions) to “respond to the call which summoned them to consecrate themselves to this arduous ministry.”<sup>16</sup>

The year 1826, which brought the Pope’s approval of the Congregation, was also marked by a General Chapter convoked by Eugene. As Józef Pielorz observed from his study of the Congregation’s development, “the Chapter officially terminated the period of the founding or formation of the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.”<sup>17</sup> The Institute had four houses at the time: Aix, Notre Dame de Laus, Le Calvaire, and Nîmes. However, the last establishment happened only a few months earlier. Out of the three main houses, two were established as part of the Aix archdiocese, as the Marseille diocese was restored on October 6, 1822 and had their new bishop Fortuné de Mazenod consecrated only in 1823. However the geographical limitations of the missionary activities of our early fathers didn’t limit their experience of the Church. On the contrary, it formed them in depth as an integral part of the “missionary impulse” of those particular churches.

*Secondly*, a detailed reading of the Rule drawn in 1825 under St. Eugene’s direction, reveals that:

The end of the Institute of the Missionaries of Provence, from the name of the province of its origin, is first of all to form an association of secular priests, living together and seeking to imitate the virtues and example of our Saviour Jesus Christ, principally by devoting themselves to the preaching of the Word of God to the poor.<sup>18</sup>

The Rule which was to be presented to Pope Leo XII for approval still reveals a deep identification with the particular churches of Provence which gave them birth and formed them, but the Rule also identifies the communal aspect of their missionary enterprise which, together with searching to imitate the virtues and example of Christ, led to evangelisation which was conducted by the preaching of the Word of God to the poor. Although still limited to southern France, their ecclesiology was mature enough to offer an insight to other particular churches, not only of their homeland but abroad as well. Those thirty men were a product of the local churches and, at the same time, a visible expression of their evangelizing character.

Some time ago I came across the diary of a man who was traveling through a European country to experience various Catholic communities. He described their commitment, unique ministries, and the spirit of the Gospel being lived there. After reading his observations, I asked myself: “What would he write after visiting our first missionary communities in Provence?” I believe that he could use the language of Pope Francis, that our first fathers were a “community of missionary disciples” or an “evangelizing community,” within the evangelizing community of the particular church. Their life and mission was showing the life and mission of the local church.

Yvon Beaudoin noted that, when the July Revolution 1830 ended the dictatorial reign of Charles X and elevated Louis-Phillippe as “King of the French”, anti-clerical feelings once again dominated. As a result, the preaching of parish missions became impossible. Until 1830 such a means of evangelisation was an integral part of the life and mission of the early Missionaries of Provence, who, like the Missionaries of France and many other Congregations, were devoting themselves to conducting missions. When missions in France were abolished, many of those missionary congregations declined, and many of them vanished. However, it didn’t happen to the Institute established by St. Eugene.<sup>19</sup> The Oblates did not simply requalify themselves to undertake other ministries, but preserved the communal expression of their call to be a nucleus in the diocese.<sup>20</sup>

A further motivation to employ such an approach to those years of the formation of our Institute has been generated by an Instruction issued on the Pentecost Sunday, 2002, by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life: “Starting afresh from Christ means once again finding one’s first love, the inspiring spark which first gave rise to the following.”<sup>21</sup> I believe that “the Oblate inspiring spark” can be found in what is called today the New Evangelisation. The context of the cross and the Church, in which John Paul II placed his original thought on the New Evangelisation, can be easily recognized by us Oblates as the context of our own beginnings.

I also hope that the Oblate experience of the New Evangelization can contribute to the discussion and practice of the wider Church community on the topic. When, in 1849, Pope Pius IX sent his encyclical *Ubi Primum*, regarding the possibility of pronouncing the Immaculate

Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary as a dogma, he requested that all bishops send him their opinion on the subject<sup>22</sup> Eugene de Mazenod responded in his double capacity as Bishop of Marseille and the Superior General of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. In his letter to the Pope he indicated that the Oblate tradition regarding the Immaculate Conception supported the common belief of the Catholic Church.<sup>23</sup>

In XXIst century, as the Catholic Church searches to identify her mission in the milieu marked by a drastic religious change in many former Catholic nations, the charism of St Eugene de Mazenod and his Oblate Congregation can offer a valuable input into the comprehension and praxis of the New Evangelisation.

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<sup>1</sup> General Administration, *OMI Information*, no. 345 (May 1996).

<sup>2</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Holy Mass at the Shrine of the Holy Cross, Mogila, 9 June 1979*. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19790609\\_polonia-mogila-nowa-huta.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19790609_polonia-mogila-nowa-huta.html). Accessed 1 June, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Holy Mass at the Shrine of the Holy Cross, Mogila, 9 June 1979*.

<sup>4</sup> Synod of Bishops, *The New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, Lineamenta* (2011) n. 5, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20110202\\_lineamenta-xiii-assembly\\_en.html#\\_ftnref11](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20110202_lineamenta-xiii-assembly_en.html#_ftnref11). Accessed 1 June 2015. Original Pope's address: *Discurso del Santo Padre Juan Pablo II a la Asamblea del CELAM*. w2vatican.va. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/speeches/1983/march/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19830309\\_asamblea-celam.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/speeches/1983/march/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19830309_asamblea-celam.html). Accessed 1 June 2015.

<sup>5</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Apostolic Letter in the form of Motu Proprio. Ubicumque et semper* (2010), Art. 2.

<sup>6</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference* (2012), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/may/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20120524\\_cei.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20120524_cei.html). Accessed 5 June 2015.

<sup>7</sup> A. DUDEK, "Nowohucka soczewka," *Pamięć.pl*. 7 (2012): 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference* (2012), w2vatican.va.

<sup>9</sup> FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation (2013), n. 27.

<sup>10</sup> FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n 24.

<sup>11</sup> E. DE MAZENOD, *Oblate Writings*, 13, 2.

<sup>12</sup> E. DE MAZENOD, *Letters to various correspondents on the Congregation of the O.M.I. 1815-1861*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, English translation. (1994), n. 833.

<sup>14</sup> PAUL VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation (1975), n. 62.

<sup>15</sup> E. DE MAZENOD, *Oblate Writings*, 14, 6.

<sup>16</sup> E. DE MAZENOD, *Oblate Writings*, 13, 2.

<sup>17</sup> J. PIELORZ, “The General Chapters from 1818 to 1861,” *Vie Oblate Life* 42 (1983): 271.

<sup>18</sup> *The Rule of Saint Eugene de Mazenod*, edited and annotated by Maurice Lesage and William Woestman, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Y. BEAUDOIN, “The Response of the Oblates in France to the Founder’s Vision and Practice of Evangelisation,” *Vie Oblate Life* 42 (1983): 160.

<sup>20</sup> E. DE MAZENOD, *Oblate Writings*, 6, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Starting Afresh from Christ: A renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium* (2002), n.2, w2vatican.va. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccsclife\\_doc\\_20020614\\_ripartire-da-cristo\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_20020614_ripartire-da-cristo_en.html). Accessed 1 June 2015.

<sup>22</sup> PIUS IX, *Ubi Primum*, Encyclical Letter (1849), n.6, papalencyclicals.net <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9ubipr2.htm>. Accessed 1 June 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Y. BEAUDOIN, “Mary,” *Dictionary of Oblate Values* (Rome: Association for Oblate Studies and Research, 2000): 538.

## ENTER JAPAN WITH THE HEART OF ST EUGENE

JAYAWARDENA HIRAN INDIKA, OMI

“**L**eave your native land, your relatives, and your father’s home, and go to a country that I am going to show you”. (Gen.12/1) The Lord’s words to Abraham for his special mission indicate the very fact of leaving behind when one goes out for a mission. It is true that we need to leave behind what we consider ours, but then, what is there to take with us. It goes without saying that we the missionaries need to take with us the intention, the purpose, and the attitude of the sender. Since God the Father, who has called us with unbounded love, is the one who sends us on His mission, we cannot but make sure that we take with us His intention, His purpose and His attitude, as we launch into the mission land. In short, what God sends with us is nothing but the message of His Son Jesus Christ: “The kingdom of God is at hand”. (Mt.4/17) Certainly, we recognize, understand, and put into action, or at least try our best to do justice to, the demands of our dear sender, God our Father. But I feel the story does not end there. We as missionaries are, of course, sent by God, yet in and through the family called Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Thus it is natural that we, the missionaries of Mary Immaculate, carry within us the attitudes of this sub-sender, the founder of the Oblate family, St. Eugene, our second father. Therefore I intend to discuss with you the theme of entering Japan with the heart of St. Eugene

### THE HEART OF ST. EUGENE

The basic thought line of the heart of de Mazenod seem to be very clear in the words he has chosen for the preface of the constitution and rules of the congregation. “They must constantly renew themselves in the spirit of their vocation, living in a state of habitual self-denial and

seeking at all times to reach the very summit of perfection”. This is because of the love and the gratitude de Mazenod felt in the intervention of Jesus throughout his life. Thus de Mazenod’s was a life of regular devotion and adoration, through his practice of prayer and meditation, with the goal of making his entire life an act of worship pleasing to God. This basic but unique attitude colors every step of his life and mission, as he takes up the charism to preach the good news to the poor. So we, as the Oblates in this mission land, think and feel that God is sending us on His mission, with the heart of de Mazenod, to help the Japanese society find and discover the riches of the Kingdom of God, deep within their very being.

### DEVOTION AND DEDICATION

The Scholastic meaning of devotion spells out a readiness of the will in the service of God. Certainly de Mazenod was filled with vigor and enthusiasm in directing his entire person to the service and worship of God and thus to the human family, the creation of God. It is this devotion that underlines the secret of his life and mission, and his longing to be united with Jesus in love before the Father and in ministry to others. In his own words: “ I pray that I may profit from the grace I am privileged to receive, and use it to purify my soul and rid my heart completely of creatures, so that the Holy Spirit, when it no longer encounters obstacles to its divine operations, may come to rest on me in all its fullness ... in such a way that I live and breathe no longer but in him...”

If a missionary with such a heart of devotion comes to this mission land of Japan, I would say, He could easily find a similar yet different total dedication in this society, too. Total dedication may not be to a god or particular deity, but to the values and the truth of the conscience. Japanese do consider this dedication as their prime moral duty and social obligation, which is known as “GIRI”. “GIRI” involves caring for others from whom one has received a debt of gratitude, and a determination to release their happiness, sometimes even by self-sacrificing. Is it not similar to the heart of de Mazenod, who showed total dedication in the way of devotion to the love of God? In my view, the poverty of Japan is also found in this very dedication. As sometimes this dedication is not for the purpose of love and affection for humankind and



finally to God the Father, therefore this very dedication becomes merely a duty and a heavy burden, leading to depression and dissatisfaction ending in suicide.

But whereas the devotion of de Mazenod was exclusively shown in his devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Eucharist, Mary and a collection of saints always led him to rejuvenate his life, purpose and mission. He says; “I will unite my feeble adorations to those of the saintly hearts of Jesus and of Mary, the Angels and the saints... assist me in all my actions, be my advocates before God and the Heart of Jesus... before leaving my chamber... I will take, then, some of the blessed water and I will respectfully kiss my crucifix, at the place of the wound of the Heart...”.

### CROSS AND BEAUTY

Eugene, as he continued to grow with the love of Jesus in imitating the Lord, was enchanted by the interior quality and the experience of his saviour Jesus Christ, especially to feel and own the deep inner disposition experienced by Jesus during his passion and crucifixion. The three specific virtues or attitudes which Jesus had exhibited throughout his life, and very specially with the cross, made a special mark on the heart of Eugene. The personal humility, acceptance of pain, sorrow, persecution and personal evangelical poverty are the hidden strengths in which Eugene always showed a special interest, even from his seminary years. Personal humility indicates the ability to consider oneself as being unimportant, and recognizes the fact that personal goodness comes to oneself from God alone. Therefore, he accepts pain and sorrow as a mortification to prepare for eternal life and lives a simple life so that all things become a loving response to the price paid by Jesus for the whole of humanity.

This very thinking is present in the Japanese mind and attitude. They often humble themselves before others with their use of words called “keigo” and with gestures. Also, they consider pain, sorrow, suffering and persecution as the stepping stones to future happiness. They also give high regard to modesty and simplicity of life.

While I express the fact that the mind-set of de Mazenod is already present in the Japanese-mind, I also make it a point to say that there exists a considerable and noteworthy difference, as, for Eugene, all

these virtues originated from Jesus the Saviour and based in Him alone. Whereas for the Japanese, they are virtues for a better society and more civilized humanity.

Thinking alone with these notions, it is here that I discovered the deep truth of the notion of beauty in the Japanese-mind. “Aware” is said to be representative of the Japanese sense of beauty, and it is a term of great subtlety which is quite difficult to understand because it relates specifically to the Japanese feeling of appreciating something that is regarded as worthless. For example, in the West, people tend to think that flowers in full bloom are most beautiful, but when withered, they are not. This is not the case with the Japanese sense of “Aware”. People are aware of the beauty of full blossoms of course, but are more touched and deeply moved when these blossoms are falling or beginning to wither. Similarly, they think that the moon partially covered by clouds is more appealing than the one that is full. “Aware” is thus connected to the feelings of regret for things losing their beauty, and paradoxically finding beauty in their opposite.

Here I began to think that what de Mazenod was enchanted by, the love of the sinless Saviour on the cross for the whole of humanity, could easily be the beauty that the Japanese consider as the “Aware”, the most beautiful act of Jesus. I feel the precious hidden grace of the cross, is ever close to Japanese mind in the different crosses of nature in miniature form.

## MEDITATION AND SILENCE

De Mazenod who had a specific concern for meditative prayer, and specified it as *l’oraison*. That was thirty minutes long mental prayer with three stages as adoration, cooperation, and thanksgiving. In the first stage, it is like “Jesus before the eyes” of the person who prays as he acknowledges the presence of Jesus and gives homage. In the next stage, the person who prays would reflect upon a particular mystery, feeling it close to the heart, so it is like “Jesus in the heart”. In the third and final stage, “Jesus in the hand”, means to seek strength and wisdom to put into practice what one has been meditating on. This method of prayer was Eugene’s strength, especially in his first years of ordained ministry. He also struggled with his need to observe this mental prayer in the midst of his active ministry. He clearly noted during several an-

nual retreats, that he needed to recommit himself more firmly to the practice in the struggles of day-to-day ministerial demands. Thus it is clear that de Mazenod had a heart for meditation and mental prayer throughout his lifetime.

It really took me by surprise to learn that the Japanese-mind is very much at peace with silent meditation. In fact, silence is considered a great value and they have long treated silence as a kind of virtue similar to “truthfulness”, indicating that a person of few words is trusted more than a person of many words. In this regard, Zen Buddhism is thought to have had a great influence on the development of these attitudes towards silence in Japan. Zen training is designed to teach that the truth cannot be described verbally, but can exist only in silence. Therefore Japanese music, for example, is said to contain “ma”, meaning intervals between sounds, which are considered important because it is the interval which determines the rhythm, while the beat is subsidiary and serves to enhance the interval. Therefore silence between the lines speaks and conveys more than the words that are spoken.

Thus I feel that the inner desire de Mazenod had for meditation and mental prayer is found in the Japanese-mind with the notion of silence. In other words, in this virtue of silence, the Japanese certainly have the disposition that de Mazenod was equipped with. Maybe Japanese lack the experience of the presence of that God we call a Trinitarian God to fill that silence with mystical silence.

#### Conclusion.

The present fast changing world has brought changes to Japanese society as well. The dedication that was found 10-20 years ago is slightly fading away with the new generations. The notion of “Aware”, the hidden beauty, is no longer appealing to the present generation. The virtue of silence is over-taken by the sound of technology in the minds of the young. Thus in my feeling, to bring back the Kingdom values and the virtues of Japan that are slowly fading away from the present society, missionaries like the Oblates need to reenter into Japan with that Heart of St. Eugene.

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## EXPERIENCE WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND THE OBLATE CHARISM

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**T**he indigenous peoples of the Philippines are defined by the 1997 Law, otherwise known as the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA) as:

A group of people or homogeneous societies identified by self-ascription and ascription by others, who have continually lived as organized communities on community bounded and defined territory, and who have, under claims of ownership since time immemorial, occupied, possessed and utilized such territories, sharing common bonds of language, customs, traditions and other distinctive cultural traits, or who have, through resistance to political, social and cultural inroads of colonization, non-indigenous religions and cultures, become historically differentiated from the majority of Filipinos (IPRA Chap. II, Sec 3h).

Before the advent of Islam and Spanish colonialism in the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the peoples of the islands in the archipelago were independent communities or villages of tribal groupings and clans.<sup>1</sup> The inroads of Islam in the south, beginning in 1480, and mostly by the Spanish conquest from 1521 in the central islands and Luzon, succeeded in subjugating the island territories, which eventually formed the present day nation-state of the Philippines. However, within the 7,000+ islands, communities of these tribal groups thrived and survived and resisted foreign encroachment, and managed to preserve and practice their own systems and way of life.

This disparate historical experience created a dichotomy between the majority lowland-dwellers who became ‘colonized’ Filipinos and

those of the ethnic groups that resisted outside influence. These latter withdrew to the more inaccessible mountain areas and retained their traditional systems and beliefs, and today comprise the indigenous peoples of the Philippines.

There are no accurate figures on the population of these peoples, as there have been no formal government-sponsored censuses from the agency created to serve them. They are found in 65 of the 78 provinces of the country. The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples estimates the population to be between 12-15 million, around 60+ percent of whom are inhabitants of the island of Mindanao.

The indigenous peoples are among the poorest and most marginalized sectors in Philippine society. They experience neglect and discrimination in the delivery of government services. The 2008 national budget, for example, shows that regions with the highest concentrations of these peoples get the smallest allocations from the government.<sup>2</sup> The general health situation in these areas are below the national average. Poverty and chronic food shortages/insecurity are a daily occurrence. A major factor that causes these ills is the loss of the ancestral homeland and displacement due to developmental aggression and other extractive industries, like logging, mining, dams, and environmental degradation, caused by chemically dependent, mono-culture type, modern agricultural systems.

### THE MINDANAO CONTEXT

Early intimations of this troubled, violence-laden island comes to us from the brutal killing of the Jesuit Father Bartolome Sanchez. He was the chaplain of one of the Spanish Military expeditions against the “*moros*” in the hands of Sultan Kudarat’s warriors on June 1, 1672. The other, later, victim was Fr. Andres Zamora, by gunshot wounds on December 28, 1679<sup>3</sup> along the stretch of the Rio Grande de Mindanao where the Oblates work today. While this ascription from Spanish colonizers specifies the Magindanaon tribal group that was already Islamized by this time, the stigma and label of violence carried over to the other tribal aggrupations that resided in the islands, and continued on after the American occupation after 1898. Therefore, the “civilization” of Mindanao was a primary concern for both the colonial forces of Spain and the United States and was systematically implemented only in

1912 by the U.S. General John Pershing, who was then governor of the Moro Province. He began the “colonos” settlements in Central Mindanao around Pikit area using the “christianized” peoples of the central and northern islands to occupy vast swaths of fertile land.<sup>4</sup> This became the model for the government-sponsored organized “settlements” that were in reality encroachment, especially after WW II, into tribal territory, and led to the disenfranchisement of the local inhabitants.

There are 18 distinct ethnic groups of I.P. that call Mindanao home. They are now commonly called by the *Visayan* term, “*lumad*,” which literally means native, indigenous, of-the-land. Although the languages at first glance are mutually unintelligible to each other, there is a common underlying matrix which is Sanskrit influenced and which are now called part of the Austronesian (meaning: *southwind*) group of languages that have evolved into localized contexts with localized representations,<sup>5</sup> much like Spanish, Italian, French and Portuguese are to Latin.

My stay among the *Dulangan* of the Cotabato Cordilleras in the early 1990s proves this language interlink. Because I am fluent in *Dulangan*, I speak 3 other native languages with facility: the underlying matrix I referred to above—much like the aforementioned Europeans would learn the other Latin-languages easily after some brief exposure to it. This is an important insight since it has repercussions in the indigenous expression of power dynamics: these native peoples engaged with each other in mutual reciprocal relationships before colonial times, and have never been isolated from each other. This relational dynamic also expressed itself in periodic raids to capture women, men or children (these latter two become slaves), as these were perceived to be wealth and prestige articles of those pre-modern societies of the past.<sup>6</sup> The later dominance of the Islamized Magindanaon tribe along the *Bukana* area, present day Cotabato City, over the other tribal groups (*Teduray*, *Aromanen-Ilyanen*, *B'laan*) is attributed to the ideology of nobility imported by the Arab merchants who claimed ancestry with the Prophet. The Rio Grande de Mindanao became the extent and limit of influence of the Magindanaon people. The Sultanates of both the Magindanaons and Jolo are representations of this lineage mythology as seen through the direct descendants of leadership through time.<sup>7</sup> Without the Islamic ascription, of these few coastal area tribal groups

of Mindanao and Sulu, however, the indigenous peoples of the south Philippines would have had the same identity today.<sup>8</sup> The similarity of our languages reveals this fact.

### OUR OBLATE ENGAGEMENT

When the Oblates came to the Philippines in 1939, the ministry involved service to the spiritual needs of the Christian Filipinos from the north and central islands who have continuously been migrating to Mindanao. The Oblate pioneers were cognizant of the fact that Mindanao and Sulu were populated with Islamic peoples and, at the outset, blazed a trail where no previous missionary societies (Recollects and Jesuits) dared to tread: inter-religious dialogue.<sup>9</sup> This was something unheard of at those times. The Notre Dame School System was built to cater to the educational needs of the southern peoples—muslim or otherwise, since no government school existed in the area. The Oblate slogan runs: “a good muslim is an educated one.” We hire Muslim *ustadzez* to teach Islam to Muslim students at our schools.

It is in this regard that the name of Bro. Mauricio Zuyco, OMI, comes out. He started working among the *Tedurays* in the late 1960s along the northern slopes of the Cotabato Cordilleras and, with Oblate Bishop Gerard Mongeau’s and Province’s support, opened schools for the locals. The ancestral domains were being encroached upon by settlers, and a globalizing world and the best way to face up to the challenge was education, since the tribals didn’t know how to read and write because of the absence of schools. As mentioned earlier, the *lumads* are looked down upon by the settlers and taken for granted by the national government. One of the most prominent fruits of Mauricio’s work is the person of the present mayor of Upi, Maguindanao Province: Ramon Piang. He was Brother’s *factotum* while going through the mainstream school system and is now a repeat, 2 six-year-term, undefeated mayor of the town, as well as a national figure in terms of the Philippine Indigenous Peoples Body Politic. The schools that Mauricio built have since been given over to the Department of Education and are now accessible by car. The work among the *Teduray* continues today, after some years of respite, with the new assignment of Juram Sacil and the scholastics who are in “exposure” also among them, to give them time to know this kind of work firsthand.



The same approach was and is being followed in the Sulu areas. The *Badjao* and *Sama* peoples; erstwhile sea gypsies of the first millennium who navigated the world using the trade winds and the constellations in fast crafts (*karakoa*), whom the mighty Dutch navy of colonial times feared (piracy)<sup>10</sup> and who have been subjugated by the Islamized *Tausugs* of Sulu and are now reduced as beggars in major cities of the country, are also partner-beneficiaries of Oblate dialogue-of-life enabling mechanisms—again to cope with the changing times; hopefully at their own pace, in their own place (the vast Sulu seas) and in their own time. The martyred Oblate Bishop, Ben de Jesus, is very much well-loved among the *Badjao*. Bro. Noel Garcia, who is fluent in the *Sama* language, also worked among these peoples.

The *Mehu*, *Bawa*, and *Ilyanen* of Kidapawan and Arakan, Cotabato, also saw the Oblates working with them. The likes of Beato Tariman, Primo Hagad, Rey Roda, all of whom have passed away, Dick Weixelman, and Romy Villanueva, who is now working in Jolo also among the *Badjao*, journeyed with these peoples in their justice and peace issues—mainly basic community organizing and advocacy for the protection of the ancestral domains in the troubled late 1970s and 1980s. Several peoples’ organizations in the area today are the results of these Oblates’ apostolate.

When the Province opened the mission in Kulaman Valley in the southern part of the Cordilleras in 1985/6, Bro. Mauricio was again assigned there with Fr. Weixelman. Ralph Deckocker (deceased) was in Masiag, about 40 km. east and Michel Lenzen (now in Zambia?) set up station in Langgal, a small barrio in between. This sub-district team of Oblates mainly worked with “christianized” settlers, but they were aware of the presence of the *Dulangan* whom the *Tedurays* called a fiercely war-like tribe.<sup>11</sup> In the Jesuit letters of 1886, the *Dulangan* was mentioned as fearsome, half-naked savages by *Teduray* informants of the priests (Arcilla 2000: 220-221). The mostly lowlander-settlers of Kulaman also feared to go near their villages, as several of them were killed by the natives.

When I was assigned there in June, 1989, while still a deacon, our group of Oblates decided that somebody had to penetrate the forest domains from the inside. Since Mauricio already opened Notre Dame of Kulaman and was therefore tied up to run it, and me being the young-

est and all that stuff, etc., I got the drift—by popular consent I had to go. I went, and the rest is a continuing history of selfless Oblates in a dialogue-of-life journey among them... King Tabuada, Jun Matas, Celoi Andamon and now Renan Aban and Mark Pagente. A recent discourse that is being addressed now by Frs. Renan and Mark is the request of entire villages to receive baptism. This is going to be a narrative for the books.<sup>12</sup>

When Michel Lenzen left Kulaman area in 1992 to work among the *Ilyanen*, *Arumanens* and related sub-groups along the eastern part of the Rio Grande at the Carmen-Kabacan-Matalam-Arakan domains, the idea for the foundation of the mission came from the elders of the several village communities in the area. They wanted to have a school! As in the other Oblate mission territories, formal, mainstream education was a felt need. Again, as in the case of past experience among the indigenous peoples, the majority of the locals do not know how to read and write. They do not go to public schools in the settler-dominated barrios for the same reasons: discrimination and distance. Poverty and lack of food security are other mitigating factors. And so the Pangipasan Community School opened in 1994. After Lenzen came Zaldy Orola. He started, at the urging of the then Provincial, Peding Labaglay, linkages with foreign funding agencies and partnered with CHALICE Canada, who supports the mission even now through its child sponsorship program. Bro. Joe Aduana came next, and then Mauricio for a short stint until his health failed him (now assigned at the Novitiate), then Elmer Boston and then myself since 2009.

One thread goes through all these engagements with the Indigenous Peoples. It is the daring and improvisation and the utmost sense of urgency to respond to concrete and sometimes very different contexts where God allows us to glimpse His face in the poorest of the poor.

#### CONSIDERATIONS ON INCULTURATION/CONTEXTUALIZATION/LOCALIZATION

The encounter between cultures—the Oblate missionary's and the locals', involves some important considerations to ensure that it is the person of Jesus that is being witnessed to and not something/somebody else. We best speak of inculturation/contextualization or localization rather than acculturation, as this latter has traditionally been linked with the concepts of assimilation and diffusion in anthropological discourse,

terminology that is difficult to accept in the post-modern, nationalistic-skewed locus of present day ethnic aggrupations.<sup>13</sup>

I will cite two real-life Oblate examples to elucidate the concept. Dick Weixelman, an American Oblate, has been assigned to the Philippines for 40 years. He speaks the major local languages fluently because he has the gift of gab and has really become Filipino by custom. Once, on vacation in the States, he went cruising with a nephew on the latter's pick-up truck in the Colorado Rockies. A girl on a mountain bike wanted to hitch a ride with them up some long stretch of slope, and the nephew let her, and told her to just tap on the roof whenever she wanted to get down and pedal up again. While Weix continued to tell these amazing stories, that he never seems to run out of, to his nephew, they heard the tap, the signal to stop. Without missing a beat and continuing his stories, Weix got out the door, went to the front fender area and urinated over the front tire to the absolute shock of both his nephew and the girl! Men in our part of the Philippines pee over the tires of vehicles offhand, as this is the most convenient way to do so while travelling the mountain roads and trails. Beneath Weixelman's white skin is the *Bisaya* heart.

Landry, our grade six class valedictorian this year in Pangipasan, is 16 years old and is one of the orphan boys who stays at my house. He is late in finishing elementary school as he stopped a couple of times since his father died in 2009. Being the eldest of a brood of 6, he took it upon himself to hire out for pitiable day's wages to settlers in the area to feed his siblings. They all stayed with their old grandparents as their mother lived-in with other men, the latest of whom periodically beats her and the children. Landry felt deep anger at this man, and, at one time, three years ago asked me to borrow a gun to kill him. But Landry asked to be baptized last year. I told him he should first read the bible—Genesis, Exodus, one of the Gospels and Acts. These are the minimum requests I ask for our would-be Catholics who now know how to read and write. Last Christmas break he asked to go home to visit his family. When he got back I asked him what he did to the man. He told me he wasn't able to meet him although he very much wanted to. I asked him why and he answered: "I wanted to shake his hand to say *I forgive you*." I got goose bumps all over and said: "I thought you wanted to kill him. Then why are you forgiving him now?" He said in all simplicity: "Jesus has

forgiven everyone who hurt Him and I shall too.” The Gospel culture has clashed against the tribal representations of violence and revenge.<sup>14</sup> So, here I am agape at how the Spirit works in the most unexpected places.

We are hitting the nail on its head. The choice of the Oblates to journey in the dialogue-of-life approach among the indigenous peoples is a response to Eugene’s call to dare the undared yet again. The wisdom found among these peoples through millennia of continuous cultural evolution is making a mark on our lives, challenging us towards humility and conversion. While it is true that God already went out there for them before we came, and that we should take our shoes off as we stand in holy ground along the ancestral domains, we are asked by our Founder to show the clearer face of God in Jesus by the simplicity and availability of our own lives (constitution 8, cf. Founder 1818 re: *simplicity...*).

#### “DIALOGUE-OF-LIFE” PROSPECTS<sup>15</sup>

The most recent OMI Philippine Congress documents, since 1990, as well the latest two General Chapters of the Congregation (34<sup>th</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup>), place ministry among the indigenous peoples as an imperative and most urgent mission, as these peoples are some of the most abandoned and poor in the entire world. Veering away from paternalistic, condescending methods that are lessons learned from the past, the nitty-gritty, everyday grind of “presence” is one attitude that is most helpful in this kind of life. We have all kinds of projects, programs, agenda, deadlines and what not to meet—and these are necessary in developmental work. But, we might miss the whole point of the journey. The indigenous peoples’ landscape is another world, a supposedly pristine universe ravaged now by a thousand and one encroachments. These outsider influences are globalizing—meaning unstoppable, and are also the factors that oppress, enslave and de-humanize them. The Founder tells us in the Preface to help enable them to rise up towards a humane society first of all. We are doing this at the ground level, primarily by our “presence.”

It is surprising to realize that the *Lumad* has no definite concept of time. When asked about their date of birth, the answer would be: “at the time when we started to clear our fields.” When asked about the time to

depart for a journey tomorrow, they would raise an arm towards the sky and point to an approximate position of the sun above. What is important is the now, the “present”, even if it may mean chewing beetle-nut all day. When Louis Lougen came here for a visit a few months before becoming General, he wrote me afterwards that he envied my living among these people, and commented on “the chapel you had built (*at the back of my house*) to have the “Presence” near you (*italics. mine*).”

This is a prophetic word from the Superior General, himself. Oblates are enjoined to be present to the Great Presence—the Eucharistic Jesus. Doesn’t this echo our Founder’s pleading for our traditional “*oraison?*”

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<sup>1</sup> Part of the “Bangsa Moro” ideology contends that Islam came to the south in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. However my own ethnographic study shows a much later date ca. 1480’s. Compare: R. L. CASIÑO 1985. *From Ship to Shore: Maguindanao in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*. Masteral Thesis, Ateneo de Manila University. See also: CASIÑO, Eric 2000. *Mindanao Statecraft and Ecology*. Cotabato City: Notre Dame University Press.

<sup>2</sup> J. K. CARIÑO, 2012. *Country Technical Notes on Indigenous Peoples’ Issues*. International Fund for Agricultural Development.

<sup>3</sup> J. ARCILLA, ed. 2000. *Jesuit Missionary Letters from Mindanao. Vol. I: The Rio Grande Mission, p.247* University of the Philippines Press.

<sup>4</sup> S. JUBAIR, 1999. *Bangsamoro: A Nation Under Endless Tyranny*. Kuala Lumpur: IQ Marin SDN BHD. See also: R. LOPEZ, 1968. *Agricultural Practices of the Manobo in the Interior of Southwestern Cotabato, p. 9*. Cebu City: University of San Carlos Press.

<sup>5</sup> See: O. W. WOLTERS, 1982. *History, Culture and Religion in Southeast Asian Perspective*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

<sup>6</sup> R. TIANERO, 2002. *Direct Violence and Christianity among Manobo Converts, 71-77*. Masteral Thesis Anthropology, Ateneo de Manila University. See also: Casiño op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> For indigenous representations of power and authority among Indigenous Peoples of Mindanao see: TIANERO, op. cit., 81-84. See also: Schlegel, Stuart 1970. *Tiruray Justice: Traditional Tiruray Law and Morality*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>8</sup> In the 1600s, the observation of this tribal identity was noted among the central islands' (Cebu, Samar, Leyte) converts of Fr. Alzina, especially in the practice of religious beliefs. Technology—in the tools and implements relating to a swidden type of agriculture-- were common to the Mindanao and central islands peoples. See: F. I. ALZINA, *The Muñoz Text of Alcina's History of the Bisayan Islands (1668)*, trans. pre-lim., Lietz, P.S. Chicago.

<sup>9</sup> Fr. Jacinto Juanmarti, S.J. the legendary Jesuit of Mindanao, and earlier and later companions, until 1898 tried to convert the moro of Mindanao and Sulu (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus* approach). Arcilla, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> These sleek craft of around 30-40 feet long had retractable sails and up to a 70-man crew of rowers, and was the scourge of the colonial navies of Spain, Portugal and the Dutch. If the steam engine was not invented, there probably would not have been colonists in this part of the world. Studies by Ruurdje Laarhoven Casiño (op. cit) of original ships log of the Dutch East India Co. in the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> c. reveal this fear among the Captains and crew.

<sup>11</sup> The term *dulangan* in the *Teduray* language means “very easily angered.”

<sup>12</sup> “The encounter of non-western societies with Christianity is often viewed as inextricably bound up with the spread of colonial power. Christian converts are perceived as living firmly within the orbit of the mission's influence, de-cultured, and alienated from their religious and cultural roots. (D. MOSSE, 1994. *The Politics of Religious Synthesis*. In *Syncretism, anti-syncretism: the politics of religious synthesis*, eds., Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, 85-105. London: Routledge).”

<sup>13</sup> See: M. J. HERSKOVITS, 1958. *Acculturation: The Study of Culture Contact*. Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith.

<sup>14</sup> Violence and revenge killings are sanctioned by tribal law. See: C. FAY-COOPER, 1913. *The Wild Tribes of Davao District, Mindanao*. Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, Publication 170. See also: J. GARVAN, 1931. *The Manobos of Mindanao*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office; A. MANUEL, 1973. *Manuvu Social Organization*. Quezon City: Community Development Research Council, University of the Philippines; R. ROSALDO, 1980. *Ilongot Headhunting 1883-1974*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press; SCHLEGEL 1970 op. cit., Tianero 2002 op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Cardinal Quevedo shares his thoughts at the death of Cardinal Francis George (they were students at Catholic U in the past). Once in a synod meeting where both were present, the latter asked him why it was so important in Asia to have the dialogue-of-life approach towards other cultures and religions. He continued on to say that, after Quevedo's answer, he understood what it really meant. Quevedo jokes to say that: “after all these years, you finally learned something from me!”

## **SIGNIFICANT EXPERIENCE OF HOW THE OBLATES HAVE LIVED OUT THEIR CHARISM IN VARIOUS HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS**

BRADLEY ROZAIRO, OMI

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives and to give new sight to the blind; to free the oppressed and to announce the Lord’s year of mercy.” Luke 4:18.

St. Eugene, our Founder, was influenced by the mission statement of Jesus. After the French revolution in 1789, he saw the situation and wanted some priests to do something about it, and that is how the Oblates began their work. They started with one aim, simple and possible: restore the faith, bring society back to God and God back to society, to religion, to the Religious, and bring about a renewal and conversion. Eugene’s charism and his vision began to encompass greater needs. He asked the Oblates to go anywhere, with a zeal for the salvation of souls.

SRI LANKA: FR. MICHAEL (MIKE) RODRIGO – MARTYR IN LIVING THE  
INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Fr. Mike was born on June 30, 1927, in Sri Lanka. He heard the ‘cry of the poor’ and, in 1980, he took up residence at his new mission in Buttala, a strong Buddhist area where the people were poor and neglected. He formed a small group of two religious sisters and lay people, and worked for the spiritual and social betterment of the poor. He called it “Christianity Living for Buddhism at the Village Level.” Near the end of his life, he received threats and began to discern the will of God for himself.

His last Eucharistic celebration was the climax of a painful and difficult process of discernment, where Fr. Mike and his colleagues struggled to arrive at a crucial decision: whether to stay on to continue their mission among the poor helpless peasants, or to evacuate for safety reasons. Fr. Mike was fully aware of the alarmingly increasing opposition of vested interests to his presence in Buttala.

Having weighed the pros and cons, the group made a courageous decision to carry on regardless. Leaving Buttala was not an option, for, whatever the risks, the people could not be abandoned. His commitment to their liberation was irrevocable.

On that fateful November day, towards the end of the Eucharist, he was discerning with his little group about the continuation of his ministry. It was then that he heard the noise behind him. Thus he died a martyr, laying down his life at the altar.

The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the assassination of Fr. Mike was celebrated on November 10, 2012 at Buttala. The Oblate Bishop, Norbert Andradi, in his homily stated: “Humanly speaking, we are witnessing to a very sad occasion; but from a spiritual point of view it is a blessed occasion. We are participating in the same holy Eucharist with which Fr. Mike’s life culminated. Rather than conforming to the social standards of the day, he stood for the rights of the oppressed poor, and raised their human lives to a divine level, fearless of threats and accusations. He was constantly searching for the kind of action with which he could fully involve himself in the lives of the poor, rather than resorting to escapism, letting his blood be poured into the same chalice in which the Eucharistic blood of Jesus had been a few minutes ago”. (He was shot soon after the communion rite).

There were two aspects to Fr. Mike’s ministry; namely, indigenization and kenosis. For Fr. Mike indigenization was not simply adaptation of certain aspects of local art, decorations, vestments, and liturgy. Instead, it was a question of incarnating the Christian teaching in the lives of the people. Referring to the violence of July 1983, Fr. Mike stated that the Tamils suffered much more than the Sinhalese. We have only one race; namely, humanity. Racist violence is a shame on humanity. Fr. Mike’s indigenization was free from racism and religious fanaticism. The importance of Fr. Mike lies not so much in his expertise of Buddhism, but in his dedication to the cause of the poor.



The second aspect of the person of Fr. Mike was his kenosis. Coming from the high class society in Colombo, he sacrificed many things for the sake of the noble cause of the poor masses for whom he had made a preferential option. Just as Jesus, we too must make an exodus towards self-emptying. By self-emptying he did not mean embracing material poverty. It was a giving up of every desire and attachment that gave birth to poverty, in order to eradicate the same. He was no arm-chair critic, but someone who came down to the grass roots level, and totally identified himself with the poor.

For Fr. Mike, dialogue in Sri Lanka, with the religions, cultures, and people, meant basically a dialogue with the poor. His dialogical theology was born of the concrete experience of living in the periphery of the Church where he met the religious poor, mostly Buddhist, with their living situation. He said, “I have learnt at the feet of the people, the poor masses, and at the feet of the Gurus of the village whom I always revere –the Buddhist monks who slowly but surely try, in many places in Sri Lanka, to lead the people to the living out of the Dhamma in practice.”

JAPAN: FR. GERARD (GERRY) STEVENS (30/4/1930 – 10/5/1996)

Fr. Gerry came to Japan in 1956. After language school in Tokyo for 2 years, he began his mission. It is at this stage, very early on, that he began to be involved with non-Christian children, and especially with the outcasts, who were very numerous in Akaoka, especially near the Yasu coast. His big helper was a teacher at the church run Nursery School, Miss Aoki Asako, herself an outcast and one of the first to be baptized by the founder of the mission, Fr. Robert Gill.

Always wanting to go further and further, though he was living in Tokushima, Fr. Gerry spent his days taking the one-way, 2-hour trip by train to Ikeda, where he spent a lot of time with outcast-work. So much so, that it was decided in 1962 (to save him travel time) to transfer him to the old little Ikeda church. He contacted teachers involved with outcasts in grade and middle schools especially, and continued his favorite work.

The ‘missionary’ in Fr. Gerry’s mind, is to keep going further and beyond to evangelize. So, though he kept some contact in Ikeda, he used his facilities there to venture to the far-away mountain areas and

contact the outcasts up there and work with them, for them, and among them. Sounds like Christ’s approach!

While he was in Ikeda he also started teaching languages (French, German, Spanish and Latin) at the Zentsuji Shikoku Christian College from 1975 to 1984. In Gerry’s words: “I am glad to have had that experience, and I hope I was able to break down some prejudices against the Catholic Church in that staunchly Calvinistic society.”

Fr. Gerry was a man who believed in poverty, so he kept very little money and wore old clothes and shoes. Some of his shoes were so worn that his feet were bleeding from walking through the mountains. After 24 years in that area, he was sent to Nakamura, where his style of going out from there to the mountainous areas to evangelize remained with him. He came into contact with many Filipinas in this area, so he went to the Philippines for 3 months to learn the Tagalog language and was better able to minister to them.

Here are two examples that refer to the spirit of Fr. Gerry. 1. To *‘make more time for evangelization to the 2,700 or so islands in the Seto Sea’* probably never visited by a Catholic missionary. 2. Constant pleading for Japan to *‘open a mission in Afghanistan’* where, according to him, no Christians are allowed to evangelize, the only such nation in the world”.

#### BANGLADESH: IN 1971, TEN OBLATES FROM SEVEN COUNTRIES ARRIVED IN BANGLADESH

Today they are working in one of the poorest countries in the world in difficult circumstances, and reaching out to the poor with their tribal faces. In Bangladesh, they understood that they had to go to the places where others were reluctant to go, to see what others did not see, to hear what others don’t hear, and to be present when needed anywhere.

By 1978, nine out of ten Oblates had left, but one persevered. In that year, five Oblates joined the mission. They had to look forward, otherwise they would not, and could not, survive. They knew that the beginning of many missions was apparent failure, but as their numbers increased, they ventured out into the unknown territories, other dioceses, and even prepared the ground for a diocese (Sylhet), which was to have a first Oblate Bishop.

Some were even sent to malaria-infested places, knowing that two religious and a layman died, within 24 hours after getting malaria, and yet they went. They had to work with different tribes, each one having a different mentality. Among the Tripuras, sometimes, if one child is punished for a just reason, the whole group would leave silently in the night. This happened a couple of times in the hill tracts.

They had to adapt according to their temperaments, forgive a hundred times and wash their feet like Jesus. They had to change according to the physical location; walk 15 kilometers just to meet a few people, drink their delicious tea with salt, and enjoy a meal of roots and roots, sleep with them in their houses.

The poor were in a deplorable situation. No schools, medicine, minimum clothes, ordinary food and bamboo houses. The Oblates heard their cries and responded because they were sent to them. Their presence triggered and tipped the scales, and that was the day that the Savior's hope had meaning for them. Actually, it was as if Jesus was already there and calling the Oblates to minister to them. It was and is surprising how the people responded to them. Villages are being transformed, developed by simple things, because of the presence of grace.

People saw in the Oblates sincerity, a good heart, and the concern for their well-being, and responded accordingly. They dared to start small and in reality, they found new needs, new places, and charity invented new means and found newer ways into the hearts and villages, of people or they made a way.

**Oblate Spirit:** For the Oblates, much of their success in ministry is due to the fact that they are a closely-knit group. From day one, they have had monthly meetings for two days, one for retreat and one day for business. One Priest gives a talk in the morning and, in the evening, they have faith sharing. Now, because of the distance, they have a delegation meeting once in two months and a district meeting in the other month. This has been the cement that keeps them bonded.

The Oblate Madonna gives them her best smile, and so they are confident that she will accompany them as they continue to evangelize the poor with their many faces and have the gospel preached to them in this far distant poor land.

## CONCLUSION

As Oblates, our fundamental call is to serve the poor of today with the dreams and visions of St. Eugene. As our Constitutions say, “Wherever we work, our mission is especially to those people whose condition cries out for salvation and for the hope which only Jesus Christ can fully bring. These are the poor with their many faces; we give them our preference.” (C 5)

I think for the past 199 years, we, in our own little ways, have been trying to live the charism of our Founder by reaching out to the poor with their many faces. As we come to a very important time in the life of our Congregation, I wish and pray that we continue to persevere in the work of evangelization, and touch the lives of those whose condition cries out for salvation.

“All that is necessary is a little courage and confidence in God, who will show us the way and who will never abandon us”. May these words of St. Eugene encourage us as we carry out God’s mission here on earth.

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## THE INDONESIAN OBLATES HISTORY

ANTONIUS SUSSANTO, OMI

**O**n this special occasion I would like to present before you our Indonesian Oblate history in living the Oblate Charism. It has been more than 40 years that Oblates have been doing mission in Indonesia. Encouraged by zeal for the salvation of souls, the Oblate pioneers came to Indonesia. Their choice was to work among the poor, to make the poor able to stand on their own. Some places have grown into developed areas, but others are still left behind by progress. Oblate touched them materially and spiritually.

### BRIEF INDONESIAN OBLATES HISTORY

Originally they came from 3 (three) different provinces, Australia, Italy and France. Australian Oblates were invited by the bishop to take up the ministries in Java. They did parish work with social and educational concern. Italian and French Oblates came to Indonesia after they were expelled from Laos by the communist authority. They preferred to go for mission in a place like Laos. And they found it in Indonesia. Italians got obediences for East Borneo, whereas the French were in West Borneo. They formed three (3) delegations. All the places where Oblates were working were slum areas, rural/remote areas, and the countryside. In Java they lived together with Javanese. In Borneo they lived mostly with Dayak. Among them there were many outsiders coming from other islands and ethnicities. Oblates observed their life style. Some Oblates were given Javanese or Dayak names, but some took the native names by themselves. They are very comfortable living with the indigenous people. Some Oblates are able to speak the local languages, dancing and entering into their tradition/cultures.

From the very beginning, they were very concerned about building up the autonomous community and raising up local vocations. About community, they formed Oblate communities and basic Christian communities. Bishops gave them some parishes to be ministered to, and also asked them to establish new parishes and dioceses. After some time, the Oblates handed some parishes over to the dioceses due to fewer personnel and the development of the parishes ready to stand alone. Then, regarding the local vocations, soon after settling down and doing the ministries, they promoted the Oblate vocation. They received some candidates, and the first formation for local Oblates began. Many young men, whether coming from Oblates parishes, diocesan minor seminaries or outside, joined the Congregation as candidates for priesthood or brotherhood. Though every year we get vocations, but the growing number of personnel is not significant. We are still few in number, and many Oblates have taken up multiple-tasks.

Becoming aware of the rapid growth of the mission and the lack of personnel, it is necessary to work together as a team. Though the three delegations did not come to know each other personally in the beginning, and in some ways were quite different, humbly they came together to form one province, declared by Superior General Marzello Zago in 1993. Some local Oblates had come and were ready to take up the ministries. There would be the sharing of personnel and sources to make our mission possible. It was really a blessing for us that the Oblate pioneers took quick proper action in responding to the needs of the time. Now, the foreign missionaries are reduced in number and new ones cannot enter Indonesia like them again. But local missionaries are already available, though the number is still limited.

### THE LIVED OBLATE REALITY

As I already mentioned before,, Oblates came from different backgrounds and worked in different areas with different situations, getting to know each other personally through various meetings and programmes and forming one province. Therefore, they also faced some challenges in living the commitment of being one province. It is necessary to note some realities which make them struggle but still joyfully living the Oblate life.

### *Geographical Background*

The Oblate's choice is to work among the poor and the most abandoned and they received it. Especially those who work in the countryside, geographically it is really heavy work. They go through land, rivers or by flight to remote areas. Sometimes they must walk through the forest because a road is not available or is just a narrow road. They face the different climates, sudden rain and quickly changing weather. They are also threatened by malaria, which has killed many people. At the beginning, transportation and communication were not easy. Now only some places cannot be reached by public transportation and have no signal for mobile phones. Oblates could not expect parishioners attending prayer services and other parish activities to come to the central parish. They must go visiting stations or villages, travelling (a week or more) called 'turne'. Sometimes they were able to gather people together in one place for a special occasion.

### *Social and Cultural Background*

Indonesia has many ethnic groups scattered throughout whole islands. They have different local languages and traditions. Some ethnics maintain their culture, but some have already disappeared. Oblates have a commitment to preserve the traditions and cultures and use them for evangelization, because there is local wisdom. Missionaries should embrace them in order to make the mission accepted. Some cultures are not suitable for the teaching of the Church, like gambling and superstition. Slowly the Oblates help them to come to an awareness of which cultures must be preserved and developed. Therefore it is important to learn one's culture to make our mission effective.

### *Economic and Educational Background*

The occupation of many people is cultivation, and others are workers, fishermen, etc. They are under estimated and mostly in poor condition. Many forests are destroyed for plantation or mining purposes. Oblates are recognized as working for and with the poor people. This poverty is also supported by little education, young people married and jobless. Therefore Oblates provide some economic and educational assistance for the people, not only for Christians. Other than that,

some Oblates also participate in building up the infra-structure, so that transportation can work and family economics can grow. Establishing a boarding house for the village children and fund-raising is one way to increase the quality of education, reduce the number of young marrieds, and prepare the youth to be leaders in the future. Giving some cultivation courses helps the people to preserve their environment. Working together with the local government and the people concerned is an effort to improve the quality of the people's life.

### *Spiritual Background*

Some ethnics have their traditional belief and some have no religion. In some parishes there already were Catholics living among other religions. Oblates worked in that situation. They introduced Christianity to the simple and poor people. They observe Christianity in simplicity. The Church is still young and not all Catholics have the same awareness of practicing their faith. Collaborating themselves with other Church ministers and laity/catechists, they help the parishioners to grow in faith. In some places it is not easy to build the church, because they face challenges from the majority religion. But in other places it is not difficult to build churches for religious activities.

Provincials gave some notes on the life of newly formed province. The first provincial, of Italian origin, wrote on communications. It is important to have clear and smooth communication. On the administrative level, the provincial and his council confirms that everything is running well, whereas the local superior should be the key person in communicating many things to the community. The Superior should maintain the mission without neglecting religious life, personal encounters, young Oblate accompaniment, problem solving, etc. Then the second provincial, an Australian, mentioned that sometimes he felt like leading four (4) provinces due to financial problems and the growth of district communities. Sometimes it was difficult to be united since every community wished to hold onto its diversity. The third provincial is an Indonesian, and he noted that there is gap between the first Oblate generation, mostly growing old, and the young Oblates who have different ideas and characters which challenge the community life and mission. But regeneration must go on, passing from the pioneers to the



local Oblates. Then the present provincial asks us to have a new perspectives as a sign of conversion.

### THE DIMENSIONS OF THE CHARISM

The charism is observed personally and communally. In almost every provincial congress that was held, the practice of the charism was evaluated and they produced new recommendations. Zealously, every Oblate tries to live this charism in his busy ministries. Some can be mentioned in this way:

#### *The life of prayer and consecration*

Prayer is an important part of religious life. Every community should give an atmosphere which is conducive for prayer life. Many communities have their chapel or prayer room. But some communities do not have specific room for prayer, and sometimes they use a living room. Some communities have a regular common prayer, some do it personally. It is recommended to have a particular place for community prayer, observing Oblates religious tradition, celebrating Oblate feasts and ceremonies together, doing recollection and retreat, celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation, doing other spiritual exercises, and above all celebrating the Eucharist.

#### *Community life*

Ideally an apostolic Oblate community contains more than one missionary. It is like the community of the Apostles with Jesus (C. 3). Unfortunately, some Oblates are living alone, doing so many tasks and responsibilities. Sometimes it is not easy to come together in a particular moment because of the ministries. But we try to have a community of two Oblates at least. It is also possible that nearby communities have a regular encounter for prayer, sharing, recreation, Oblates feasts, etc. The members of the community are varied according to age, life experience, place of origin, education level, ministries, etc. But we have come to the awareness that we form this apostolic community because we have same vocation and mission.

### *Mission*

It was mentioned that we are men set apart for the Gospel (C. 2) to preach Christ Crucified, and the Cross of Jesus is central to our mission (C. 4). We are doing our community mission, but some Oblates do their own instead, so that sometimes it is difficult for some to be transferred to another community. Using intensive dialogue, the particular Oblate understand the meaning of doing community mission and then are ready to be sent anywhere. In doing the mission, we also collaborate with other ministers of the Church and laity (R. 9a). We animate the laity to take part more in the services because very rarely are priests able to come for sacramental services (priests sometimes come twice or thrice a year due to the vastness of the areas and missions).

### *Marian devotion*

It is an Oblate commitment to do ‘a double mission’, evangelization and devotion. While preaching the Good News, wherever an Oblate goes he should promote devotion to Mary (C. 10). First of all Oblates should have an intimate devotion to Mary. By their constant devotion, people will follow, observing this religious practice. Some Oblates also built Marian Shrines/Grottos where Masses, novenas and prayers are held. The most suitable times to do those pious acts are in May (Month of Mary) and October (Month of Rosary). Oblates accompany the pilgrims, preach the recollection/retreat, say Mass for them and welcome them generously into their houses.

### *Working among the poor*

It is our choice and vocation to work among the poor and most abandoned (C. 5). And the local Church happily gave that part to the Oblates. We also received it joyfully. Oblates are not only working but also taking on a simple lifestyle in order to be able to live together with the poor. On our *turne*, we stay for a night or more in our simple people’s family. We share meals of what they prepare for us. Sometimes we also work together with them for the Church’s functions or for the society. Together with the diocesan programme for JPIC, we form advocacy teams to help keep the marginal from being exploited by companies or irresponsible people. Many times people lost their lands, occupations

and freedom which was given to the companies due to economic needs. When Oblates try to help the victims, some people compete against them. Actually much social and financial support comes from government or benefactors, but the economic management of the people is not developed yet. Together with the parish council, Oblates educate them to have a better economic living.

#### CONCLUDING

Throughout history, our Oblate Missionaries have been living the Charism in context. They bring the charism into reality as the wish of our Founder, by uniting themselves with the people whom they serve without losing their Oblate identity. They left their place of origin for a faraway mission, and then adopted the lifestyle of the people. They understand the struggle of the abandoned. They live the incarnation Christ, proclaiming Good News to them and being Good News for them.

To deepen our learning and reflection then, I simply put these two (2) guiding questions before us as it is written in the working paper:

- How has the charism been lived in our context from its origins to today? What are the most significant experiences?
- What lessons can we learn from the successes and failures experienced throughout history?

These I would share with you from the Indonesian Oblate history perspective. May this help us to grow in understanding each other on how to live the Oblates charism. My heartfelt thanks.

*Antonius Sussanto, OMI*  
Yogyakarta, Indonesia



## THE OBLATE CHARISM IN LAOS

CLAUDIO BERTUCCIO, OMI

**F**rom 1935, the year in which the Oblate presence started in Laos, to 1976, when all but one of the foreigner missionaries had to leave or were expelled from the country, more than 100 Oblates, mostly French and Italians, worked at the service of the Kingdom in that country. Fifteen of them remain in Laotian soil. Beside the seven who shed their blood for fidelity to Christ and his people, there were eight others, likewise victims, of illness or accidents, on the river, in the air or on the roads. “They gave their still young lives – the average age of the fifteen was below forty – in order that the Church of this country could be born and develop. More than twenty years after the upheaval, it is only right to say that their work and prayers, their labors and their sacrifice, have not been in vain. It is a beautiful page of the history of the Mission which was written there, and it is only proper to give thanks to the Lord who was indeed the sole Master of the work”<sup>1</sup>.

It is exactly to give thanks to the Lord and to let many more know about this experience that I have decided to write about the Oblate Charism in Laos. Most of the sources are in French and therefore I will be forced to make my own translation, sometimes without making direct quotes. The texts that I consulted, however, are all quoted in the bibliography at the end of this paper.

### A SHORT PRESENTATION OF THE COUNTRY

A country without access to the sea, placed between China to the north, Vietnam to the east, Cambodia to the south and the Kingdom of Siam to the west, it was only thanks to the French protectorate that, at the end of the last century, Laos did not fall under its enterprising neighbors to the east and west. Only after the Second World War, together

with a rather artificial unity, Laos also obtained independence, which unfortunately, ended up under the yoke of a triumphant communism in 1975.

A mosaic of peoples, among whom the Lao are dominant, the population, which in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was not even three million inhabitants, lacks any kind of unity, be it ethnic, political, cultural or religious. The main link between the provinces in the North and those of the South, more than one thousand kilometers apart, is the Mekong River, used as the main way of communication. The Lao people settled on the banks of this majestic river and in the low valleys of its tributaries, where they built their houses on piles to avoid flooding and cultivated “sticky” rice in paddy fields. It was also along the river that the most important towns were built. Aboriginal peoples live in the mountains of the North and on the high plateau of the South. There are many tribes and each ethnic group has its own language; only a few men know enough Laotian for trade and some eventual relations with the authorities.

From the religious point of view the Lao are Buddhists, and the old village society is built around the temple and the community of monks. The mountain peoples, instead, remain attached to their traditional beliefs and do not easily accept the setting up of a temple in their village. It is true however that Buddhism is the national religion, at least up to the fall of the monarchy.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF EVANGELIZATION

The first efforts for the evangelization of Laos started already in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with Fr. Leria, an Italian Jesuit, who arrived in Vientiane, going up the Mekong River from Cambodia in 1641. Many other efforts followed in the following years, but we have no sign of conversions for almost two centuries. Most missionaries actually died even before being able to reach the country, which was not easily accessible because of its geographical configuration.

Only in 1878, finally, the MEP Society was able to establish the Catholic Mission of Laos, and groups of missionaries were present in a more stable way in the territory of Laos and especially in the territories of the North-East of Thailand that had been part of the Kingdom of Laos but had been recently passed to the Thai Kingdom. However, evange-

lization progressed slowly, the northern part of the country receiving a visit from the missionary only every now and then. It was a huge territory, and the MEP did not have enough personnel for the evangelization of it, also considering the difficulty of the travels and the many deaths of missionaries caused by the asperity of the nature (32 dead in 25 years). For this reason, they asked for the help of another Institute, to which they would entrust a territory detached from the Mission of Laos and which would include all the Northern part of the country. After several refusals from various orders and congregations, finally the Oblates of Mary Immaculate accepted the invitation in 1933. The first group of three missionaries reached Vientiane only in January, 1935, after a long trip going up the Mekong River. At their head was Fr. Mazoyer, a French man with missionary experience in Ceylon for 25 years. He would become the first Apostolic Prefect of Vientiane, in 1938.

Laos was already known as a difficult mission<sup>2</sup> for many reasons: the climate, the difficulty of communication, the abuses of power by the local and colonial authorities, the insecurity of the country... The Oblates, already well known for their dedication in the difficult missions of North Canada, had no experience of a missionary work in a French colonial administration. Usually the French Oblates were working in British colonies. In Laos they worked hard to keep the reputation of the name give to the Oblates by Pope Pius XI: The “specialists of the most difficult missions”.

### THE OBLATES IN LAOS: THE HISTORY

Fr. Chevroulet, a historian of the Oblates in Laos, wrote: “It is said that, in the course of his first reconnaissance journey the previous year, Father Mazoyer had wept on realizing the difficulties which awaited the missionary in that country. And he could not guess what the circumstances of the war and the wickedness of men would add to the natural obstacles!”<sup>3</sup>

In the territory destined for the Oblate apostolic activity there were only two reasonably well established sectors: the rural district of Paksane, which included among its villages the first Christian settlement of northern Laos, Ban Keng Sadok, on the bank of the Mekong, and the urban Christian community of Vientiane, almost entirely composed of Vietnamese. It was therefore necessary to set about studying

the languages (Lao and Vietnamese) at once, and it is what they did in order to be able to take care of the small Christian communities inherited from their predecessors. All together in their territory, there were fewer than two thousand Catholics, and among them many immigrants from Vietnam. They also immediately tried to make contact with the people on the mountains, but it was a sporadic presence because of the limited number of personnel.

The group increased rapidly. Missionaries arrived from France, Canada and Belgium. In 1938, the Mission was developed enough to be raised to a Prefecture Apostolic, the first entirely Laotian ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Fr. Mazoyer was named the Prefect. He had fourteen priests with him, thirteen of whom were Oblates, one diocesan, and a Brother. The remarkable effort of the Congregation made it possible not only to maintain the existing posts, but especially to open others with a resident missionary, in particular at Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang. Moreover, some priests were sent into the villages in the forests and on the mountains, where promising contacts were made.

From the beginning until Vatican Council II, the mission was under a special Statute, which did not allow the Oblates to build anything for their own institute. Everything had to be done or built for the Local Church. The religious' congregational character was not much respected. All Oblate missionaries were under the direct authority of the Apostolic Vicar, who happened to be an Oblate too. The missionaries' mentality was shaped by this Statute for many years, and it had a lasting effect on the unit even after its revocation during Vatican II.

Unfortunately, all this growth was to be cut off sharply with the beginning of the Second World War, which disorganized the Mission and deprived it of any reinforcements until 1947. The breaking off of all relations with Europe was also a cause of serious financial problems for the mission.

In Thailand and in the South of Laos the situation was very hard, with a real persecution of the Church, seen as an ally of the western powers. In Northern Laos, the part entrusted to the Oblates, the Japanese occupation restricted much of the movement and activity of the missionaries. From 1943, the two Canadian Fathers were interned in Vietnam, confined in a house of the Redemptorist Fathers, and this reduced the already limited active personnel of the Mission. Things



changed from March 9, 1945, when the strong attack by the Japanese allowed the Nipponese Army to take full control. That meant the arrest of all French missionaries, with the exception of those who went underground. The personnel of the Mission found itself reduced to two Laotian Priests. Once again the Mission of the Oblates was affected less than that of the South, which saw two French bishops and two priests massacred by the Japanese (March-August 1945).

It was a really troubled period that would last beyond the Japanese surrender (August 15, 1945) because the Viet-Minh communists took advantage of it to declare the independence of Vietnam. This was soon to be imitated by their pale Laotian copy that began to make itself known under the name of “Pathet Lao” (“Lao Country”) or “Lao Issara” (“Free Laos”). The French army only slowly re-conquered the country. The situation also was very confused because of the Chinese occupation of the northern provinces, which would need a long time to return to normal. The return of the Apostolic Prefect would not occur until some months later, while troubles of all kinds were the lot of the missionaries who remained in the country, even after their freedom from Japanese prisons. Some had to go to Thailand, the new name for Siam since 1939.

“The war, finally over in Europe, also seemed to be drawing to a close in Asia, and new missionary reinforcements would be able to give new vigor to a young Mission, struck too soon by the ups and downs of international politics. This, however, was but an illusion, since from 1946, in spite of the agreements signed between the Vietnamese communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, and the French government, a new period of disorder began, which history remembers under the name of the First Indochina War or the French War”.<sup>4</sup>

The Mission however started again with a new energy, thanks to the arrival of fifteen new Oblates, one of whom was a Brother, in 5 years (1947-1952). This new generation of missionaries, which had experienced the war and had been in contact with a new theology born from the renewal of research in Liturgy, Patrology, Ecclesiology and Spirituality, had a new mission awareness, new mission methods and a great enthusiasm.

“These young Oblates would unite themselves entirely with the villagers, living with them, eating with them, working with them, suffering with them. Very often, and in many places, it was not secure to go beyond the limits of the village because of the various anti-French movements. At the same time, there was virtually no contact with the non-Catholic population. The Catholics were even forbidden to have any contact with ‘Pagans’, to say nothing of participating in any Buddhist ritual”.<sup>5</sup>

The most noteworthy developments concerned the Minor Seminary of Paksane, opened in 1942 during the war under the name “De Mazenod Institution”. It took some years before a permanent structure was built in 1956. Another difficult beginning, but one that promised to develop rapidly, was the mission among the minority groups, at first among the Hmong, especially in the Luang Prabang sector, then among the Khmu, the poorest of the poor, on the banks of the Plain of Jars (Xieng Khouang).

Because of the progress of the Mission during these years, a Vicariate Apostolic was set up in 1952. Fr. Jean Mazoyer, aged 70, had retired, and so Fr. Etienne Loosdregt, one of the first group of Oblates in Laos, was named the first Bishop in Vientiane. But the situation appeared more and more precarious, as heavy communist attacks from North Vietnam threatened Luang Prabang, and later Xieng Khouang. However, the decisive Vietnamese victory of Dien Bien Phu would put an end to this first war (July 1954). There was finally a ray of sunshine after all the years of tempest that had ravaged the mission.

Fr. Chevroulet states:

“Then began what might be considered the best years of the Oblate Mission in Laos as the Vicariate expanded from the province of Sam-Neua to the Vietnam border after the communists had returned it to the national community. December, 1958, saw the ordination of two diocesan priests whose complete training had taken place locally. (...) A new missionary district was begun at Nam Tha on the Chinese border. It was in reply to the growing need that the Oblate Congregation decided to send some Italian missionaries to Laos. This influx of new men, from November, 1957, on, permitted a rapid development in the northern part of the Mission”.<sup>6</sup>

Because of this development, in 1963 the Vicariate Apostolic of Luang Prabang was created. Bishop Lionello Berti was its first bishop. However, by this time the Church in Laos had already been through some tragic times once again. Let's briefly retrace their development.

After Laos received full independence in 1953, a period of relative peace settled in for several years (1954-1960). During the years 1958-1960 it was even possible to travel anywhere in Laos. In 1956, Bangkok became the normal transit place for missionaries going to Vientiane in place of Saigon. In the same year, the Vicariate of Vientiane was divided into districts for pastoral reasons. These pastoral districts became the form of the religious communities. In fact, except for the Seminary of Paksane, the missionaries usually lived alone, even isolated. They met all together only once a year for the annual retreat. At the district level they gathered once a month.

In 1958, the Italian Oblates took charge of the region of Luang Prabang. In the same year some regions previously attached to a Vicariate in North Vietnam became part of the Vicariate of Vientiane. In 1959, the Lao translation of the Four Gospels in One was printed for the first time in Lao script. In the same year the religious authority was clearly separated from the ecclesial authority, and the first Oblate Provincial of Laos was appointed. For the old generation, used to dealing only with the bishop, and for the bishop himself, it was not easy to understand the need of a religious superior in addition to the bishop.

Unfortunately, 1959 is a turning point for the political situation of Laos. A priest from the MEP (Foreign Paris Missions) was assassinated in Southern Laos. It was a sign of things to come. Already in 1960 the war raged all over Laos again, and it would stop only in 1975 with the start of the Communist system. In April, 1960, Fr. Mario Borzaga, an Italian Oblate, disappeared in the mountains in Luang Prabang area, killed by the guerrillas. In that year, there are several attempts at a coup d'état. Clearly the situation was not far from civil war. The communist regime was imposed in the North-East of Laos. The Oblates living there escaped by a miracle, but this event closes a short but inspiring missionary effort in that region.

The Oblates were not the only ones to be worried about the political developments. Most Laotian people did not look positively at the communist militaries (Pathet Lao) and the communist ideology. They

wanted tranquility and the guerrilla war was making any hope for peace fade. While the Christians shared the same apprehensions and hopes as their compatriots, they had however reasons to harbor special fears. They knew what had happened in China when the communist regime took over. All the foreign missionaries had to leave the country, and very soon, even before the Cultural Revolution, a real persecution was begun. They also knew of the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese Catholics in 1954, who chose to flee the regime in the North in order to protect their faith. They themselves would not be able to escape in the same manner. Objectively it must be acknowledged that the reasons for fear were quite real, because it was well known what the communists thought of religion in general and Catholicism in particular.

Finally the war expanded also into the region around Vientiane. In 1961, the situation became very tense. Four Oblates were killed. The hope of continuing the mission in the Hmong and Khmu villages was very limited, at least for the foreign missionaries. “It became clear that difficult days lay ahead for the missionaries. But had not that been their lot since the beginning? At the time, orders from Rome were that, in the event the communists took power, the missionary would remain at his post with his people. This was not disputed. But had all the possible consequences been foreseen? Nobody spoke of martyrdom, a big word which, it seemed, can only be used “*post factum*”. But each one faithfully carried on his work, while admitting, given the circumstances, the possibility of capture followed by prison or even worse”.<sup>7</sup> And actually 6 Oblates gave their lives for Christ and his people in those years.

However, there was no panic. They saw the need to begin preparing the Christian communities to live their faith in fidelity to their baptism, even without the support of the priest. Emphasis was put on the formation of catechists. That’s why, in 1962, a Hmong Center and a Khmu center opened in Vientiane, with the direct aim of formation for lay catechists. To them was entrusted the pastoral and missionary work in the villages. Spiritual and doctrinal formation in Vientiane alternated with work in the mountains. Also to them were entrusted consecrated hosts for distribution during the liturgies they organized in the villages.

In spite of this distressing situation, there were still some signs of hope. In 1963, the first Lao Oblate was ordained a priest. A commission to unify all the prayers in Lao was organized. In 1964, the Bishops’

Conference of Laos and Cambodia started to exist. An OMI provincial house was opened in Vientiane. Life must go on, even though in 1967 and 1969 two more Oblates were killed and, in 1968, Bishop Berti, OMI, of Luang Prabang died in an airplane crash in the Mekong River.

After the Vatican Council, there was a new atmosphere in the Church. Interreligious dialogue was starting. The successor of Bishop Berti, Bishop Alessandro Staccioli, invited Buddhist monks to his consecration, starting a very good relationship between the Italian Oblates in the North and the Buddhist upper hierarchy. Fr. Marcello Zago spent much energy to bring about dialogue in the mentality of the clergy and the religious. His knowledge, and his direct experience of Buddhism, were much appreciated. Together with the bishop, he accompanied the Buddhist Patriarch of Luang Prabang, together with a delegation of monks, on a visit to Rome, where the Pope granted them a special audience. The relationship grew as never before<sup>8</sup>.

Also in the spirit of ecumenism, Catholics and Protestants worked together for a new translation of the Bible in Lao. Fr. Pierre Chevroulet was invited by the Protestants to participate in the work.

Efforts were made in the field of inculturation, especially in Christian art and in the Liturgy, but they were not much appreciated by the local people, who had been formed in a separation from the Buddhist context in which they lived.

In 1973 the Oblate Congregation made official the division of the Oblate Vice-Province of Laos into two units: the Vice-Province of Vientiane for the center of the country, and the Vice-Province of Luang Prabang for the North. But 1973 was also the year of a political agreement between the communists and the state authorities. Practically, the communists were integrated into the system and took it over from within. In 1974, a Political Program in 18 points was accepted by all parties: the communist liberation of Laos had started. In the same year, Bishop Nantha, the first Lao bishop, was consecrated auxiliary bishop of Vientiane. In 1975, Jean Khamse Vithavong was ordained a priest by Bishop Nantha.

Soon the Seminary in Paksane was closed. The French bishops of Laos resigned. The Italian Oblates in Luang Prabang were expelled. The next year, the French Oblates in Vientiane and all foreign missionaries in the South had to leave or were expelled. The year 1976 signals

the end of the two Oblate Vice-Provinces in Laos. The three Oblates at the time still present in the Laos were attached to the newly born General Delegation of Thailand. Finally, only one Lao Oblate could remain in the country. He was ordained bishop of Vientiane in 1983.

Only in 2009 were the Oblates able to start a new, unofficial community in Vientiane. At present there are 3 members plus a bishop. All are Laotians except for a Vietnamese father. There are also a few seminarians. One will be ordained deacon this year. The hope is that, after all these years of troubles and sufferings, it can be a new beginning for the Church, for the mission and for the Oblates.

### THE OBLATE CHARISM IN LAOS: A SHORT REFLECTION

Clearly in our context the reflection will try to highlight how the Oblates in Laos have incarnated the Charism of the Congregation in their daily life and mission, even if often not in a reflected way, also because, at that time, the Congregation did not speak much of it.

How has the charism been lived in the Lao context from its origins to today?

Starting by giving an answer to this question, I would like first of all to point out that, in Laos, the charism has always been lived in a very challenging situation caused by natural and man-made difficulties. The fact that the Oblates remained at the service of the people in spite of the risk that they were facing clearly shows their total commitment to Christ and His Church. Even though they were aware of the consequences that this choice could comport, they did not falter. In fact, as we have seen, some of them were called to the extreme witness that today the Church is recognizing as martyrdom. The others knew that they too could meet the same end.

Through people's need for salvation (Cf. C 1) the Oblates had heard within the Church the call of Jesus Christ. And they were ready to follow him and to share in his mission, both through words and deeds. In their missionary choices, they committed principally to the evangelization of the poor and, among them, to the most neglected and abandoned (Cf. C 5). That's why they were ready to work with the hill tribes, and among them they committed to the Hmong and to the Khmu, the poorest of the poor. Their desire to be close to the people (Cf. C 8) brought them to give first priority to learning the language, even if, in Laos, the

languages spoken were many. They immersed fully into the life of the people, sharing their life, their work, their way of life, their food, their suffering, especially in the villages. Fr. Michel Lynde, OMI, loves to say that he was born again in Laos.

They were ready to leave everything to be disciples of Jesus (Cf. C 2). They had not only left their country and their family, but also all comforts and the legitimate desire for a peaceful life in a safe environment. As it is witnessed many times by the Lao people, and also by the life and death of many Oblates in that mission, they gave themselves to the Father in obedience, even unto death, and dedicated themselves to God's people in unselfish love. Their apostolic zeal was sustained by the unreserved gift they made of themselves in their oblation. And, as we have seen while retelling the story, really this offering had to be constantly renewed by the challenges of the mission. The Crucified Jesus was the model of their life (Cf. C 4), as we can read from some notes and letters of the Oblates of that time.

Religious and community life (Cf. C 3) were lived within the limits of their understanding at the time and the law given to them by the Church. Certainly, the religious virtues of chastity, poverty and obedience were part of their life, in spite of the loneliness they had to face living alone most of the time in a context that was not theirs. Poverty was imposed on them by the harshness of the mission; obedience was lived within the limits of the Statute that was given them by the Church with the approval of the Congregation. In this, clear the necessary distinction between the ecclesiastic authority and the religious authority was not really clear. As we have seen, it was the source of many tensions when later on they tried to clarify it. The expression of community life in most cases was limited to the gathering they could have once a month, in the prayer for each other, and in the friendship and support they could offer to each other. We read of the importance of those gatherings in the diaries of some Oblates, in the Codex, in their letters, and in the witness of those still living in our days.

In full unity with the Church and especially the local bishop, with the help of the developments that followed the Vatican Council, they were ready to cooperate with all for the proclamation of the Kingdom (Cf. C 6). In this context we can understand the efforts made in order to collaborate with Protestants and, in a special way, the relationship

that they built with the Buddhist authorities, especially in the North, as we have already seen here above. The Buddhist monks, when the Italian missionaries were expelled in 1975, assured them that they should not worry about their Christian communities, because the monks would take care of their Christian brothers and sisters. And indeed they took care of what they could, even when later on the persecution reached Buddhism.

The Oblates worked hard to establish Christian communities and a Church that was rooted in the local culture and fully responsible for their own development and growth (Cf. C 7). Certainly it was not the way the Church looked at mission when the Oblate presence started in Laos, but, after the Vatican Council, and also pushed by the unstable and worrisome political situation, they worked for it. They created liturgical hymns and songs in Lao with the use of local melodies that are still used in Laos today. They tried to develop a seminary and support local vocations, both for the diocesan clergy and the congregation. They started centers for the formation of catechists that could take care of the Christian communities in their absence. Unfortunately, they had little time left before they were forced to leave the country. Perhaps not many local priests were left in the country when the missionaries had to go, but it is a fact that the Church, rooted in the faith received by the proclamation of the Oblates, has survived 30 years of persecution and that the faith has been kept and has even developed, thanks to the help of the Lord and to the commitment of the local bishops, priests, consecrated women (Sisters of Charity, Lovers of the Cross and OMMI) and lay catechists. Especially these last two categories, certainly more numerous than the first two, have been the strong support of the faith of the people in times in which, in the whole country, bishops and priests were only a little more than a dozen.

Not much has been said in this paper yet about devotion to Mary. However it is enough to have a simple contact with the Church in Laos to be struck by the filial devotion of the people to Mary, the Mother of the Lord and our mother. To her they entrust their life and sufferings, and she has been their real support in the long years when the Church was reduced to silence. Even if the liturgies could not be celebrated; even if priests could not be met; even if sacraments could not be received; even if crosses could not be kept in the houses; the rosary and



the family prayer to her has nourished the faith of generations of Christians in Laos, where these children of God were brought to her Son by her love.

Today the Church in the whole country has a little more freedom and it has started to flourish again. Vocations are increasing and it is possible to welcome them for formation, though under close control of the government. Some villages ask for the proclamation of the Good News and even for baptism. It is the hope of a new Spring.

The small Oblate community present in Laos today tries to live its commitment to Christ and his Kingdom with humility and daring, not afraid of the difficulties and the limitations of their own group and of the political and ecclesial situation. While moving in the footsteps of our fathers in the faith, trying to imitate their apostolic zeal and their commitment, they are also trying to give more stress to community life, aware of its importance for the support of the members and for the witness it offers. Many are the challenges, especially in front of the many urgent needs of the mission, but the Oblates want to keep their community and religious life as a priority, as a gift they can offer to the Local Church. We are no longer 100 as in the past, but only three. The political situation does not yet allow total freedom of movement. Since it is not easy to let foreign missionaries work in the country, we are helped to work so that our Charism can be rooted more in the Local Church, both through Laotian consecrated members and lay people. The challenge is keeping the ideal bright in our hearts: living our consecration to God for the service of the Kingdom without wanting to see immediately the fruits and without getting discouraged. Obviously failures are part of life, and hopefully also learning experiences for a better future.

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<sup>1</sup> P. CHREVROULET, *Oblates witnesses in Laos*, in "OMI Documentation" 229, September 1999, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. R. JACQUES, *Laos: le choc des independances*, Brepols 2007, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> P. CHREVROULET, *Oblates witnesses in Laos*, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> P. CHREYROULET, *The Oblates in Laos*, edited by B. Arens, Pro Manuscripto, 2007, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> P. CHREYROULET, *Oblates witnesses in Laos*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> P. CHREYROULET, *Oblates witnesses in Laos*, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. R. Jacques, *Laos: le choc des independances*, p. 25-26.

## THE OBLATE CHARISM: ITS IMPACT ON FILIPINO OBLATE ASPIRANTS

ROSS B. KAPUNAN, OMI

**T**he first Oblates arrived in the Philippines from North America in 1939 (75 years ago). As of today, we have 109 Oblates, including scholastics in temporary vows in the Philippine Province, (Thai delegation not included), thanks to the generosity of Filipinos who have responded to God's invitation to bring the Good News to the poor through the Oblates. A major percentage of Filipino Oblates went through the Juniorate formation program or what we call today the Oblate Residential Aspirancy Formation Program.<sup>1</sup> A traditional portion of this initial formation stage, which serves as preparation for the prenovitiate, is spent on immersion in Oblate mission fields.

Aspirants in their third and in their final year<sup>2</sup> respectively are sent in pairs to Oblate communities where they experience the actual life of a missionary. The purpose of this is to allow Oblate aspirants to live with the realities of Oblate religious and missionary life: the almost never ending walks in muddy and mountainous villages, the dangerous drive around cliffs and ravines, witnessing the struggles of the poor, seeing how the Oblates relate with these people and their attitude in the ministry, their experience of Oblate community life in all its richness and challenges. Hopefully, the experience will awaken the aspirants' interest in the missionary life, having had a first-hand experience of the mission, so that they may be able to appreciate the beauty and struggle of the Oblate community and, most importantly, that they may imbibe the Oblate spirit.

As the aspirants return to the formation community after a month-long missionary immersion, they bring a rich array of experiences. One can sense the impact of these experiences as they share about them to the younger members of the community. There is a surging sense of ea-

gerness and enthusiasm to undertake the same experiences. Those who are still in their first and second year begin to ask how soon they can participate in the immersion program!

There is something attractive here. This is confirmed when, every year as Oblate aspirants finish their aspirancy formation program, they are asked to recount their significant experiences while in formation. What is often heard from their sharing is that, aside from experiences of personal transformation or conversion experiences, they always find significant the concrete experience of the Oblate life and mission.

It is from this context that I decided to gather the experiences of the aspirants so as to bring concrete data to our reflection, and to help us see our Oblate identity from the perspective of our formandi as we prepare for the Oblate Triennium. A survey was conducted among the Filipino Oblate aspirants and how this charism has personally touched their lives. The survey aims at identifying common characteristics of Oblates in the conduct of their missionary activities, as seen from the experience of the aspirants, and how these influenced them in a particular way.<sup>3</sup>

This charism survey will hopefully give us insights into our fidelity to the charism God has gifted to our founder, St. Eugene de Mazenod. How is the Oblate charism manifested today among Filipino Oblates? How is the charism being lived out by the community of disciples in the Far East, remotely removed from its birth place? Can we see the Oblate charism deeply rooted in the context where the Oblate missionaries are sent? What elements of the Oblate charism have impressed and inspired young aspirants seeking to follow the Lord through the Oblates?

#### THE OBLATES FROM THE EYES OF THE FILIPINO OBLATE ASPIRANTS

In the survey questionnaire, the aspirants were asked, according to their own experiences, what are the common characteristics of Oblates that are strongly manifested in their way of life (being and doing) and how do these Oblate characteristics relate to them personally.<sup>4</sup> The following is the product of the survey.<sup>5</sup> I have categorized the responses into eight: (1) *Oblates are men for others*, (2) *Oblates are God-centered*, (3) *Oblates are community oriented*, (4) *Oblates are zealous/daring missionaries*, (5) *Oblates are close to the people*, (6) *Oblates are simple and humble*, (7) *Oblates are dynamic and creative*, (8) *Oblates*

*are committed to their vows and charism.* For each category, I will cite a few direct quotations coming from the responses.

### *Oblates are men for others*

One hundred percent (18 of 18) of the respondents perceive this characteristic among the Oblates they have come by. (Related descriptions: persons towards others, focus on the people, selfless, generosity (self), practice of charity, Christ-embodiment (service), service-oriented, genuine service, the heart to sacrifice, good people)

Oblates give importance to the poor and marginalized. They are willing to give effort to attend to the needs of the people even in times of conflict in schedule.

The service they give has no mixture of bitterness and never lacks enthusiasm but God-centered service. If I become a priest I will also do the same.

Oblates offer everything for the mission (people first before self). This is a big challenge for us aspirants.

### *Oblates are God-centered*

This characteristic comes in second with seventy eight percent (14 of 18) of the respondents perceive the Oblates are. (Related descriptions: anchored in God, prayerful, closeness to God, devoted to Mary, community at prayer, strong and inspired faith, religious)

Oblates express their faith with communal prayer while some prefer personal prayer.

Praying the breviary every morning. I noticed that the value of community is well-emphasized.

They do not seem to feel the weight of difficulties and problems because they know God is with them. I have seen their good values. They preach simply but makes a mark in the hearts and minds of the people.

### *Oblates are community oriented*

The Oblates are known to have a strong community spirit. Though challenged by the increasing individualism in the society, seventy-two percent (13 of 18) of the surveyed aspirants see the Oblates to have maintained the spirit of community life. (Related descriptions: harmonious community life, united or united in love, community as family, community centered, one with community)

They (Oblates) are one in their goal of spreading the Gospel to the poor and the most abandoned. They have a sense of community and belongingness.

Oblates look after each other as a family, like brothers and that is something for us. At times, however, aspirants are neglected and feel unwelcome in the family.

I would observe that Oblates are closely intact and that they continually engage in various community lifestyles.

### *Oblates are zealous/daring missionaries*

The same number of aspirants as above (72%) views the Oblates to possess a zealous and daring spirit. (Related descriptions: zealous, zeal for mission or zealous towards the mission, engaged in the mission, daring, adventurous or adventurer and making mission fun)

For the Oblates there is no mountain too big that they could not climb it and no rough roads that they could not walk on it because they are always on the go even though the journey from one chapel to another is definitely difficult.

This is one of the most interesting Oblate character. It seems like they play between danger and adventure because when I hear their stories they seem to enjoy it. The riskier the mission is the more they actually enjoy it.

An Oblate is a smiling priest even in the face of difficult struggles and challenges of the mission. Despite the difficulties, the Oblates still manage to smile and live happily.

### *Oblates are close to the people*

Sixty-one percent (11 of 18) of the aspirants surveyed perceive the closeness of Oblates to the people they serve. (Related descriptions: closeness to the people, unconditional love for the people, charism of friendship, living with the people, heart for the people)

They bring joy to the people. They bond with the people taking time to talk to them and share stories. They indeed offer themselves to others. This has inspired me most.

The parishioners feel very comfortable living/working with the Oblates. They are very approachable and kind.

Oblates are very close to the people in every place they are assigned to. The people love the Oblates.

### *Oblates are simple and humble*

Twenty-eight percent (5 of 18) of the aspirants mentioned this characteristic among Oblates.

The Oblates emphasize the call of simplicity in terms of the food they eat, the clothes they wear and the gadgets they own.

Oblates keep and strive to have their feet on the ground and not glorifying themselves.

Most Oblates as I experience them are very simple and humble in almost all aspects of life.

### *Oblates are dynamic*

Twenty-two percent (4 of 18) of the aspirants stated this as an Oblate mark. (Related descriptions: open-minded , liberal)

Oblates are adaptive, flexible, adjust themselves in whatever community or people they are in as one way of doing and fulfilling their apostolate and their mission.

Oblates are ever changing in their mission approaches considering the needs of the contemporary world.

### *Oblates are committed to their vows and the charism*

It is indeed comforting to hear that some aspirants, 3 of 18 (17%) noticed the fidelity of Oblates to their vows and charism.

Oblates show the charism of St. Eugene de Mazenod by preaching the Gospel to the people of God.

Oblates are obedient to their superior and they are dedicated in following the vows they have professed.

Oblates are always attached to their mission and vision and to the people they are serving making them as valuable individuals in the community.

### THE ELEMENTS OF OBLATE CHARISM AND THEIR IMPACT TO OBLATE ASPIRANTS

Some elements of the Oblate charism mentioned above have particularly made strong impressions among the Oblate aspirants. However, other comments were made rather in a general way. Therefore, many of the responses will not be included in this presentation. For a more concrete picture of the charism and its impact on aspirants, it will be best to utilize only the specific elements of the charism that were explicitly stated.

### *Oblation*

To offer oneself totally for the kingdom of God is not a call particular to the Oblates. But at the same time it is truly an essential part of the Oblate identity, to which the cross that the Oblates bear is always a reminder.

One of the aspirants sees selflessness as an important element of this Oblation: “I am inspired to help others and become selfless.” Indeed, one who offers himself cannot but be selfless. For another, Oblation also means total gratuity.

There are so many characteristics that make me inspired to become an Oblate someday. Indeed, one of it is to serve with love without expecting a return.



In another instance, an aspirant sees Oblation as doing something for others.

I have come to admire the value of helping and my eyes were opened to the reality of the poor. Because of these, my heart is now very close to the apostolate and to implement programs that will help those in need.

In a general way, Oblation also means a sharing of oneself with others. For an Oblate aspirant, this is the path towards true happiness.

With such Oblate characteristics and values I came to realize many things that life is not about oneself alone but about how you open yourself to others for the sake of the Gospel. I found out that happiness is not measured by material things but by how you have lived together with others.

Finally, Oblation is expressed through service and sacrifice.

If I become a priest, I will offer myself to serve genuinely and being other-centered. A priest sacrifices himself for the people of God. I want to be good and do good for the people with God's inspiration. I may not become a priest but I will share to others what I have learned and discovered. I would like to make people feel what an Oblate is.

### *Daring spirit*

Many of the respondents have been truly inspired by the daring spirit of the missionaries. A particular aspirant admires them for their adventurous spirit.

What I can really relate with the Oblates is the zeal for the mission. I like the feeling of excitement and adventure not knowing what awaits you out there in the mission.

Another aspirant esteems their determination to evangelize, even "in the most difficult part of the world."

I have come to admire Oblate missionaries who have great determination in preaching the Word of God and evangelizing the people even in the most difficult part of the world"

A courageous aspirant is inspired by the burning zeal of missionaries to take on difficult missionary work.

I do believe that the Oblates have shown me the aspirations of engaging in difficult missions. The task at hand is not simple—it has a multitude of considerations. It is in these characteristics that I have come to admire the Oblates, to which, I too would like to be one of these “commandos” who never back down and are not picky of society.

### *Oblate Community spirit*

Indeed, one of the distinctive marks of Oblates is the emphasis on community life. The founder himself insisted on this on his deathbed saying “among yourselves practice charity, charity, charity.” The community serves as a home where each member is welcome and accepted.

I really like how the Oblates live harmoniously within their community and with the people. I feel very light and blessed when I join them.

In the Oblate community, one experiences the joy of living together. How good it is if each member feels blessed and thankful for their community.

Before, I used to believe that the life of a priest is boring. It all changed when I came to the Aspirancy and especially when we were sent to these different mission areas. The Oblate community is really great that ordinary persons would not know. I am very thankful and blessed to be here.

### *Simplicity and closeness to the people*

Oblate life reflects that of Jesus himself.

Among the Oblate characteristics what inspired me to become an Oblate missionary is their simplicity and closeness to the people because for me this is what a priest should really be just how Jesus lived while he was still with us.

## CONCLUSION

A young Oblate priest shared in one table talk, relating an occasion where he gave input to a group of lay ministers in a Diocese that the Oblates had formerly administered. He said that some of the participants expressed their longing for the Oblates as they were truly different. In other words, these people distinguish certain characteristics that are truly Oblate from non-Oblates. To me, this means that the Oblate charism is truly alive and has taken root in places and people where the Oblates have been planted.

Consequently, the Oblate charism today continues to inspire young aspirants to follow in the way of Christ through the Oblates. The Oblates' selflessness and zeal for God's mission, the community spirit left by the founder as his legacy, and the Oblate way of ministering to people with the attitude of closeness and humility have been important elements of the charism that brought inspiration among Filipino Oblate aspirants. It is our hope that the spirit of the founder, St. Eugene de Mazenod, will continue to be passed on to the younger generations and be kept alive for the generations to come. The result of the survey somehow affirms that the Oblate charism remains alive today among the Oblates in the Philippines.

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<sup>1</sup> The Oblate Philippine Province maintains a residential aspirancy formation program which the congregation finds "... useful for awakening and nurturing vocations." The aspirancy program aims to "... provide the(ir) students with an appropriate place and conducive environment to grow as human beings, Christians and Oblate aspirants. It (They) may also provide the necessary academic preparation for those candidates from cultures or contexts that do not provide appropriate initial intellectual formation necessary for university and graduate philosophical, theological and pastoral studies." (cf. GNOF-2013 #90)

<sup>2</sup> The current Oblate residential aspirancy formation lasts four years.

<sup>3</sup> There have been very little documented study on the charism among the Oblates in the Philippines. During the 75th anniversary celebration of Oblates in the Phil-

ippines, an informal sharing among the participants was documented by Fr. Ed Santoyo, OMI.

<sup>4</sup> The number of aspirants surveyed was 19. However, only 18 are included in this survey since one response was invalidated as the aspirant just copied his response from his co-aspirant. Those who were surveyed had at least experienced two mission immersions for one month to different Oblate communities. See annex 1 on survey.

<sup>5</sup> This survey, however, only took into account the more “ideal” Oblate life as the aspirants were sent to a more “ideal” Oblate community as well. It does not pretend to generally speak of the other Oblate realities on the ground, since we are truly aware of the many aberrations in our Oblate identity and mission.

## DOMINE, QUO VADIS?

REY EMMANUEL M. AMANCIO, OMI

With our celebrations for the 200<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the Congregation's foundation, and forty years since the first congress on the Oblate charism, we find ourselves probably asking today, where are we heading as Oblates? What now? Where are we going? These are valid questions to ask now that we are nearing the end of this Congress, but I would like to propose that we, first, direct such query as a prayerful longing to our dear Lord, resonating in our context, here and now, that same confusion of Peter.

"Domine, quo vadis?" "Lord, where are you going?" The modern usage of the phrase refers to a Christian tradition regarding St. Peter. According to the apocryphal Acts of Peter, he is fleeing from the general persecution of Catholics in Rome and the likely crucifixion of himself, when he suddenly comes face-to-face along the roadside with the risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Peter asked Jesus "Quo vadis?" to which Jesus replied, "Romam vado iterum crucifigi" that is "I am going to Rome to be crucified again." Peter, perhaps ashamed, ultimately gained the courage to continue his vocation and returned to be martyred by being crucified upside-down.

There are dynamic movements in the story of Peter which could guide us in our discernment for direction – the flight of Peter, his encounter with the Risen, and his eventual going back to Rome. From this pericope I wish to share with you my personal take on the Oblate charism, as a son of de Mazenod, in my very context as an Oblate scholastic in first formation.

## CREDIBLE WITNESSING

I would like to begin with a primary point of evaluation of my vocation, that is, the emergence of the incessant call to recognize the ultimate purpose of our faith: our «life in his name». Here, allow me to recount an experience, one summertime in Pagalungan, Cotabato.

My father was preparing for a trip then. As a social worker, he had been too occupied in his movements at these times of strife in Mindanao in 2001. From one evacuation camp to another he goes, relentlessly reaching out to displaced families. In my ignorance, I thought his work to be absurd, until one such particular afternoon, one summertime, he asked me to join him in his trip to Pagalungan, a war torn municipality in Maguindanao.

The scene is so memory-vivid to me. Fr. Bert, in his “porontong” shorts, sando and a black belt bag, was then conversing with a certain *Bapa Mike*, a community leader of the area. Fr. Bert’s back was to us as we were approaching them, when all of a sudden the face of Bapa Mike flashed before my very eyes. There was nothing so special about his old and rugged face, but there was something noticeable with his smile. What lasted in my memory of that experience was this beaming smile from Bapa Mike—a great consolation indeed for me, thinking that hope can spring up out of a devastating reality such as the evacuation center. It was at that moment when I told myself: There can be hope. there is hope.

In Pagalungan there was more to *Bapa Mike*’s smile; there was a far greater spectacle which tells the story of an ill-seated community of lost families, deaths and uncertainty. Right before my eyes are the ‘*bakwits*’, the deadening sight of which cannot be clouded by a smile. Before my young and idle consciousness is this sight of a complex reality that is happening around me, that only through an authentic and credible witnessing will it ever be redeemed. I have seen this in some of the Oblates. And I continue to give witness to that when in first formation, learning about the Founder, and more so in encountering Oblates with their “boots on” in the mission field. All that there is, is an authentic and credible witnessing.

By authentic credibility, this demands of the person his totality in believing and accepting Christ in his life upon the encounter of his un-

conditional love. This is not to be taken though as an end in itself but rather as a humble consideration that through believing one may attain salvation.

We, then, infer that the mandate of an Oblate is to be authentically present at the fringes of the society, where even the liminal knowledge of the Crucified Lord merely passes by the consciousness. Poverty in its extremes—of all forms and manifestations to exist—to this direction the Triumph of the Resurrected Savior is addressed. For this presence, the Oblates are given the title by the Pope Pius XI, *Specialists of the difficult missions*.

Hence, the Apostle is affirmed in his exhortation: “...to preach ‘Jesus Christ, and him crucified...not in loftiness of speech, but in the showing of the Spirit,’ that is to say, by making manifest that we have pondered in our hearts the words which we proclaim, and that we began to practice them before setting out to teach.”

This is oblation in context, in the quotidian sense of consistent witnessing to the Good News.

## MARTYRDOM

Now, let us take a look at martyrdom as one of the supreme expressions of such witnessing. As a formand in first formation, the blood of the martyrs has also taken a great part in my budding missionary thrust. But how was it for Eugene?

For Eugene, death was not the sweetest thing to ever be considered. Instead he found it to be unfavorable. But for a martyr, death was not something to be loved in itself. For him, the martyr was not a fanatic, nor a simplistic hero to be lauded. A martyr, for him, was a person who has deeply loved Jesus, the First Oblate. All of his oblation is bound towards this love for him and of him. And so we can proceed saying that the Founder was not afraid of martyrdom because it meant the death of somebody who loves unconditionally. Such death is for the glory of God and the Church and is for every reason our joy.

The idea of martyrdom that de Mazenod formulates can intimately be linked to his concept of service and of conversion of souls, hence of the mission.

It was not only a «martyrdom of faith» that Eugene sought to realize, but that which captures the mission of an apostle, that is the «mar-

tyrdom of charity. » Eugene says that he wanted to die exercising his ministry among the apostates, serving the poorest of the poor. And we know that it was not only a fervent desire of a new priest. We can notice this to have gradually come out of a very mature spiritual growth.

In the eventual crescendo of Eugene’s idea of the mission, it was fundamentally important that he proceeded with zeal for the salvation of souls. For such cause he was ready to give all of his life. Therefore, the mission and martyrdom come to be deeply intertwined in the daily life of an Oblate, into a daily martyrdom.

I saw this kind of daily martyrdom in the quotidian encounters in our houses of formation—in our struggles in trying to live together, in our unbarred yet charitable fraternal corrections. I see this daily martyrdom actually happening among our leaders, whenever they have to make important decisions. I see this daily martyrdom in the youth—in their clamor that they may be made part of the Oblate mission when in reality they are also Oblates. I see this martyrdom in our old Oblate brothers, battling over the pangs of their illnesses. I see this daily martyrdom in you, gathered here today, constantly challenged by the demands of the charism of the Founder, trying to accord our hearts to the rantings of that cold Mistral wind, that is Eugene, that is the Spirit, in our zeal to sear through the very contexts we have today here in Asia-Oceania, in our Oblate units, in our communities.

As Oblates, the direction we are heading to, then, is towards the cross—back to Rome, where like Peter we may be ready to embrace our oblations carrying in our hearts the joy of the first Oblate, who is Jesus.

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## AN ATTEMPT AT SYNTHESIS

FRANCIS EFREN C. ZABALA, OMI

**G**iven the limited time accorded to me to read, listen, contemplate and reflect on the whole proceedings in this Congress, I would not make any pretension that I would be able to fully capture in a synthesis the depth, the grandeur, the richness of our charism as experienced in diverse contexts here in our part of Asia-Oceania. Mine is just a humble attempt at bringing together various elements in a framework which can still be expanded, enriched, clarified, reformulated or even perhaps changed.

Having said that, may I also invite you to make your own personal synthesis. While it may not be presented here, your whole appreciation and appropriation of the exchanges in our Congress might provide greater enlightenment to further discussions on the Oblate charism in other forums and venues. Our charism has a beauty that can be viewed from various angles and vantage points. I believe each perspective can contribute to a much fuller understanding of and better insight into the gift given to us by the Spirit.

### *Experiential*

From my own viewpoint, it is my impression here in the Congress that our understanding of the charism is heavily-tilted towards what is experiential rather than what is academic and/or doctrinal. For example, when asked - what is the Oblate charism? - most likely, our response would not be straightaway by way of a definition. Rather, it would be in the way of a story or a narrative of an experience of the charism. Our immediate instinct is to recall an account on how such a charism has been experienced, such as:

- the heroic witness of Fr. Michael Rodrigo, or Rey Roda, or Bishop Ben de Jesus, or the Martyrs of Laos, who have made a supreme sacrifice—i.e., to offer their lives in oblation for their people;
- or “the finest hour” of those missionaries who opted to stay with their people when it was most difficult and when the normal tendency is to run for one’s life and safety;
- or those who left the familiarity of their own land and home to venture into what is unfamiliar and insecure to respond to the call of the mission,
- and so on (we just have to go back to all the papers and presentations in this Congress)...

And rightfully so—because, according to Fabio Ciardi, “(f)or the Oblates it is life which always comes before reflection.” Oblates are “more concerned with promoting life around them than with intellectualizing about their own life.” In other words, “it is better to be imbued with the Oblate spirit than to know its definition.”

Padre Fabio would also add: “the Founder (himself) does not worry about formulating his own thought in a systematic way, convinced as he is of having passed on his spirit with sufficient clarity in the Constitutions and Rules.”

Having said that, however, Padre Fabio would also say: “But there is no denying the necessity of understanding in more depth the elements connected with lived experience” (and that I believe is the rationale behind why we are doing this Congress—to understand in more depth the elements connected with lived experience).

## Themes

For the purpose of having a synthesis, may I categorize what has been shared in this Congress around these themes:

- Encounter
- Dialogue
- Witness

Charism *encounters* context. In such an encounter, *dialogue* happens. Encounter and dialogue call forth *witness* on the part of the bearer of the charism.

In this part of Asia-Oceania:

- Charism ushers encounter;
- Charism facilitates dialogue;
- Charism calls forth witness.

### *Encounter*

Imbued and impelled by our Oblate charism, we have come to a face-to-face encounter with the following:

- People, particularly the poor and most abandoned (the marginalized, the oppressed, the dehumanized by various circumstances)
- Cultures
- Other Faiths and Religions (Buddhism, Islam, Indigenous Religions, and so on)
- Massive poverty
- Globalization and Secularization (and the seeming collapse of traditional values)
- Conflict, Violence and “Unpeace”,
- Wanton environmental degradation
- And more (as our contexts become more and more complex)...

In the encounter, one question that can be asked is: can we also say that the Oblate charism is discernible/alive/recognizable/present, not only among us, but also among the people and places we serve?

- e.g. among the Christians in Laos who persevered in their faith in spite of persecution and severe suffering even without the presence of missionaries and priests for thirty long years? (cf. Fr. Claudio Bertuccio’s paper)
- or with the people of other faiths who did not only collaborate with us in our pastoral works and concerns, but who even prayed in our own sanctuaries? (cf. Fr. Roberto Layson’s testimony)
- and more...

The wind blows wherever it pleases, and so does the Spirit. Shall we just limit charism to our known boundaries?

## Dialogue

In the encounter, dialogue happens. For the OMI missionary, the Oblate motto still rings true: “He has sent me to preach the good news to the poor; the poor have been evangelized.” (Fr. Bradley Rozario’s preamble to his paper) *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me; pauperes evangelizantur.*

Evangelization is still of primary value to Oblates. Here and now, it is given more support and impetus by the Church’s call for New Evangelization (cf. Fr. Daniel Szewc’s paper). But in our own context, we have to be reminded that “dialogue is an integral part of the evangelizing mission of the Church.” Contextualizing the charism then, in this part of the universe, would necessarily involve: Dialogue—Dialogue in Evangelization.

- Dialogue
  - With all of the above elements (pointed out in the Encounter)
  - e.g., with other religions: of life, action, words, faith
- Silence (cf. Fr. Hiran Jayawardena’s presentation)
- Failure (e.g., as part of the missionary enterprise—cf. Fr. Claudio Bertuccio’s testimony on the mission in Laos)
- Learning from Others (from the subaltern and marginals—Fr. Rafael Tianero’s presentation; from other cultures—Fr. Hiran Jayawardena’s paper)
- Appreciation of our Own Riches (Fr. Hiran Jayawardena’s testimony; Fr. Mai Van Thao’s presentation)
- Solidarity (Fr. Rafael Tianero’s presentation)
- Prophecy (announcing the Good News; denouncing the bad news—Zone Narito’s testimony)

## Witness

What is being called forth after encounter and dialogue? The answer is witness. Witness by responding to the following themes:

- Call to Holiness (Fr. Eduardo’s paper presented at the International session)
- Conversion (cf. Fr. Ross Kapunan’s report)

- Return to the Sources/Back to the Basics/Creative Fidelity (Fr. Ross Kapunan/Fr. Rizalde Orola/Fr. Antonius Sussanto/Bro. Noel Garcia/Sc. Rey Emanuel Amancio)
  - Prayer - l'oraison
  - Vows
  - Community Life
  - Oblatology
  - Initial and ongoing formation
  - and so on...
- Martyrdom
- Oblation
- On to the peripheries... From the Margins
- Mission
  - Internationality and Crossing Borders
  - Missionary Discipleship (New Evangelization)
  - Evangelizing Community (New Evangelization)

### *Conclusion*

By way of conclusion: when we talk about Oblate charism, we can think of this metaphor: you have an encounter; in such an encounter, dialogue happens; and after such an encounter and dialogue, no one is ever the same, because one is called to witness to what is being demanded by that encounter and dialogue.

In this Congress, in the most basic way, of the utmost importance, which we should not forget because I believe this is the most fundamental reason behind the charism—as Oblates, we must affirm once again that *Jesus indeed is the center of our life and mission*. In our different contexts, our Oblate charism helps us to encounter Jesus, to have a conversation with him, and that same charism also calls us and challenges us to be witnesses of him—who is our Lord and Savior.

In Asia-Oceania we encountered Jesus not only within—within our Oblate communities and structures—but also without—among the poor, the indigenous peoples, peoples of different religions and cultures, amid globalization, secularization, environmental degeneration, and so on. In that encounter, we dialogued with Jesus. We dialogued with him not only in prayer and thru the resources of our faith, but also in attending to the realities of our contexts. Then, having encountered

and conversed with the Lord, we are called to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Was this not also the dynamic in Eugene’s story?

As we know, Eugene had a privileged encounter with Jesus. It did not stop there. His encounter and conversations with the Lord subsequently led him to dialogue with the poor and the most abandoned, with the Church brutally ravaged at that time. Such encounter and dialogues eventually brought him to become a witness to Jesus (together with others whom he invited to join him) to the ends of the world. His encounter and conversations with Jesus expanded his heart so it became as big as the world.

Would this also be the dynamic of our story after this Congress?

May this Congress then be a Pentecost experience for all of us. May the Spirit touch our fragile, faltering hearts just as he has touched the hearts of the early disciples to become emboldened in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus.

Mary Immaculate, our Mother was with the disciples during Pentecost. May she always be with us—with her maternal care and loving intercessions (Fr. Claudio Bertuccio shared that, in Laos, faith was sustained by the rosary and devotion to Mary in those long years in which Christians were deprived of the sacraments and ordained ministers).

With the charism of Eugene—a gift from the Spirit—may we move beyond 200 years with gratitude, passion and hope.

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# Local Section Colombo, Sri Lanka

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## MISSION *WITHOUT* CONVERSION IN INDIA: AN OBLATE RESPONSE

PETER RAJAN ALPHONSE, OMI

**T**he *mission manifesto* of Jesus, “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me... He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,” (Lk 4: 18-19) illumines a Christian and sends one on a mission to communicate the message ‘*Jesus*’. Jesus, the missionary par excellence, in his pilgrimage of life on earth encountered cultural, social, political, economic and religious differences. He transformed the plurality of creation into opportunities for ministries. This article presents the *stasis questions* - the recent attacks on Christians in India on account of conversion and their practice of Christian faith. While clarifying the notion of conversion, the article researches the biblical and theological foundations of the inclusivity and universalism of Jesus’ mission in the phase of conversion, and proposes *metanoia* as the *modus vivendi*, communicating love and peace while bridging the differences.

## THE STASIS QUESTIONS

The Indian church is as old as the Catholic Church with the missionary journey of St. Thomas the Apostle to the Malabar Coast of southern India. Numerous foreign missionaries preached the gospel while encountering new cultures, languages and religions. Persecution and martyrdom on account of a Christian faith are part of Indian Catholic history. Unlike the previous Congress coalition government, the present *Bharatiya Janata Party*<sup>1</sup> (BJP) has given asylum to its source and *alma mater* - Hindu Fundamental Organizations such as *Rashtriya Swayam-sevak Sangh*,<sup>2</sup> (RSS), *Vishva Hindu Parishad*<sup>3</sup> (VHP) and Hindu Fronts. BJP serves as the political wing of RSS. The attacks on Christians in India enkindle one to examine the *modus operandi* of Mission while examining the present missionary models and the forecasted future perspectives of mission.

*Anti-Christian Movement: A Sign of the Times*

Religious intolerance has been very much on the rise for the past year, due to the unofficial support rendered to the Hindu fundamentalists by the present BJP Government. A few fundamental concepts will clarify the signs of the times.

*Definition of an Indian:* It was Vir Sarvakar who presented the idea of Hindu Nationalism in 1923. According to him, “a Hindu is one who acknowledges Hindustan as his Fatherland (*Pitri bhumi*) as well as his holy land (*Punya bhumi*).”<sup>4</sup> Anyone who is or whose ancestor was Hindu, (including someone who was a Hindu, but converted to Islam or Christianity) is welcome back to the Hindu fold, provided he accepts Hindustan as his fatherland-cum-holy land. In other words, one cannot be a true nationalist until and unless he is part of the “Hindu Family”, or Hindu *Parivar*. Therefore, in order to be a true Nationalist, one must return to the Hindu *Parivar*, popularly called “*Ghar Wapsi*” (*Returning home*), through reconversion.<sup>5</sup> From these fundamentals, Christians in India are no longer Indian citizens but foreigners.

The modern successors of Vir Sarvakar, Mr. Sudarson, one of the modern leaders of RSS, and Arun Shourie, are strong proponents of Hindu nationalism and cultural nationalism. This has been aptly and adequately explained by Bhartiya Janwadi Aghadi in his article “India’s



Saffron Surge.” He says, “If there is one explosive idea that is setting the agenda for India today, it is *Hindutva*. *Hindutva* has nothing to do with spirituality, but everything to do with an aggressive form of cultural nationalism. It appears to be connected with India’s past, but it is actually an omen for the future.” This cultural nationalism may finally end up with an Indian brand of Fascism or Nazism.<sup>6</sup> Safronization, sanscritization and government policies founded on Hindu fundamentalism began to take deep root in Indian social, educational, political, economic and governmental concerns and undertakings.

### *Conversion as Understood*

Indian history has it that Conversion to Christianity came to be, for the natives, out of the fear of serrated swords by Christian invaders and the joy of the people on receiving food materials from missionaries, besides the heart’s conversion to profess Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Inculturation was also one of the means of conversion to Christianity. Gandhi’s views from the Bihar notes (8-10-1925) on conversion indicate that: “Christian missionaries have been doing valuable service for generations, but in my humble opinion, their work suffers because at the end of it they expect conversion of these simple people to Christianity... How very nice it would be if the missionaries rendered humanitarian service without the ulterior aim of conversion.”<sup>7</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi’s response to Mr. Krezenski, a visiting professor of Philosophy from Poland, who had told him that Catholicism was the only true religion: “The idea of conversion, I assure you, is the deadliest poison that ever sapped the fountain of truth.”<sup>8</sup> Hindu Nationalist and cultural nationalist organizations accuse Christianity of religious conversion; converting the people from sacred vegetarians to profane non-vegetarians, from a sacred culture to its contamination, from organism to non-organic cultivation, *et cetera*.

The controversial statement of Mohan Bhagwat, chief of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or National Volunteers Force), on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February, 2015, espouses Hindu nationalism. “It’s good to work for a cause with selfless intentions. But Mother Teresa’s work had an ulterior motive, which was to convert the person who was being served to Christianity,” alleged Bhagwat, addressing a women’s empowerment program in a village near Bharatpur in the BJP-governed western

state of Rajasthan. “In the name of service, religious conversions were made,” claimed Bhagwat, who in recent months has called repeatedly for converting India into a “Hindu rashtra” (nation). Gandhi worked for the poor and the diseased without any selfish motive. He was a great philosopher, teacher, intellect, and above all a great world leader. None of this can be said of Mother Teresa,<sup>9</sup> says Dhiru Shah an Atlanta-based writer. Hence re-conversion begins.

*Ghar Wapsi Ceremony*: (“Home Coming”) is a series of religious conversion activities, ceremonially organized by the Indian Hindu organizations *Vishva Hindu Parishad* and *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, to convert non-Hindus to Hinduism. The *Bharatiya Janata Party* has claimed that this is a means to have conversions banned altogether in the country. The *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* and *Vishva Hindu Parishad* organized several *Ghar Wapsi* events in Kerala, Goa and many parts of India. About 1,200 people were converted to Hinduism in a *Ghar Wapsi* event organized by VHP in Telengana. The *Indian Express* reported that Scheduled Caste Manjhi families demanded better facilities, along with education and healthcare, before they converted. The new re-converts are awarded cash, gifts and services. Anti-Christian violence is common to Hindu nationalists too.

### *Attacks and Assaults*

Christian persecution is part of Indian church history since its birth in India. BJP, after its massive victory in the parliamentary election, has assured the persecution of Christians. Unlike under previous congress governments, persecution is on a steady rise after BJP’s coming to power. Their *alma mater* is RSS. Anti-Christian violence in India refers to religiously-motivated violence against Christians in India, usually perpetrated by the Hindu Nationalists. The acts of violence include burning of churches, reconversion of Christians to Hinduism by force and threats of physical violence, distribution of threatening literature, burning of Bibles, raping of nuns, murder of Catholic priests and nuns, destruction of Christian schools, colleges and cemeteries. I wish to quote a few major attacks in the past one year devoid of previous major attacks and assaults; attacks on the Churches in Jabalpur in Bhopal, Hisar in Haryana, sexual assault of 71 year old nun in West Bengal, accusations of Christians converting Hindus in Alirajpur and the attack

on their properties by *Hindu Jagaran Manch*<sup>10</sup> (HJM), Christian prayer meeting stormed by Hindutva groups in Madhya Pradesh, *et cetera*. More than 100 villages in Northern India have passed a resolution in village councils denying entry to Christian priests and Christians in the villages. With the BJP regime, the rising pitch of the crescendo of hate speech against Muslims and Christians is on the rise. More than 600 attacks have been registered on minorities since the landslide victory of the Hindu nationalist BJP. Thus, the stasis questions present a problem of conversion in the ambience of Mission. Let us formulate the premises on their biblical and theological foundations, which researches the notion of conversion and Jesus' inclusivism and universalism. This religious conversion is the challenge that the Christians face. The response to this shall be founded on the Scripture.

## BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

### *The Notion of Conversion*

The understanding of Christian conversion derives from ideas associated with the Hebrew *teshuvah* (implying “turning” and rooted in *Shup*, “to return home”) and the Greek *metanoia* (involving a marked change of mind and direction).<sup>11</sup> As it means the change of heart, of mind and an attitudinal change from an unhealthy status to a healthy pro-active one, from inorganic stress and depression to the organic joy of living, religious conversion denotes the actual rite of Baptism as well. Conversion requires a free human response--forced conversion is an oxymoron. Conversion's fruit is the transformation of a life by grace, but often by a gradual blossoming and ripening rather than spontaneous fructification. True conversion is a radical affair, touching life's very roots; and the fruit depends on the roots' vitality. The call to conversion is God's invitation to a radical and explicit commitment to the values of the reign of God, but God calls within particular social contexts, and not only through outsiders.<sup>12</sup> Conversion, traditionally marked by the rite of baptism as a shift in religious affiliation, is considered as terrorism by Hindu nationals. It is appropriate to discuss Jesus' meaning of conversion to develop the theme further.

## *Jesus' Understanding of Conversion*

The Old Testament notion of conversion can be summed up in Ezekiel 36: 26, “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” The basic call to conversion which constitutes the capstone of the entire ministry of Jesus, in Mark 1:14-15, is addressed to Jesus’ own co-religionists, the Jews: “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Jesus’ proclamation of conversion meant change of heart, change of cognition, change from unhealthy to healthy attitudes, change from law to love, change from sorrow and anxiety to peace and tranquility, change from judgment to non-judgmental attitudes, a shift from sickness to health, and a change from the periphery to the nucleus. Such already was the message of the Baptist (Mk 1:4), and would also be the content of the mission of the Twelve (Mk 6:12). At this juncture, it is worthwhile to dwell on Jesus’ universalism and inclusivism in order to understand Jesus about proselytism.

### *Mission: Jesus' call for Universalism and Inclusivism*

In the Gospels, Jesus encounters the gentiles, such as the Syro-Phoenician women (Mk 7:24-30) whose faith Jesus appreciates, the Centurion (Mt 8:5-13) whose faith Jesus exalts, and, when Jesus heals the ten lepers, the one who comes back to thank him is the Samaritan (Lk 17:11-19). F. Hahn states that Jesus was, in fact, a full-fledged missionary to the Gentiles. The reports of his movement through Gentile territory, his open attitude toward Gentiles, and the universal missionary summons to the apostles supports the fact that Jesus included everybody in his mission.<sup>13</sup> Jesus’ dominant note of love and compassion leads to a provocative, boundary-breaking tendency in Jesus’ own ministry. Paul proclaims God as “rescuer of the ungodly,” as “impartial,” as freely offering salvation to Jew and Gentile. Luke-Acts also highlights the theme of God’s benevolent “impartiality”, and directly relates it to Jesus’ own boundary-breaking ministry. Matthew stresses the theme of the responsive outsiders, such as the Magi (Mt 2:1-12), gentiles such as the Centurion or the Canaanite woman, and the “sheep” at the last Judgement (Mt 25:31-46). Johannine tradition speaks of a cosmic level

of God's love for the world and Jesus as revealer of that inclusive love (Jn 3:16-17).<sup>14</sup>

The choice of the title "twelve" obviously refers to the twelve tribes of Israel and indicates that Jesus interpreted his own mission as working toward the restoration of God's people. Another more inclusive symbolism is Jesus' apparent preference for the messianic banquet theme as corrective to the motif of the eschatological pilgrimage of the nations to Zion. Mt 8:11 concludes the incident of the Centurion's marvelous faith with Jesus' words: "I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." This statement, which appears to be an authentic saying, places the Gentiles on an equal footing with the Israelites in the messianic age. The banquet theme and the favorable reaction of Gentiles are echoed in a number of Gospel texts. The rejection Jesus experiences (Mt 11:20-24) from the Galilean cities is contrasted with acceptance in the Gentile regions of Tyre and Sidon, and even the perennial badlands of Sodom.<sup>15</sup> Jesus' universalism and inclusivism calls us to contemplate on his attitude towards Proselytism.

### *Jesus and Proselytism*

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves" (Mt 23:15). This is a strong statement proving that Jesus is highly critical of the proselytizing activity of the Pharisees.<sup>16</sup> Nor did he advocate a change of religion. His mission was to take people to the nucleus of life, presenting a broader outlook towards the art of meaningful living. He challenged the people to transcend from the periphery to the centre. Numerous episodes from the gospels substantiate that Jesus proclaimed a change of mind and a change of heart rather than a change of religion.

**Radical Conversion:** Radical conversion for Jesus is continuous and permanent and not temporary. Jesus does not orient himself in promoting conversion as circumcision or as any symbolic religious rite. Rather, he advocates conversion as a shift from the law of law to the love of love (Jn 13:34-35). Conversion is a prophetic pilgrimage within,

and transcends deep into the depth of reality, rather than an external symbolism. A radical conversion to the interior: From “you shall not murder,” to “if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment” (Mt 5:21-22), from “you shall not commit adultery” (shift from the act- *culmen*) to “lust” (the source of the act- *fons*) (Mt 5:27-28), from “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy” to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:43-44), from Hypocrisy to Humility in almsgiving, prayer and fasting (Mt 6:1-18), *et cetera*. Jesus broke the boundaries of the rites and borders of Judaism and manifested himself as love personified. The nucleus of prophetic conversion is not an external rite or rubrics, but an internal healthy character formation and attitudinal transformation. Founding ourselves on the Bible invites us to strengthen it by the church’s theological positions.

#### THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The church on earth is, by its very nature, missionary, since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>17</sup> *Ad Gentes* says that the Church sent to the nations is the “universal sacrament of salvation” and so, by its very nature, has the obligation to proclaim the message of salvation to all people.<sup>18</sup> Previously, the concept of mission was rendered by such phrases as “propagation of the faith,” “conversion of the heathen,” “religious instruction of the ignorant,” “apostolic proclamation,” “proclamation of the Gospel,” “planting of the church,” “expansion of the kingdom of Christ”<sup>19</sup> et cetera. *Redemptoris Missio*, in the spirit of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Ad Gentes*, describes mission as “mission *ad gentes*,” “evangelization” and “re-evangelization.” In the Catholic sphere it was Ludwig Rutti who deliberately distanced himself from developing “the meaning and necessity of mission from biblical and dogmatic sources”. He demanded an unconditional commitment to the world, formulated the motto: *Shalom* instead of mission, a radical exodus into the world.<sup>20</sup> In fact, many Asian theologians such as Michael Amaladoss, Felix Wilfred and others would rather talk of the mission of the church of today as mission “*inter-gentes*” than mission “*ad gentes*”.

Reputed theologians such as Jean Danielou, De Lubac, Congar, Karrer, Ohm and Rahner seriously reflected, even before the Second

Vatican Council, on the possibility of salvation of those not belonging to the Church. Vatican II, in *Nostra Aetate*, expresses the Church's enlightened position on its relation to Non-Christian Religions; "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrine which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless, often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life. In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself, men find the fullness of their religious life."<sup>21</sup> This inclusivism approach grants that genuine knowledge and experience of God may be found in other religions, but holds that the fullness of that knowledge and experience can be found only in Christianity.<sup>22</sup>

After the council, a fresh theological discussion began. No one wanted to hold to a strict interpretation of *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (Ignatius of Antioch in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century and Cyprian of Carthage in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century). Solutions captured by the following phrases were suggested: Anonymous Christians, latent and manifest, Cosmic Christianity *et cetera*.<sup>23</sup> The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, "Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience - these too may achieve eternal salvation."<sup>24</sup>

From the *Fulfilment Theory*, which states that the non-Christian aspires for the divine by nature, we move to the presence of the *Mystery of Christ* in other religious traditions. The theological views on the mystery of Christ in other religious traditions seem to present to the other religious traditions a greater openness with regard to the operative presence of the mystery of Jesus Christ, as a universal Savior. These views seem to say that the members of other traditions are saved by Christ, not in spite of their allegiance and sincere practice of their tradition, but through that allegiance and practice.<sup>25</sup> That means that their religious allegiance and sincere practice does play a role in their salvation, but with Christ alone. The other religions retain their value for their followers until such time as the Gospel would be existentially

“promulgated” to each individual person. The theologians in this regard are: Karl Rahner on “Anonymous Christianity,” Raimon Panikkar on “Unknown Christ,” Hans Küng on “Ways of Salvation,” and Gustave Thils on “Mediations of Salvation.”

It is from Panikkar’s book “The Unknown Christ of Hinduism” that the theory of the “presence of Christ” in other religious traditions, derives its name. Speaking specifically of Hinduism, Panikkar wrote: “There is a living presence of Christ in Hinduism.”<sup>26</sup> According to him, “Hinduism is the starting-point of a religion that culminates in Christianity”; it is “Christianity in potency”; it already contains “the symbolism of the Christian reality.”

*Cosmic Christ:* Christ is universal, for he transcended himself beyond boundaries. His inclusivism and universalism par excellence reveals his universal nature. Rahner writes, “Christ was poured out over all the cosmos; he became actually, in his very humanity, what he had always been by his dignity, the heart of the universe, the innermost centre of creation.” Both Teilhard and Rahner maintain that Christ belongs to the innermost reality of the universe by reason of his incarnation, life, death and resurrection. For both, the act of dying is profoundly a mystical act of communion by which a person finally belongs totally to the cosmos by being supremely detached from self and attached to God. In and through death, for Rahner, the person becomes “pan-cosmic” by virtue of his total self-surrender to the God of Love.<sup>27</sup> This concept of the ‘Cosmic Christ’ paves the way for the concept of ‘anonymous Christianity’ of Karl Rahner.

*Anonymous Christianity*<sup>28</sup>: K Rahner states that “It means that a person lives in the grace of God and attains salvation outside of explicitly constituted Christianity - Let us say, a Buddhist monk - who, because he follows his conscience, attains salvation and lives in the grace of God; of him I must say that he is an anonymous Christian; if not, I would have to presuppose that there is a genuine path to salvation that really attains that goal, but that simply has nothing to do with Jesus Christ. But I cannot do that. And so, if I hold that everyone depends upon Jesus Christ for salvation, and if at the same time I hold that many live in the world who have not expressly recognized Jesus Christ, then there remains in my opinion nothing else but to take up this postulate



of an anonymous Christianity.”<sup>29</sup> Anonymous Christians can also be anonymous catechumens desiring baptism.

*Baptism of Desire:* The Catechism of the Catholic Church observes that, “for catechumens who die before their Baptism, their explicit desire to receive it, together with repentance for their sins, and charity, assures them the salvation that they were not able to receive through the sacrament.”<sup>30</sup> Anyone who desires to join the fold of truth and gospel values could be added to the list of anonymous catechumens, by which Baptism of desire is possible for all those who seek the truth and the gospel values, the values of the Kingdom of God, irrespective of his/her ignorance of Christ.

Sacramental Theology of *signum* and *res*: Jesus is the sacrament of the encounter with God (Schillebeeckx, 1963), and one would also speak of the Church as the Sacrament of “communion with God and unity among all peoples.”<sup>31</sup> Sacrament is at once *signum* et *res*. The sign is outward, which is efficacious. *Res* is mystical. Conversion is both internal and mystical, but a reality in the sense of *metanoia*. Conversion is also the *signum* external in the sense of rite and ritual. Conversion as interior and radical is efficacious reality itself, without having the external sign. Radical efficacious conversion without the external material sign could be considered both *signum* et *res*. The external sign or the act of rite is mystically present when radical inner conversion itself is efficacious.

I see a true tension between the external sign and the inward attitude. If the external is present and the internal absent, the external is valid but not fruitful. But if the external is absent and the internal is present, it is meaningful. On the other hand, we are called to be the sign as well. In this regard, one will be the visible sign (those who have not realized the Kingdom’s values do not recognize this visible sign, for them it still remains an invisible sign) of one’s inner transformation.

What comes first... the *signum* or the *res*? The conversion of heart comes first and then the sign. As soon as they heard the preaching of Peter in Acts 2:37-38, the people “cut to their heart”... said to Peter and to the other apostles, “brothers, what should we do?” Peter said to them, “repent, and be baptized...” here, the conversion of heart as efficacious reality comes first and then the sign of repentance, the Baptism. If the baptism did not follow the conversion of heart, is this conversion of

heart valid? Yes, it is valid. It is then complete with the desire to be at the side of the truth. Well, it is ‘already’ complete and ‘not yet’. This is a pilgrimage from the external sign to the internal mystical reality.

Every sacrament has *matter* and *form*. Here, in this universal sacrament of *metanoia*, the actual expression of attitudinal change is the *matter*; and the conscience as cosmic Holy Spirit - the cause of change, is the *form*. Here the *matter* is trans-material and the *form* is non-verbal. Jesus went beyond symbols. He was not for a law of law but a love of love. A shift from the letter of the law to the sense of love.

### MISSION *WITHOUT* CONVERSION

Having presented the problem of conversion in India, my premises on the biblical foundations of Jesus’ notion of conversion in the ambience of the gentiles, and the theological foundations of the possibility or even assurance of salvation in other religions, what then is the need for Christians to preach missions? The Church is missionary in its nature.<sup>32</sup> Every Christian is duty-bound to preach Jesus and him crucified. My relishing the experience of eating KFC chicken stimulates me to personally advertise KFC. Hence, a profound experience with Christ (to be with him) naturally urges one to proclaim one’s relishing experience (to be sent out (Mk 3:14)). “For we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). The Christ Experience is a constitutive element of the missionary proclamation that urges others to have such a relishing experience. Hence it is personal and relative, which can never be compelled.

Proselytizing is marked by those who try to convert others through fear, malice, manipulation, deception, threat, or bribery. It does not respect religious freedom or human dignity. For example, ISIS is trying to establish a caliphate and is using force through the threat of death or taxes to make people convert to their version of Islam. Proselytizing is concerned with the number of people who convert by any means, and success is measured by such. Pope Francis, in an interview with atheist Eugenio Scalfari published in an Italian newspaper, *La Repubblica*, with the title “*Il Papa; così cambiero la Chiesa*” said that “proselytism is solemn non-sense, it makes no sense. We need to get to know each other, listen to each other and improve our knowledge of the world around us.”<sup>33</sup>

Religious Conversion is understood as shallow, from one religious fold - collective consciousness (religion) to another religious fold - collective consciousness. This level becomes the source of conflict and violence in the world. In the kingdom of God spirituality, God comes first; human beings, in their original image and likeness of God, come second; and religions come third, and are meant to be at the service of human beings. In the spirituality of the Kingdom of God, conversion is not from one collective consciousness (religion) to another collective consciousness (religion) but from collective consciousness to the universal or cosmic consciousness. When Jesus spoke of repentance, he meant a transition from the collective consciousness (religion) to universal consciousness (kingdom of God).<sup>34</sup> Besides dialogue with other religions for Christians that is possible where they are a minority, it is good to hold a dialogue within. Yet, the Goal of inter-religious dialogue is to transcend or outgrow belief structures and discover our original image and likeness of God, in which we discover our original and essential unity with the whole of humanity and of creation.

Now the goal of mission shall be *Shalom* of the Risen Christ, "Peace be with you" (Lk 24:36). Salvation of souls versus Salvation of persons with their body, mind and soul. Salvation of persons with their body, mind and soul shall be a holistic approach to human liberation and salvation. Salvation was achieved in Christ once and for all and at all times. Hence, salvation also means alleviating the pain of the body and mind, which shall result in the resting of the soul after death. The kingdom values of Christ practiced by anybody on earth, irrespective of religious boundaries, even without knowing Christ, shall be saved, for the Kingdom values anywhere on earth are values as water is H<sub>2</sub>O anywhere in the universe. Religious conversion shall not be the ulterior motive behind our charitable works and works towards social transformation, but Peace that the Risen Cosmic Christ offers. D. Senior and C. Stuhlmueeller in the book "The Biblical Foundations of Mission," conclude with the Four Modalities of Mission. They are: Direct Proclamation, Prophetic Challenge in Word and Sign, "Witness" on behalf of the Gospel, and Mission as Personal and Social Transformation.<sup>35</sup> We are witnesses of that cosmic Christ's peace.

Jesus Christ did not have a mission or an ambition to expand his boundaries and increase his numbers. The conversion which Jesus pro-

posed was not from one religion to another religion but from religions into the universal presence of God. Christians need *metanoia* from its fundamentalism. By religious conversion, we have wounded the other religions, though we believe a ray of light or seed of truth is possible in other religions. Converting people from one religion to another equals not seeing any truth in the other religions. But the mission Jesus gave to his disciples was not to convert people from one collective consciousness to another collective consciousness, but from collective consciousness to universal consciousness. Where there is a mission or an ambition to expand one's boundary and increase one's numbers there is inner violence, and this inner violence also brings external violence. Mere symbolic religious conversion is terrorism. With this inner violence one cannot become an instrument of peace. Mother Teresa on conversion said, 'There is only one God and He is God to all; therefore it is important that everyone is seen as equal before God. I've always said we should help a Hindu become a better Hindu, a Muslim become a better Muslim and a Catholic become a better Catholic.' Conversion is only a bridge to cross over religion and transcend to be a universal being, becoming truly the image and likeness of God himself. Am I sounding religionless religion? This is not abolition of religion but fulfilling religion (The kingdom of God).

#### CONCLUSION; INDIAN OBLATE CONSCIOUSNESS AND ITS *MODUS VIVENDI*

Dialogue with cultures and religions, peace and harmony are the constitutive vocabulary of an Indian Oblate. The *Aanmodaya Ashram* is one such example par excellence. Indian missionary Oblates in the recent past have ventured into numerous North Indian and North East missions as true witnesses of the Gospel, in word and work. Preaching the person of Jesus calls an Oblate to work for personal and social transformation, beginning from imparting knowledge and wisdom. Our communities are the *locus* for dialogue, for we hail from diverse ethnic cultures and customs, hence our communities are missionary. We achieved this healthy understanding of other cultures and religions in the womb of formation. The variety of exposure to various cultures and the emphasis on inclusivist missionary Oblate formation, including the Ashram experience, various native meditation techniques, and yoga into Oblate formation help an Oblate journey *within*. This pilgrimage

within, with the person of Jesus - to be with him (personal enlightenment and personal consciousness) urges the Oblates to be sent out as a Missionary Community (collective consciousness) to proclaim the inner joy of experiencing Cosmic Consciousness – the Christ.

# RELEVANCE OF OUR CHARISM IN THE AMBIENCE OF CONVERSION: INDIAN OBLATE PRO-ACTION

The Charism “to preach the Good News to the poor” is very much relevant as long as the poor in their many faces do exist. The poor and the rich in India are poles apart. The diversity is huge. Indian Church history has it that some missionaries gave away grains of wheat, sugar and milk powder in order to attract the poor for religious conversion. The economic poverty which was the weakness of the poor was made use of for religious conversion. Did they humiliate the body of Christ (I Cor 11:22) by humiliating those who have nothing? Human Dignity is the need of the hour. If charity does not offer human dignity, it is poisonous. Human dignity<sup>36</sup> is the Good News to the poor in India. Sharing your bread is almsgiving which is temporary, but sharing your knowledge to bake bread is consistent charity (love) which is human dignity. Instead of offering fish to eat, it is worthwhile to teach them how to fish, and so we honor them with dignity. The person of Jesus – the Good News - was *rich* in spirit, *rich* in his emotional intelligence, *rich* in his knowledge, *and rich* in translating this knowledge into practice. We shall not do this charity under the disguise of or with the ulterior motive of religious conversion. Oblates in India since their inception have tirelessly worked for the prosperity of the poor irrespective of their faith.

Projects to uplift the downtrodden who are affected by consumerism and globalization are on the run in terms of education. Education ministry which does uplift the poor in their many faces, once considered “prostitution” by a few Oblates, was shredded to pieces and education ministry ignited itself within fifteen years and it is at its healthiest velocity. The Social transformation of the poor in subaltern perspectives is not the preferential option of the Oblates but it is an “imperative.” “Whatever their work, Oblates will collaborate, according to their vocation and by every means compatible, with the Gospel, in changing all that is a cause of oppression and poverty. They thereby help to create a society based on the dignity of the human person created in the

image of God.” (R. 9a) The Charism too calls us to participate in the decision-making authority by emancipating the faithful to be part of decision-making powers in the government sectors and in politics. This shall enhance the Oblates to be the voice of the subalterns to achieve their rights.

We have responded to the challenges positively by our inclusivism. Our mission shall be without religious conversion. No hidden agenda of religious conversion under the disguise of humanitarian works, personal or social transformation, which perpetrates hatred and violence towards Christians; For, reduction of Jesus’ good news to religious conversion offends the message of Jesus – love (love for the self and for the other) and peace. Growing beyond Inter-cultural dialogue and inter-religious dialogue shall be a key to consistent prosperity. But when one offers himself to join the *new way* of life to experience Christ, we give them a hearty welcome. May our mission (*kerygma and witness, word and work*) be “The Kingdom of God” rather than religion. Let us travel from the comfort-zone of religion to the uncomfot-zone of the kingdom of God, so that one day we may make this uncomfot-zone a comfort-zone. I have always culminated my Missiology lectures with the following statement, “One’s Heart is the *Locus* of Mission (*Missionalism*); Journey *within* is a better missionary pilgrimage, for what is *ad extra* in our *Oblate mission* (Collective Consciousness) is the replica of what *ad intra* is.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), (Indian People’s Party), pro-Hindu political party of post-independence India. The BJP traces its roots to the *Bharatiya Jana Sangh* (BJS - Indian People’s Association), which was established in 1951 as the political wing of the pro-Hindu group, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS - National Volunteers Corps). The BJP advocated the rebuilding of India in accordance with Hindu culture and called for the formation of a strong unified state. The BJP is the ruling party in India, with a sweeping victory in the 2014 parliamentary elections.

<sup>2</sup> *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), (National Volunteer Organization), a Hindu organization founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889–1940), as

part of the movement against British rule and as a response to rioting between Hindus and Muslims. RSS presents itself as a cultural, not a political, organization that advocates a Hindu nationalistic agenda under the banner of *hindutva*, or “Hinduness.”

<sup>3</sup> *Vishva Hindu Parishad* (VHP), (World Hindu Council), is an Indian right-wing Hindu nationalist non-governmental organization based on the ideology of *Hindutva* and *cultural nationalism*. It was founded in 1964 by M.S. Golwalkar and S.S. Apte in collaboration with Swami Chinmayananda. Its main objective is “to organize, consolidate the Hindu society, and to serve and protect the *Hindu Dharma*.”

<sup>4</sup> K. BASU, *The Sovereignty of God and Christian Nationalism*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2003, p. 15-16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15-16.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 28, p. 295-296.

<sup>8</sup> A. SHOURIE, *Missionaries in India*, New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers in India, 1994, p. 10-11.

<sup>9</sup> D. SHAH, “Mother Teresa’s Hidden Mission in India: Conversion to Christianity” in *India Star: A literary-Art Magazine*, at [www.geocities.ws](http://www.geocities.ws) as on 1, June 2015.

<sup>10</sup> *Hindu Jagran Manch* (HJM), (Forum for Hindu Awakening) is an Indian Hindu activist group affiliated to the *Vishva Hindu Parishad* (VHP). It focuses on activism against religious conversion and works for the reconversion of Muslims and Christians to Hinduism. It and other similar affiliates, *Hindu Jagran Samiti*, *Hindu Jagran Samaj* and *Dharm Jagran Samiti*, have been implicated in the aggressive *Ghar Wapsi* reconversion to Hinduism- programmes in 2014–2015.

<sup>11</sup> A. J. GITTINS, “Conversion” in *Dictionary of Mission*, New York: Orbis Books, 1999, p. 87-89.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> F. HAHN, “Mission in the New Testament,” *Studies in Biblical Theology* 47, Naperville: Alleson, 1965, p. 26-41.

<sup>14</sup> D. SENIOR, C. STUHLMEYER, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*, New York: Orbis Books, 1983, p.152.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 152-153.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>17</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 48.

<sup>18</sup> *Ad Gentes*, 1. (Cf. GS 22, RM 6, 10, 28).

<sup>19</sup> S. KAROTEMPREL Ed., *Following Christ in Mission*, Bombay: Pauline Publications, 1995, p. 25-26.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> S. KAROTEMPREL, *Following Christ in Mission*, p. 246.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), Art.847; Cf. LG 16 and GS 22.

<sup>25</sup> J. DUPUIS, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 2001 edition, p. 143.

<sup>26</sup> R. PANIKKAR, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, London: Barton, Longman and Todd, 1964, p. ix.

<sup>27</sup> H. D EGAN, *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers*, 1998, p. 296.

<sup>28</sup> The theme is treated by K. RAHNER in several essays contained in *Theological Investigations*, 23 vols., London: Barton, Longman and Todd, 1961-92.

<sup>29</sup> K. RAHNER, in *Dialogue*, p. 135.

<sup>30</sup> CCC, Art. 1259.

<sup>31</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ad Gentes*, 2.

<sup>33</sup> *La Repubblica* (Italian News Paper), 1, October 2013.

<sup>34</sup> J.M. SAHAJANANDA, *Mission without Conversion: Becoming Instruments of Peace*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2013, p. 18-20.

<sup>35</sup> D. SENIOR, C. STUHLMUELLER, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*, p. 332-338.

<sup>36</sup> *Dignitatis Humanae*, 2.



## CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS: THEORY AND PRAXIS

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Religious wars may be something of history, but the cold war among religions continues. This is an ugly scandal of the contemporary society which pricks the conscience of humanity. Religions are not breeders of animosity and hatred. The propelling force of religions should be to promote relationships converging in the direction of integration, unity and peace rather than segregation and disunity and violence. Religions ought to be movements of convergence. J. B. Jeyaraj defines inter-faith relations as, "... a cordial and meaningful relationship between different religious communities. It includes understanding the faith and practices of others, appreciating the good elements in their culture and valuing the contribution of the people of other faiths towards establishing peace and harmony, restoring justice and the rights of people and working together for the welfare and equality of all people."<sup>1</sup> How has that ideal been realized in history? What are the more modern perceptions of inter-faith activity? This paper tries to find an answer to such questions.

With the institutionalization of Christianity during the reign of Emperor Constantine (312-37 CE), an image of an imperial Jesus was also projected. This had its effect on Christian theology also.<sup>2</sup> Christian gospels were read and interpreted from this imperialistic perspective. St. Cyprian (216-58 CE) had already prepared the ground for Christian exclusivism with his formula, *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* – "Outside the Church there is no salvation." For him the basis of this imagery was Noah's ark in which were only those saved from the deluge (Gn 7:23). Standing on this foundation, St. Augustine interpreted Mk 16:16; Acts 2:38 and Jn 6:53 as saying that Jesus and the Apostles intended that the saving grace was effected by the sacraments, particularly Baptism and

Eucharist. As the power to administer sacraments was vested in the hierarchical Church by Jesus, she becomes necessary for salvation. So the saving power spoken of in the Cyprian formula got tied to a sacerdotal soteriology where priests who celebrated the sacraments for the faithful were necessary in order to save.<sup>3</sup> This view was reaffirmed during the Middle Ages. At the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the reformers rejected the so called abuses of sacerdotal sacramentalism, but they dared not do away with the Cyprian formula. For Martin Luther said,

... though we have sinned, our sins cannot harm us because we are members of Christendom, where there is entire forgiveness of sins, so that God forgives us, and we forgive, bear with, and help one another whereas outside Christendom, where the Gospel is not received, there is no forgiveness and can be no holiness... Hence these articles of the Creed divide and separate us Christians from all other people on earth. For those who are outside Christianity, be they heathens, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, and although they may believe in only one true God and worship Him, yet they do not know how He feels towards them, and cannot expect either love or any blessing from Him, and accordingly remain in eternal wrath and perdition<sup>4</sup>.

Calvin also held basically the same view.

After the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE the problem of children dying without baptism arose. The answer to the problem was the addition of a limbo for children to the already existing limbo of Fathers. Since Baptism is necessary for salvation, all persons saved without a Christian baptism were considered incorporated into the Catholic Church by a *baptismo implicitum* (an implicit baptism).<sup>5</sup> In 1943, Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis* affirmed that only 'true' Catholics are saved," but there was still a possibility of salvation for those who have no access to the gospel. Such people, by a certain unconscious desire and longing, can be "ordained to the mystical Body of the Redeemer."<sup>6</sup>

In the Christian Church there are two basic approaches to the theology of religions. One is the older Western approach and the other is the approaches of South Asian theologians. The older Western approach deals with the question of the theology of religions in a trilogy, viz., exclusivism, inclusivism and plurality.<sup>7</sup>

*Exclusivism* (also called replacement model) is the theological position that strongly endorses the finality of the Christian faith. Accordingly, salvation cannot be found in non-Christian religions. Samuel Zwemer (1867-1952), Hendrik Kraemer (1888-65), and Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998) were some of the early Christian exclusivists of the twentieth century. According to the Aristotelian *Weltanschauung* of exclusivists, truth is one, there cannot be truth in other religions. and therefore, they are false and wrong.<sup>8</sup> Non-Christian religions are demonic and hostile to Christian truth. Gods and Goddesses of other religions are demons. Exclusivists put Hinduism, Buddhism, Satanism, all other forms of Neopaganism, and all other non-Christian religions in the same basket. The spiritual power of their rituals is attributed to the devil.<sup>9</sup> These unsaved people cannot understand the gospel because the Holy Spirit does not reside in them. According to exclusivists, salvation is through Christ alone by a personal commitment to him. As a non-Christian does not know Christ nor does s/he acknowledge His lordship, s/he cannot be saved. The Bible is the only source of knowledge for spirituality and salvation. It is the criterion of all religious truth. They base themselves on the biblical revelation according to which Christ is the only saviour. If one denies the exclusiveness of Christ, then s/he denies the veracity of the Bible and *vice versa*. The exclusiveness of the Bible is to be found in its proclamation of Christ as the only way to salvation. In mainstream Protestantism, exclusivism was revived in the 20th century by Karl Barth for whom, *Religion ist Unglaube* ("religion is disbelief"). This model is rather common among Fundamentalist and Evangelical Christians who strongly affirm that salvation is to be found in no one else except Jesus Christ. The truth found in other religions cannot offer salvation.<sup>10</sup> The Evangelicals are opposed to inclusivism and pluralism. Their Manila Declaration says, "We did agree that salvation is to be found nowhere else than in Jesus Christ. The truth to be found in other religions is not sufficient, in and of itself, to provide salvation."<sup>11</sup> Many Reformed Christian Churches find it impossible to see salvation outside Jesus Christ. But they are also aware that we cannot set limits to God's saving power.<sup>12</sup> Baptists, being made up of very diverse groups, are not easy to put their thinking together. Although

they are strong advocates of religious freedom, they are very conscious of their duty to personal evangelism and to be faithful to Jesus' missionary mandate in Mk 16:15. Most Baptists are exclusivists while there is some openness to other religions among African-American Baptists.<sup>13</sup> Exclusivism is aprioristic because it turns a blind eye to the reality of other religions, nor does it really respect their heritage and praxis. Exclusivism can be either extremist or moderate. For extremists, no dialogue is possible with non-Christians, while for the moderate there is a possibility of dialogue.<sup>14</sup>

*Inclusivism*, also called the Fulfillment model, is found most typically in post-Vatican Roman Catholic theology. Inclusivism is the position which affirms that God who wishes to save the whole world is present in non-Christian religions and saves their followers through Jesus Christ and the Church. This is both an acceptance and rejection of the other religions. As religions are endowed with spiritual power and depth, they become *loci* of the divine presence. Inclusivists find in Luke-Acts the basis for the operation of God's Spirit outside the Christian community (Lk 10:35; 14:16f; 17:22-31).<sup>15</sup> Inclusivism works on two axes; namely, salvation is through Christ alone, and God wills the whole world to be saved (Acts 4:12 and 1 Timothy 2: 4). The elements of truth and goodness found in non-Christian religions find their fulfillment in Christ. This idea of fulfillment led to another theory; namely, the fulfillment theory in religions, according to which other religions find their fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup> That is why exclusivism is also called the fulfillment model. Eusebius of Caesarea (275-339 CE) saw the religions of the Phoenicians as a preparation for the gospel (*Praeparatio Evangelica*). Some modern theologians also see non-Christian religions as a preparation to receive the fullness of the gospel.<sup>17</sup> After Vatican II, inclusivism proliferated all over the Catholic Church.

The Second Vatican Council also affirmed this teaching in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Articles 14-16), saying that the Church is necessary for salvation.<sup>18</sup> According to the Cyprianic formula, visible membership in the Church was necessary for salvation. However, Vatican II moved one step forward; namely, the visible membership in the Church became only a precondition for the fullness of salvation and not for salvation itself. There can be several ways of incorpora-

tion into salvation. Non-Catholics can be incorporated into the Catholic Church even without their knowing it. Vatican II made some positive remarks about non-Christian religions.

By the proclamation of the Gospel she prepares her hearers to receive and profess the faith. She gives them the dispositions necessary for baptism, snatches them from the slavery of error and of idols and incorporates them in Christ so that through charity they may grow up into full maturity in Christ. Through her work, whatever good is in the minds and hearts of men, whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples, is not only saved from destruction but is also cleansed, raised up and perfected unto the glory of God, the confusion of the devil and the happiness of man. The obligation of spreading the faith is imposed on every disciple of Christ, according to his state. (*Lumen Gentium* 17)

Religions, however, that are bound up with an advanced culture have struggled to answer the same questions by means of more refined concepts and a more developed language. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim, Christ “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself... The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men. (*Nostra Aetate* 2)

In order that they may be able to bear more fruitful witness to Christ, let them be joined to those men by esteem and love; let them acknowledge themselves to be members of the group of men among whom they live; let them share in cultural and social life by the various undertakings and enterprises of human living; let them be familiar with their national and religious traditions; let them gladly and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among their fellows. (*Ad Gentes* 11)

But Vatican II still maintained the necessity of the Church for salvation when it said, “This Sacred Council wishes to turn its attention firstly to the Catholic faithful. Basing itself upon Sacred Scripture and Tradition, it teaches that the Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is necessary for salvation. Christ, present to us in His Body, which is the Church, is the one Mediator and the unique way of salvation. In explicit terms He Himself affirmed the necessity of faith and baptism.” (*Lumen Gentium* 14)... “Although whatever good found in other religions is “preserved... purified, raised up, and perfected” by the Catholic faith, the Church still “snatches them from the slavery of error” when she incorporates them more fully into Christ and “each disciple of Christ has the obligation of spreading the faith to the best of his ability.” (*Lumen Gentium* 17)

German Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who was in the forefront of inclusivism, speaks of the *Vorgriff* (“anticipation”), an inborn openness to Transcendence, which corresponds with God’s self-revealing activity. The question he raises is about the salvation of those who have never had the opportunity to listen to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Rahner said that people can be saved even if they are not members of the Christian Church. God in Christ reaches out to the individual to save her/him. He calls such followers *anonymous Christians*. God’s saving grace reaches out to these anonymous Christians through Jesus Christ, though they have no personal knowledge or experience of Christ. Rahner further says,

*Anonymous Christianity* means that a person lives in the grace of God and attains salvation outside of explicitly constituted Christianity... Let us say, a Buddhist monk... who, because he follows his conscience, attains salvation and lives in the grace of God; of him I must say that he is an anonymous Christian; if not, I would have to presuppose that there is a genuine path to salvation that really attains that goal, but that simply has nothing to do with Jesus Christ. But I cannot do that. And so, if I hold if everyone depends upon Jesus Christ for salvation, and if at the same time I hold that many live in the world who have not expressly recognized Jesus Christ, then there remains in my opinion nothing else but to take up this postulate of an anonymous Christianity.<sup>19</sup>

For Rahner, Christianity is the best articulation of truth, which is the normative expression of divine revelation. Rahner did not fail to see God's truth and grace operative in non-Christian religions, but rightly insisted that there are some non-negotiables in each religious tradition. But when Christianity is seen as the best and normative religion, dialogue with other religions becomes difficult, because we are not among equals. According to Rahner, a non-Christian religion is a lawful religion until its members meet a Christian witness. Such a religion is in God's plan of salvation and it can communicate God's grace to its adherents. This sympathetic nature of inclusivism appeals to people. Some of the orthodox and Protestant Churches also hold inclusivist positions.

Among post-Conciliar developments in Catholic theology of religions, the more common view is that the adherents of other religions may be saved, but these religions do not have a salvific structure. Pope Paul VI pushed forward the momentum gathered at Vatican II. In 1964 the Secretariat for Non-Christians was inaugurated by Pope Paul VI to communicate official Catholic views on non-Christian religions, and to promote dialogue with them. It was meant to become a channel where Christians come to know and esteem the beliefs and practices of non-Christians and *vice versa*.<sup>20</sup> The declaration *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Pope Paul VI (1975), while reaffirming the earlier statements of respect and esteem for other religions, emphasized strongly their salvific insufficiency and reiterated the Church's commitment to deliberately evangelize them. Some think that this was a step backward from the Vatican II.<sup>21</sup> Post-conciliar encyclicals such as *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) of John Paul II are pastoral correctives to the de-emphasis on the central roles of Christ and the Church, as well as to the stress laid on the commonalities among religions at the expense of the uniqueness of Christianity.<sup>22</sup>

Pope John Paul II succeeded Pope Paul VI. The 27 year long pontificate of Pope John Paul II was a significant hallmark in the dialogue with non-Christians. In terms of what he taught, there isn't much of a difference between him and his predecessor, but the way he spoke and wrote about their value and redemptive quality was much more positive. His travel to other countries and meetings with the representatives of other religions provided a wonderful witness of his respect and esteem toward them.<sup>23</sup> Out of his 14 encyclicals, three are important when

it comes to the dialogue with non-Christian religions. Sections 6, 11-12 of his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) encourages Catholics to be in dialogue with people of other faiths with deep respect and esteem for the values they expound, and reaffirms the teachings on the universal activity of the Holy Spirit. His encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986) points to the action of the Holy Spirit outside the Church. His next encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio* of 1990, speaks of the necessity of responding to the missionary mandate of the Church and affirmed the inclusivistic theology of Rahner. The pope maintained the possibility of salvation not because of the merits of their own religious traditions, but because of the hidden presence of Christ and the action of the Holy Spirit in them. According to Pope John Paul II, dialogue should be “without pretense or closed-mindedness, but with truth, humility, and frankness,” in “an attitude of a profound willingness to listen.”<sup>24</sup> In 1990, Pope John Paul II wrote a letter to the Bishops of Asia, speaking to them of the danger of the pluralist positions which held that Christianity is only another way to salvation among many. (Section 4). In his apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (1994) he taught that Christianity differed from other religions because of the incarnation of the Word who is the yearning “and fulfillment of all religions (Section 6). More than what he wrote, his gestures of meeting and friendship with members of other religions was something to his credit. His meeting a huge number of young Muslims in Casablanca in 1985, celebration of the World Day of Prayer for Peace in 1986 with leaders from 11 non-Christian religions, the 1993 Day of Prayer with Christian, Muslim, and Jewish leaders, commemorating the end of war in Bosnia, the World Day of Prayer for Peace with over 200 leaders of different religions in 2002, all spoke volumes of his openness and friendship towards other religions.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published in 1994, contains Post-Vatican II theology which spells out the work of the Holy Spirit among the nations and religions of the world. It speaks of the possibility of salvation through non-ordinary channels, with the ordinary, most perfect and ultimate channel of salvation being Christ and the Church.

The Worldwide Anglican Communion, through its Lambeth Conferences, has upheld the freedom of religion and has spoken of the dialogue with other religions as part of the Christian discipleship. Peter Slater said,



From our perspective continuing the Jesus movement is the ordinary way “home.” But this does not preclude others having saving knowledge [and] engendering ways which to us seem extraordinary, a “Christomorphic” as contrasted with “Christocentric.” The sense of mission invites us to celebrate deeds done in a Christ-like spirit wherever and whenever we encounter them. We do not use our traditions to build a fence around but to provide guidelines for discerning the disclosure of enlivening truth<sup>25</sup>.

Inclusivism has its obvious challenge. People are not ready to accept that Christianity is the only true religion in whose truth all religions participate.”<sup>26</sup> If Jesus Christ is God’s fullest and final revelation, how can we speak of dialoguing with other religions? There is nothing more basic left for any dialogue.<sup>27</sup>

*Pluralism* is also called the Mutuality model. Proponents of pluralism wish to deconstruct the “myth of Christian uniqueness.” It advocates that the world religions are true and their communication of the truth about God, the world, and salvation are equally valid. They expound that, as all religions lead to the one and only God, Christianity is not the absolute, unique, and final way that leads to God. Instead of Christ and Christianity being the centre of religions, God is their centre. John Hick of the Claremont Graduate School in California was its first proponent. He spoke of “the Real” as conceived by different world cultural contexts. This Real or the Ultimate has many names, like God, (Yahweh), Allah, Brahman, Shiva, Kali, Durga, Dao or Amaterasu. Hick does not understand salvation as communion with the Trinity, but as a shift from ego-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. Conversion from one religion to another is not necessary as all religions provide more or less equal opportunities to access Reality. Christianity does not hold a monopoly on salvation. In the evolutionary process, early religions are superseded by higher religions. God’s message comes to a particular group in a particular form, and that is different from others, but the basic core of all messages is the same because their source is the same. That explains the similarities among religions. The center of religions is not Christianity, but God.<sup>28</sup> For Hick religion, or “salvation”, is the transformation from ego-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. According to Hick, this is the common goal of all religions. Hick’s pluralism maintains that all religious traditions, though they represent par-

ticular paths, all lead to one and the same ultimate goal. The differences among them are only superficial and not substantial.<sup>29</sup> Three criticisms are levelled against Hick's pluralism; namely, that claim to objectivity is less, actual differences among religions are reduced, and the religious perspectives like peace, cooperation and mutual understanding are marginalized.<sup>30</sup>

Roger Haight was another vociferous pluralist in the Catholic Church.<sup>31</sup> Haight insists that Christians must believe that Jesus is a normative revelation from God, but there are normative revelations in other religions as well. So Jesus is one savior among others. He speaks of a Spirit-Christology in which Jesus is the presence of God's saving Spirit to the Christians. But there are other presences of the Spirit in other religions. Dhavamony calls Buddha also a savior because he is the one who imparts the saving truth to Buddhists (Majjhima Nikaya 1.8).<sup>32</sup> Jesus is not the full revelation of God. Christians should look at other religions to get a fuller picture of God.<sup>33</sup>

Next to Haight it was Paul F. Knitter who spoke of Pluralism.<sup>34</sup> He opines that several Church Fathers, like Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Theophilus of Antioch, Athenagoras, and Tertullian, believed in the possibility of all people being offered an authentic revelation and salvation.<sup>35</sup> Knitter proposes four models, and in doing so he renamed the three classical models. They are: Replacement model (exclusivism), Fulfillment model (Inclusivism), Mutuality model (Pluralism) and Acceptance model.<sup>36</sup> Knitter invites fellow believers to "cross the theological Rubicon" by giving up exclusivist thinking. Religions offer three bridges across the unbridgeable theological Rubicon, viz, philosophical-historical, mystical, and practical-ethical. The philosophical-historical bridge is the discovery of the historical situatedness. Religions are historically conditioned responses to the Real. The mystical bridge consists of the experiential dimension of religions. The third bridge is the practical-ethical one, which sees salvation as the common goal all religious traditions. These three bridges presuppose a certain equality among all religions. According to Knitter, this view affirms Christ's uniqueness while not denying the uniqueness and necessity of the founders of other religions like Buddha, Muhammad, Krishna *etc.* He speaks of its imperialistic and relativistic tendencies as weaknesses.

Gavin D'Costa is an outspoken critic of the pluralist interpretation of Knitter and other pluralists.<sup>37</sup>

Methodists hold that religious pluralism is not against the gospel, but complimentary, while people can access God through their religions. Grace is present to all in creation. There is no truth outside God. Other religions also have a share in this truth. The most effective way of knowing that truth exists in other religions is this interfaith dialogue.<sup>38</sup>

Pluralism is the view that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate from within the major variant cultural ways of being human; and that, within each of them, the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness is manifestly taking place, so far as human observation can tell.<sup>39</sup> The main concern of Christian pluralism is to re-articulate the understanding and attitude towards people of other religions in the light of a pluralistic spirituality.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, there can be neither superiority nor inferiority among religions in terms of salvation. Although pluralists promote better inter-faith relations and mutual understanding, this school also has its limitations. It replaces Christo-centrism with Theo-centrism. Inter-faith relations are built neither by winning others or rejecting one's own.<sup>41</sup> Thus, pluralism has sacrificed confessional and kerygmatic elements of dialogue for the sake of religious harmony.<sup>42</sup> So this typology of pluralism cannot be accepted as a viable theology of religions in the practice of inter-faith relations. Theologians of different religious groups have attempted to bring about religious harmony, but a positive result unanimously accepted by all is still a far cry. The traditional triology of the schools of theology of religions; namely, exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism has not sufficiently penetrated the core elements of inter-faith relations in our pluralistic society. Having surveyed the western positions of the Christian theology of religions, now let us turn to the theologians of South Asia, whose thought has been very much shaped by the presence of multiple religions in their milieu.

#### SOUTH ASIAN THEOLOGIANs ON INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE

India born Fr. Raimundo Panikkar's pluralism moves away from Enlightenment and Kantian epistemology toward a relational ontology. We are constituted by our relationality to each other, to God, and to

the world. His concept of interrelationality is called cosmotheandrisms; namely, that the cosmic, the divine, and the human are three irreducible dimensions of the Real. This triadic intuition is found both in consciousness and in reality.<sup>43</sup> The biggest difference between Panikkar and Hick was that, for Panikkar, pluralism is a religious task, within a religious tradition. His views are distinctly Christian, Catholic and South Asian. Authentic interreligious encounter becomes possible between Christianity and Hinduism because “it is an encounter in the Presence of the one who is already present in the hearts of those who in good faith belong to one or the other of the two religions.”<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, Hinduism and Christianity meet in God. But this unity or oneness is not uniformity. The goal of inter-religious dialogue is not assimilation of each other’s views, but rather mutual enrichment and growth resulting from true kenosis or self-emptying.<sup>45</sup> Pluralism is not at a kind of mutual tolerance, but a dynamic religious interaction among religions. Hick’s pluralism aims at a neat ordering of different paths to one common and higher religious goal. But Panikkar’s pluralism consists of openness and a kenotic dynamism. Our religious experiences are incomplete. We need contradictory truth claims to challenge our complacency and ignorance, subjecting our myths to the critical perusal of others, making us grow in our interrelationality.

S. J. Samartha, another Indian pluralist who sees salvation as *advaita* (non-dual) which brings God, the world, and human beings into a single whole of unbroken unity through God’s universality. He rejects the idea of Judeo-Christian salvation history as well as Christomonism and affirms that all revelations are relative and only God is absolute.<sup>46</sup>

Fr. Aloy Pieris, SJ: All religious streams are Eastern. Christianity is not something Western. They are hybrid at some point. Buddhism and Christianity are principles that cohabit in any human being irrespective of religious labels. The contexts of Jesus Christ and Gautama Buddha are not polar opposites. The core of Buddhism is *gnosis* while that of Christianity is *agape* (love) which are distinct languages of the Spirit that overlap. Pieris says, “I believe that there is a Christian *gnosis* that is necessarily agapeic and there is also a Buddhist agape that remains gnostic.”<sup>47</sup> These religious cores have already crossed their boundaries. That is why they appear hybrid. Therefore the identity of a Buddhist as well as a Christian is not a monolithic self-contained entity.<sup>48</sup> In sym-

biosis with people of other faiths we become authentically aware of our own tradition. Our religious identity comes through engagement with another person of a different religious stream. As living and dynamic realities, religions cannot be reduced to written texts, because a religious dynamism cannot be imprisoned in a text. Religion has a non-textual dimension like art and ritual.<sup>49</sup> Pieris sees two kinds of religions, viz. cosmic and meta-cosmic. Cosmic religions are indigenous religions which revolve around phenomena like fire, wind, water and earth which have a mysterious cosmic balance. Meta-cosmic religions pursue the beyond dimension, transcending day to day life. Buddhism, Hinduism, Abrahamic religions and Taoism are meta-cosmic religions.<sup>50</sup> Culture has meaning only in relation to religion. The term inculturation is of missionary origin. Inculturation presupposes a dichotomy between culture and religion, whereas no such dichotomy exists. The Western notion of religion as a function of life does not exist in Asia, where religion is life itself.<sup>51</sup> After several centuries of Christianity, in Asia it remains a minority. The reason for this, according to Pieris, is that Asia has not appropriated the double baptism of Jesus. The first baptism has to be an immersion or inreligionization into the Jordan of Asian religiosity, while the second baptism is the commitment to poverty in Asia, which acts as a prophetic stand leading to death on the cross.<sup>52</sup> The priority question in Asia is not Christ's uniqueness, but the poor and how the liberation thrust of each religion addresses itself to its poor. For the two mutually complimentary traditions of Buddhism and Christianity, symbiosis is necessary because their differences are based on the inadequacy of the basic medium proper to each. If they are to grow they need to live together in symbiosis. In symbiotic relations with other religions one is challenged by the other's unique attitudes towards the poor. Each religion is irreducibly distinct. They cannot compromise their identity. There are non-negotiables between Christianity and Buddhism.<sup>53</sup> This symbiosis goes beyond the model of multiple religious belonging proposed by Phan and Dupuis.<sup>54</sup> Pieris has provided a foundation for multiple religious belonging. There is a multiplicity of cores and not just one. Salvation idioms are not one but many. Pieris has accepted not only the husk of Buddhism but also its kernel. He is a multiple religious believer whose beliefs and practices are challenged and transformed by Buddhism. Then the result is not synthesis or syncretism, but sym-

biosis. Buddha and Christ are just titles. These are interpretations of the salvific medium of each religion. The titles in themselves are not salvific. What is important for salvation is orthopraxis and not orthodoxy. We have to live what the sages have taught.<sup>55</sup>

By dialoguing with other religions, God's revelation in history is better understood. For Theravada Buddhists the ultimate reality is unknowable or impersonal. For Hindus all reality is pantheistic. Islam has a strict monotheism. Asian Christianity needs an Asian look. Hellenistic and Roman philosophical-theological formulations are only one of the ways to articulate the mystery of the divine. There are other ways to it. To have a better appreciation of other religions, according to Balasuriya, Christians have to be aware of the presuppositions on which their theology and philosophy are based. Western logic is based on the principle of non-contradiction and tends to be exclusive of opposites. But the eastern logic is more inclusive and harmonizing.<sup>56</sup> Balasuriya insists on distinguishing the core of Christianity; namely, the gospel and the subsequent developments in the interpretation of scripture by the Church. God may be absolute, but theological statements about God made by the Church can be relative. The Church's answer to theological questions comes from her teaching authority. But they are not necessarily answers directly from Jesus. Conflicts among different Christian denominations are due to secondary conclusions from different presuppositions, whereas the core teaching remains the same. Similarly, in dealing with our non-Christian neighbours, we have to be conscious of such secondary presuppositions, which can make Christianity something exclusive or normative. Commenting on the encyclical *Dominus Iesus* of Pope Benedict XVI and a report on the Interreligious Assembly held in Vatican City Oct. 25-28, 1999 (published in *Pro Dialogo*, Bulletin 106, 2000/1 pp 93-95) which said that, although other religions can receive divine grace, they are in a gravely deficient situation compared with the Church which has the fullness of the means of salvation and that it was necessary to announce the need to be converted to Jesus Christ through baptism. Balasuriya records the reactions of Buddhists in Sri Lanka to these statements to the effect that they were not interested in such a dialogue in which their own intrinsic worth as a religion was unrecognized as during the colonial past, and they are looked upon as having grave deficiencies when compared with Catholics who were

in a superior position.<sup>57</sup> It is important to distinguish between the essential and absolute core of Jesus' teaching, and subsequent developments and elaborations of his message, which may be relative. This is a difficult task to so distinguish because the teachings of the Church have become normative for the Christian faith. Interreligious dialogue can promote peace, mutual respect, and understanding only if one religion does not claim superiority over others.<sup>58</sup> Challenging the Caledonian Christological position, which made the nature of Jesus' divinity exclusive, Balasuriya says that Jesus Christ is the cosmic Lord who cannot be restricted to a figure in space and time. Cosmic Christ belongs to all irrespective of labels.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, according to Balasuriya, true followers of Jesus have to take Asian poverty and religiosity into serious consideration if they are to dialogue with their non-Christian brethren. This means also sharing our material and spiritual worth with them.<sup>60</sup> Balasuriya proposes a critical principle for interpreting Christian or any theology. This critical principle is how much a religion can promote justice, peace and love among its adherents.<sup>61</sup>

An important aspect of India's heritage is its mysticism. From time immemorial, Indian mystics and sages have dandled themselves on the suckling breasts of *Bhārath Dhyāna Māthā* (Indian mother of contemplation). Experience of the absolute was an essential aspect of Indian religiosity.

Fr. Bede Griffiths, O.S.B.Cam. (1906-1993) was a pioneer in interreligious dialogue and inculturation in the second half of the 20th century. Born in England and educated at Oxford, he was drawn towards Indian mysticism through the reading of Indian Scriptures. He became a Catholic in 1931 and, the following year, a Benedictine monk. In 1955 he arrived in India, desirous of founding an Indian monastic ashram. With Acharya Francis, they dressed themselves in Kavi orange robes and started Kurisumala Ashram in the Ghats of Kerala. Based on the Syriac rite, they developed a Syriac monastic liturgy. In 1968, he moved over to Saccidananda Ashram at Shanthivanam, a community in Tamil Nadu, India, dedicated to the Christian contemplative ideal in an Indian setting. There he boldly explored interreligious dialogue and inculturation. He has published more than a dozen books and scores of articles. Griffiths attracted large crowds and was recognized by fellow pioneers like the Dalai Lama in the realm of interreligious dialogue.



Being himself a monk belonging to the Camaldolese Benedictines, he wanted to wed Western monasticism with that of the East. His pioneering experiments in this matrimony of the east and west worked out in spite of initial drawbacks.<sup>62</sup>

When it comes to inter-faith dialogue we often think of academic pursuits. But there are two other important forms of dialogue: dialogue of life and that of experience. The dialogue of life involves living and sharing one's life with people of other religions. Rather than one's words, one's non-verbal attitudes and actions come to the fore. They testify to the values one stands for. A number of people have opted to live totally identifying themselves with the people in a particular geographical locality. I like to mention here the profound life witness of Fr. Michael Rodrigo, omi. Being himself a great academic with double doctorates, he moved away from an ambitious of academic life with all its institutional security and comforts, and went to the grass-roots level. He totally identified himself with the farmers of Lower Uva in Southern Sri Lanka and in 1980 erected a mud hut at Alukalawita, about 5 km south of the town of Buttala on the historic Raja Mawatha leading to Kataragama. The initial suspicion of the Buddhist clergy of the area was justifiable. What has a Catholic priest, disguised in a white sarong and banyan instead of the traditional white cassock, to do with a 100% Buddhist village? Has he come to proselytize the poor Buddhist villagers like many other Christian fundamentalist groups in the country? Soon the monks and people of the village and environs realized that their suspicions were unfounded. His deep knowledge of Buddhism was utilized when he was invited to preach at local Buddhist temples. Rodrigo said that he came to historic Lower Uva to compensate for the damages done by Christian colonialists who were responsible for the 1848 Uva rebellion during which the Uva peasantry, together with their local leaders, rose against an oppressive colonial regime. Fr. Rodrigo's simple life style and his love for the poor inspired by the gospel as well as the Buddhist scriptures attracted the villagers to him. He became one with them. He taught them and served them like a shepherd. He had a community of nuns who handled health care and women's issues in the village. His mud hut home, named Suba Seth Gedara (house of good fortune), was like a parish without the cross. He was their voice in the village. He spoke boldly against injustice, inequality and oppression.



During the second JVP insurrection in the late 1980's, the sinister political forces that could not tolerate his presence among the oppressed poor of Lower Uva claimed his life when an unidentified gunman assassinated him on October 11, 1987.<sup>63</sup> To his credit nobody in that village became a Catholic during the past 34 years.

## CONCLUSION

The theology of religions has been approached by both Western and Asian scholars, particularly, more relevantly, South Asian ones. The Western approach consists of the three paradigms of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Exclusivism is the view which propagates the Cyprian formula of *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* because to be saved one has to enter into the sacramental economy of Jesus Christ administered by the Church hierarchy. Inclusivism consists of the possibility of salvation for non-Christians, but through the mediation of Christ and the Church. Catholic theologian Karl Rahner called the adherents of other religions anonymous Christians. The elements of truth and goodness found in non-Christian religions find their fulfillment in Christ. Non-Christian religions are seen as a preparation to receive the fullness of the gospel. This has been the predominant Christian view for the past 50 years. Pluralism challenged the rock bottom of traditional Christianity saying that Jesus Christ is not the absolute, unique, and final way that leads to God, while the world religions are true and they also communicate the truth about God, the world, and salvation, which are equally valid, and all religions lead to the one and only God. In the history of the Church for many years, its triumphalist attitude has been exclusivist, particularly until the Second Vatican Council. Since then the inclusivist attitude has taken over. Right through, pluralists have been the minority who were often blamed for their views by the official Catholic Church, Protestant and Evangelical Quarters. The second division consists of a number of South Asian theologians who have been deeply immersed in their multi-religious contexts. These are scholars who have taken pains to understand correctly the teachings of the major living faiths and have theologized, incorporating their jargon having been fully immersed in their contexts. These have won the approval and admiration of the moderate followers of other religions in South Asia.

But their novelty and unorthodoxy have called for much criticism from various opponents.

But the tug a war between religions continues inside as well as outside of the Church. Brutal killings, oppression, harassment, persecution and insult on account of religion, and often in God's name, continue in some parts of the world. Then, what kind of a God do we have? Haven't we enthroned in our hearts a God of vengeance, violence and war who wants to be the victor all the time and worship him? Then can he be the most merciful one, the Creator and Saviour of all? Labels make us so distinct and unique that we lose the sense of humanity common to us and all sentiments of philanthropy. "Killing is a sin, but people of X race and Y religion must be killed because we have been rivals right through." I respect those who hold such opinions, but with total disagreement and regret. The world has to be a multi-religious family. Religions should not breed animosity and conflict, but rather peace, love, justice and brotherhood, promoting human values as well as the integrity and harmony of the universe. Each religious group is free to hold its opinions, but we have to respect the religious beliefs of others. It is healthy that we become aware of the religious convictions of others and study them more deeply so that we see where we agree as well as differ. Dialogue of life and sharing of experiences has to continue. We must hold hands, ushering in an equitable and peaceful society where justice is done to every being living in the universe. Such fellowship ought to lead us to work together in whatever fields that open up for common endeavours, without jeopardizing our proper convictions/beliefs and practices. I wish to end this article with some thought-provoking statements of Pope Francis, a humongous hero and a leader in the world of today.

One week after the election of the first non-European pope in 1,300 years, when meeting a group of non-Christian, and non-Catholic religious leaders, Pope Francis said, "The Catholic Church is aware of the importance of furthering respect of friendship between men and women of different religious traditions. They are our precious allies in the commitment to defend human dignity, build a more peaceful coexistence among people and protect nature with care."<sup>64</sup> Giving his New Year's message on January 1, 2015, which also coincided with the World Day of Peace in the Catholic Church, he spoke at St. Peter's Basilica of the positive aspects of unity among religions and cultures. He said, "All of

us are called (by God) to be free, all are called to be sons and daughters, and each, according to his or her own responsibilities, is called to combat modern forms of enslavement. From every people, culture and religion let us join our forces.”<sup>65</sup> Pope Francis said that freedom of expression had its limits, especially if it involved insulting or ridiculing religion. On January 15, 2015, speaking to the journalists on board his official plane from Sri Lanka to the Philippines during his pastoral visits, he referred to the murderous attacks by Islamic militants who on January 9, 2015 stormed the Paris offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, and shot 12 members of its staff dead, including some of their best known cartoonists, who for years had ridiculed Islam and other religions as well as Christianity, Pope Francis said, “It’s normal. You cannot provoke. You cannot insult the faith of others. You cannot make fun of the faith of others.”<sup>66</sup> In a personal message to the world’s Muslim community to mark the end of Ramadan, the Pope said: “Turning to mutual respect in inter-religious relations, especially between Christians and Muslims, we are called to respect the religion of the other, its teachings, its symbols, its values. Particular respect is due to religious leaders and to places of worship. How painful are attacks on one or other of these!... It is clear that, when we show respect for the religion of our neighbours or when we offer them our good wishes on the occasion of a religious celebration, we simply seek to share their joy, without making reference to the content of their religious convictions.”<sup>67</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. B. JEYARAJ, “Interfaith Relations for Transformation and Higher Education,” Ed. M. V. BASKARAN (Delhi: Lady Coak Collge, ISPCCK, 2007) 1.

<sup>2</sup> L. M. WHITE, “An Imperial Jesus,” *Front Line*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/why/legitimization.html> (access 07.06.2015).

<sup>3</sup> Secerdotal soteriology means salvation wrought by Jesus Christ mediated through priests. The Latin word for priest is *sacerdos*.

<sup>4</sup> H. WAGE and C. A. BUCHHEIM, *Luther’s Primary Works together with His Shorter and Larger Catechisms Translated into English* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1896), Articles 104, 106.

<sup>5</sup> D. CHEETHAM, D. PRATT & D. THOMAS, *Understanding Interreligious Relations* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013) 126.

<sup>6</sup> Veli-Matti KÄRKKÄINEN, *An Introduction to Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003) 111-12.

<sup>7</sup> D. MARBANIANG, “Theology of Religions: Pluralism, Inclusivism, Exclusivism,” <https://epages.wordpress.com/2010/03/24/theology-of-religions-pluralism-inclusivism-exclusivism/> (accessed 26.05.2015); Cf. also H. CAREY, “Interfaith Relations and the Different Approaches in the Theology of Religions,” in <http://mizoram.academia.edu/HmarCarey>.

<sup>8</sup> K. GNANAKAN, *The Pluralistic Predicament* (Bangalore: TBT, 1992) 23.

<sup>9</sup> E. BRUNNER & K. BARTH, *Natural Theology* (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1946) 74, 128.

<sup>10</sup> World Evangelical Fellowship: Theological Commission, *Uniqueness of Christ in a Pluralistic World* ed. B. J. NICHOLLS (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishers, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> The WEF Manila Declaration, “The Unique Christ in Our Pluralist World,” ed., Bruce J. Nicholls (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing House, 1994) 15.

<sup>12</sup> 1989 World Conference on Mission and Evangelization at San Antonio, Texas, “Report of the Section I: Turning to the Living God,” *International Review of Mission* 78 (July – October 1989) 351.

<sup>13</sup> S. M. HEIM, “Accounts of Hope,” in *Ground for Understanding*, Ed. S. Mark Heim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 17-18.

<sup>14</sup> D. MARBANIANG, *Theology and Philosophy of Religion* (2011) 5.

<sup>15</sup> A. RACE, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Publications, 1983) 39f.

<sup>16</sup> P. HEDGES, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2010) 23; L. J. FREDERICKS, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Publications, 2004) 1-29.

<sup>17</sup> KÄRKKÄINEN, *An Introduction to Theology of Religions*, 117.

<sup>18</sup> *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, new revised edition, ed. A. FLANNERY, (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing, 1975, 2004<sup>5</sup>).

<sup>19</sup> K. RAHNER, *Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews 1965-1982* (New York: Crossroad, 1986) 135. This position was reiterated by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Dominus Jesus* (2000), I:8.

<sup>20</sup> Secretariat for Non-Christians, *The Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, May 10, 1984, sec. 4. Under the presidency of Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli (1973–1980), it described the work of the Secretariat in terms of spiritual friendship based on eternal spiritual values towards non-Christian brethren. Under the leadership of Archbishop Jean Jadot (1980–1984), the Secretariat laid special emphasis on the Christian-Muslim relationship. Under Cardinal Francis Arinze’s presidency (1984–2002), the name of the secretariat was changed into the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (1988). The secretariat’s second important document was: *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*. It was a joint publication with the Congregation for the Evangelization of the Peoples.

<sup>21</sup> M. AYDIN, *Modern Western Christian Theological Understandings of Muslims since the Second Vatican Council* (Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2002) 60-62.

<sup>22</sup> KÄRKKÄINEN, *An Introduction to Theology of Religions*, 117, 120.

<sup>23</sup> A. CAMPS, "Interreligious Dialogue: A Task with Many Challenges," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 10 (2000) 166-67.

<sup>24</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Sec. 56; *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, *Apostolic letter at the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000*, January 6, 2001, Sec. 56.

<sup>25</sup> P. SLATER, "An Anglican Perspective on Our Interreligious Situation," in *Grounds for Understanding: Ecumenical Resources for Responses to Religious Pluralism*, Ed. S. Mark Heim, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 137-38.

<sup>26</sup> H. KÜNG, "What is True Religion? Toward an Ecumenical Criteriology," *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, ed. L. SWIDLER (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987) 231- 250, cited in Veli-Matti Kašrkašinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions*, 24.

<sup>27</sup> P. F. KNITTER, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Publications, 2002) 103.

<sup>28</sup> J. HICK, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); L. GILKEY, "Plurality and Its Theological Implications," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed., J. HICK (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Publications, 1998) 40.

<sup>29</sup> J. HICK, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 240.

<sup>30</sup> M. M. YADLAPATI, "Raimon Panikkar, John Hick, and a Pluralist Theology of Religions," *Interreligious Dialogue*, <http://irdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Raimon-Panikkar-John-Hick-and-a-Plu> (access 12.05.2015).

<sup>31</sup> R. HAIGHT, *Jesus: Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Publications, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> M. DHAVAMONY, *Buddhism and Christianity*, Concilium: Religion in the Seventies, eds. C. GEFFRÉ and M. DHAVAMONY (New York: Seabury Press, 1979) 48-52.

<sup>33</sup> HAIGHT, *Jesus: Symbol of God*, 403, 417. Other proponents of Spirit-Christology are: M. HABETS, *The Anointed Son: A Trinitarian Spirit Christology*, Princeton Monograph Series, ed. K. C. HANSON, C. M. COLLIER, and D. Ch. SPINKS (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010); G. BADCOCK, *Light of Truth and Fire of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

<sup>34</sup> P. KNITTER, *No Other Bane: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Towards the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Publications, 1985); Idem., *One Earth Many Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Publications, 1995); Idem., *Jesus and Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Publications, 2001); Idem., *Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Publications, 2002).

<sup>35</sup> KNITTER, *No Other Name ...*, 121.

<sup>36</sup> KNITTER, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, Replacement Model - 19-62; Fulfillment Model - 63-108; Mutuality Model - 109-172; Acceptance Model - 173-237.

<sup>37</sup> G. D'COSTA, ed. *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1990).

<sup>38</sup> N. THOMPSON, “The Search for Methodist Theology of Religions Pluralism,” in *Ground for Understanding*, Ed. S. M. HEIM (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 106.

<sup>39</sup> Ch. SREENIVASA RAO, “The Inter - Faith Dialogue and World Community - An Introduction,” in Ch. SREENIVASA RAO (Ed.), *The Inter-Faith Dialogue and World Community* (Madras: C.L.S., 1991) xxxv.

<sup>40</sup> T. S. RAJU, *Christian Responses to Plurality of Religion* (Bangalore: SATRI, 2006), 119.

<sup>41</sup> COSTA, *The Pluralist Paradigm in the Christian Theology of Religions*, 211-24.

<sup>42</sup> R. PANIKKAR, “The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges: Three Kairological Movements of Christic Self-Consciousness,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, edited by J. HICK and P. F. KNITTER (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987; 1992) 92.

<sup>43</sup> R. PANIKKAR, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, Ed. Scott Eastham. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1993) 62.

<sup>44</sup> Idem., *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981) 58.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 58 -60.

<sup>46</sup> S.J. SAMARTHA, *Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical Issue in Inter-Religious Relationships* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982) 97; Th. CHACKO, “An Appraisal of the Dialogical Theology of S.J. Samartha with Special Reference to Religious Pluralism,” *Ebenezer Theological Journal*, Vol. 2, 1 (Jan. 2013) 9.

<sup>47</sup> A. PIERIS, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Catholic Experience of Buddhism*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Publications, 1988) 113.

<sup>48</sup> Op. Cit.

<sup>49</sup> Idem, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, Faith Meets faith Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Publications, 1988) 98.

<sup>50</sup> PIERIS, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 98-99.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 55. Pieris has a different explanation as to why mass conversions to Christianity are not possible in South Asia even after a history of 500 years of Christianity. Both Early Buddhism and Early Christianity had clear missionary mandates from their founders (Vin I 20-21; Mk 16:5-18 and Mt 28:18-20). Due to early missionary activity there were mass conversions both in the Mediterranean world and in Asia. In both these contexts there was a ready-made launching pad in the prevalent cosmic religions of the day. These decadent cosmic religions had ceased their appeal to both the rulers and the ruled, creating a spiritual vacuum calling for a novel religious experience. Accordingly, there were masses of people who embraced the new faiths. The two new meta-cosmic religions, viz. Buddhism and Christianity established themselves without any violence to the cosmic religions found in their milieu. But that was not the case with colonial Christianity. When colonial Christianity arrived in South Asia there were the two meta-cosmic religions; namely, Hinduism and Buddhism, very well established, which had taken deep roots in the native soils. In such a situation Christianity was not welcome and, on the contrary, resisted. The reaction of the colonialists to this situation was violent forced conversion and proselytism. Such conversions did not last long. Once the religious violence ceased, they went back to their former religion. This explains why Chris-

tians are a minority in South Asia today, frustrating the misdirected missionary zeal of evangelical Christians. Cf. A. PIERIS, "Two Mission Mandates Calling for Conversion: Preach the Dhamma (Vin I 21), Proclaim the Gospel (Mk 15[16]:16)," *Dialogue* New Series xxxii & xxxiii (2005-2006) 1-57, 48-52.

<sup>53</sup> A. PIERIS, *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Publications, 1996) 162; Idem., "Spirituality of Mindfulness: The Biblical and Buddhist Versions," in P. GNANAPRAGASAM and E. SCHÜSSLER, eds., in *Essays in Honour of Prof. Felix Wilfred* (Delhi, India: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008) 185.

<sup>54</sup> J. DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997) 161.

<sup>55</sup> D. PREMAWARDHANA, "The Unremarkable Redundancy of Multiple Religious Belonging," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 48.1 (Winter 2011) 76-101.

<sup>56</sup> T. BALASURIYA, *Mary and Human Liberation: The Story and the Text* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International) 109.

<sup>57</sup> "The Two Faces of the Vatican Curia on Interreligious Dialogue," in [http://http://www.ucanews.com/story-archive/?post\\_name=/2000/09/13/the-two-faces-of-the-vatican-curia-on-interreligious-dialogue&post\\_id=540](http://http://www.ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/2000/09/13/the-two-faces-of-the-vatican-curia-on-interreligious-dialogue&post_id=540) (access 05.06. 2015).

<sup>58</sup> *Mary and Human Liberation*, 110-11.

<sup>59</sup> T. BALASURIYA, "An Asian Perspective," in K. C. ABRAHAM ed., *Third World Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002) 117; Idem., "Right Relationships: De-rooting and Rerooting of Christian Theology," *Logos* 20, Nos 3-4 (Sept-Dec 1991) 203.

<sup>60</sup> BALASURIYA, "An Asian Perspective ...," 118.

<sup>61</sup> BALASURIYA, *Mary and Human Liberation*, 114.

<sup>62</sup> J. B. TRAPNELL, *Bede Griffiths: A Life in Dialogue*, Sunny Series of Religious Studies (New York: Stae University of New York Press, 2001); Idem., *Christ in India: Essays Towards a Hindu-Christian Dialogue*. (Illinois: 1966, 1984); Idem., *The Marriage of East and West: A Sequel to the Golden String* (Illinois: 1982); Idem., *The Cosmic Revelation: The Hindu Way to God* (Illinois: 1983; ATC, Bangalore: 1995); Idem., *River of Compassion: A Christian Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita* (Illinois: 1988; New York: Continuum: 1995); Idem., *Christianity in the Light of the East* (Illinois, London: 1989); Idem., *A New Vision of Reality: Western Science, Eastern Mysticism and Christian Faith*. (ed.) F. EDWARDS (Illinois: 1990)

<sup>63</sup> M. RODRIGO, *Harvest Dreams of Fr. Mike: Coming to Fruition* (Colombo: Centre for Society and Religion.); Jayantha Pathberiya, *Why Do We Live* (London: Docamali Ltd., 2012).

<sup>64</sup> <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/pope-francis-slams-spiritual-alzheimers-4856518> (access 03.05.2015).

<sup>65</sup> <http://www.inquisitr.com/1724574/pope-francis-bring-all-religions-together-concept-of-one-denomination-raises-concerns/#ObhSDzSooKhqih1q.99> (access 03.05.2015).

<sup>66</sup> [www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2015/01/15/...](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2015/01/15/...) (access 05.06.2015).

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-to-muslims-for-end-of-ramadan>. (access 19.07.2015).

