

Towards a future filled with hope

(Reflections for a day of recollection during the General Chapter 2016)

5.0

1. He went forth

To have faith means to *be on a journey*. The experience of a journey is a fundamental dimension of faith. When a person responds to the inviting call of God, he or she begins a journey of faith. All people of faith can discover the faith of Abraham in their own experience. Here are a few simple words, which describe the very depths of the adventure, drama, beauty and risk of faith:

“The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. (...) So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him.”(Gen 12: 1.4)

To begin such an adventure means to allow oneself to be led, to lose control over one’s very life, to leave behind one’s own plans, to go into the unknown, to allow oneself to be surprised, to allow strangers to enter into one’s life and to become the instruments of God. Sometimes, perhaps even above all, it means to walk in darkness, to live in humility, to have the awareness that life is pure gift. But it also means *a never extinguishing hope* - God and his call comes, as it were, from the future, it opens up horizons, invites and leads. From then on, *faith, the future, and hope, become inseparable*. This is why the life of a person of faith – if it is marked by fidelity to the received Word – is never lost. It may be difficult, but *for people of faith the future is always filled with hope*. God, who pours hope into the heart, is always faithful. He never says: “The journey is over, there is nothing further.” For God, blocking Jesus in the grave was not a dead end situation, without a way out!

“I will make of you a great nation” – these words will resound continuously in Abraham’s ear and nothing will be able to muffle them, neither the awareness of his own frailty, nor death, which may look him in the eye, nor other people, whose mind might look for other solutions. A man or woman of faith, someone who is on the journey of faith, experiences that God is stronger than one’s weakness, even stronger than death; God’s logic exceeds all human calculation. This is why Abraham went forth. To this day he is for all people our father in faith.

In answering the Word, Abraham made a decision. Faith is a *choosing to stand with the Lord so as to live with Him*.¹ These simple words express the reality of faith: on the one hand, it is a question of making decisions every day, and on the other hand, faith is something that totally engages the person and does not allow for a perfunctory or lukewarm response. A person arrives at his or her full human development and maturity only when he or she is *fully engaged* in this process. Faith is able to reach full maturity, only when a person enters completely into its experience. Abraham did not sign a “contract for services rendered” with God. He was not employed by God “by

¹ Benedict XVI, *Porta fidei*, 10.

the hour.” He engaged himself totally, without reserve and each day he made a decision - sometimes a very difficult one - to “be with the Lord” anew.

Our Founder was the same. On the one hand he was totally dedicated, without reserve; and on the other hand, he was ready to decide anew each day “to be with the Lord,” whose face he recognised in the face of the suffering Church of his poor.

Our Founder – as we well know – did not write learned dissertations. He was a practical man and his spiritual journal was also very practical. He did not leave behind a tractate on the spiritual life or any systematic reflection on the faith of Abraham. However, when one investigates his journey of faith, we can certainly say that he lived like our great Patriarch and became for us – his spiritual sons – a true Father in faith. First he himself learned and then he showed us how to entrust oneself to God, who calls; how to go forth into the unknown; how to risk; how to cross the established borders of human logic; how to preserve one concern in one’s heart – concern for fidelity, and leave the rest to God.

Here is one of many examples. When he was visiting the community in Inchicore in Dublin in 1857, as he was living very edified by the good spirit, zeal and spiritual regularity of the members, he affirmed that this is a great work of grace, which he recommended to be answered by “*a constant fidelity to the Holy Rule*”² – fidelity that is total and renewed daily.

I mentioned that the Founder did not write a dissertation on Abraham, but he did mention Abraham, when he wrote in his diary about his journey through Africa from October 22nd to November 13th, 1842. He wrote about his meeting with those whose customs and tents in the Oasis’ of North Africa, called to his imagination the age of the Patriarchs. With sadness in his heart he confessed that they didn’t follow the great Father in faith and are bereft of the Light that he arrived at. But one can immediately feel that in his words there was the fire of a missionary: *we have to do everything in our power so that they find God and the faith of the Church.*³ It is as if he wanted to say: *we, who have the faith of Abraham, must embark on a mission to carry the Light of his faith to those, who live in tents, like the Patriarch, but who have never embarked on that journey of the spirit that leads to the discovery of the fullness of truth about God.*

It’s time for a **preliminary conclusion to this reflection**. God required from Abraham a radical fidelity to His Word. Our Founder, who heard this Word, also knew that *the door to a future filled with hope is opened by a radical fidelity to God*, who calls to, and indicates, a mission. One must be faithful and God will take care of the rest. On the one hand, 200 years of our history is a testimony to the following: just as the attitude of Abraham for future generations, so too Eugene’s charism became a blessing for the nations. On the other hand, crossing the symbolic threshold of 200 years of our Oblate life, we are once again called to a *radical fidelity to our charism*. As the small Inchicore community recalled: we are called to a *radical fidelity to the Holy*

² Écrits Oblats III, 208.

³ Écrits Oblats XXI, 66.

Rule. God will take care of the rest. He is the Lord of history and He is leading us. He demands only *confidence* in Him and *fidelity*.

2. The Poor – the way for the Oblates

Ever since Jesus said to his Apostles, “*go out to the whole world and teach all the nations*” (Mt 28: 19), the Church is constantly *on the way*. The Church was born *in order to go forth*. She is truly herself only when she goes forth and when she shares the gift of love, when she reaches out to those who have been deprived of love *on the way*. Indeed, the way of the Church is man; what’s more, “*in the sphere of the whole of mankind - this man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission: he is the primary and fundamental way for the Church, the way traced out by Christ himself, the way that leads invariably through the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption.*”⁴ This man is the way for the Church, the way for her daily life and experience, for her mission and toil.⁵

Ever since Eugene de Mazenod chose the very words of Christ, “*pauperes evangelizantur,*” as *the way for the Missionary Oblates*, the way of their daily life, experience, mission, and struggles are *the poor*, the abandoned, and the least. The Oblates announce to them the proximity of Kingdom of God, which “*is not a concept, a doctrine, or a program subject to free interpretation, but it is before all else a person with the face and name of Jesus of Nazareth, the image of the invisible God.*”⁶

Father Marcello Zago reminded us that consecrated life itself is a journey, moving through history, taking on different forms that respond to the exigencies of the age and the life conditions of the people.⁷ It was on this journey of consecrated life that our Congregation was born. The General Chapter is also a privileged *moment of grace of this journey*. The whole Congregation, in the person of her representatives, pause on the journey; it looks at the trails blazed in the past, regains strength, and makes plans for its future missionary endeavours. *Three words* describe this fundamental experience of the Congregation. These resounded with incredible force during the period of preparation for the General Chapter, words that Pope Francis directed to us and to all of the consecrated in the Church: *gratitude* for the past, *passion* for the present, and *hope* when we look to the future.⁸

During the Triennium of preparation for the General Chapter, there were many reflections made by our communities. One thing that they certainly affirmed was that *we do not want to give up the journey*. The whole Congregation places great hope in this Chapter, to move forward filled with hope. But there is one condition: for this to happen *we cannot – we must not - stray from the path that is marked out for us by the poor*.

⁴ John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, III, 14.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 18.

⁷ Documentazione OMI, nr 214, s. 6.

⁸ Francis, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated Persons for the Year of Consecrated Life, Advent 2014 – Advent 2015*, I, 1-3.

This year's General Chapter has a special dimension, which is clearly outlined by its chosen theme: we want to return to the sources, we want to experience the apostolic zeal of the Founder and of the first oblates and, above all, we want to renew our mission in the Church, which is searching for a way that leads to the human person. On this way, *we as oblates want to find, first and foremost, the poor.*

The essential question of our charism regarding the poor was never simple or straightforward, as might be imagined. The face of the poor is changing. We need to constantly look for them anew and find our way to them. Every age and every context has its poor. Our Founder did not limit himself to any particular social class. He asked us to look for those most abandoned and to announce the Gospel to them.⁹ But one thing remains unchanged: *the poor must always remain the way for us oblates.* Today they are children of a new culture; a new culture, a new way of thinking and valuing that gives birth to new kinds of poor. How?

What I am about to say probably refers more to so-called western culture. But, given the process of globalization, it is slowly touching ever-wider areas of oblate mission. By no means do I consider the following reflection exhaustive; rather, I would hope that it might be a catalyst in our *search for the poor.* I am deeply convinced that an analysis of the social and cultural conditions, which give birth to the poor, is an urgent need linked to the prophetic dimension of our charism. I would like to touch upon three questions and draw some conclusions from them.

- a) **First reflection.** Up to until very recently we were able to say that contemporary culture is trying to win over, convince, or “catch alive”, someone or some group. Today, as someone rightly noticed, one no longer “catches anyone alive”, not with a small or large net. *Today the very water has been changed.* It is no longer “Christian water” for most of the world. New environments are constantly arising, giving birth to new poor, who are calling out for our presence and service. These are truly the new poor, who under the influence of what was at one time called Christian culture are now the new poor of *secularity (secularization).*
- b) **Second Reflection.** The new “poor in spirit” are the children of the technological civilization of the 21st century. Looking at the philosophical and social trends of the last three hundred years - and at the risk of oversimplifying the matter - one can say the following: the 19th century proclaimed the “death of God”, the 20th century the “death of man” and the 21st century proposes the concept of “man the machine”, efficient, technological creator of his own fate, lord of life and death. Reflected in this diagnosis are the words that Pope Benedict widely presented: “*Today man thinks that he can accomplish himself what in the past he awaited only from God (...) Thinking no longer looks for mystery, no longer searches for that which is divine, instead, believes that everything is already known (...) Progress has*

⁹ Documentazione OMI, nr 214, s. 6

truly led to the increase of our possibilities, but not necessarily to an advancement of the moral or human dimension.”¹⁰

Continuing in this same vein, Pope Francis added: *“technological society has succeeded in multiplying occasions of pleasure, yet has found it very difficult to engender joy”*.¹¹

This is the new and changed water, the environment in which our brothers and sisters are growing in, and in which they are being formed. They are the *way for the Oblates*.

- c) **Third reflection.** I share the thinking of the former Apostolic Nuncio in my country, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, who called today’s culture a *“culture of scarcity,”* a culture of insatiability. In a word, it means that there is *a constant need for more*: more time, more information, more autonomy, more efficiency, more influence. We need to produce more and we need to consume more. A competitive mechanism is thus initiated to achieve first place. But this attitude, slowly but surely, diminishes and destroys the virtues of solidarity and mutual trust. It eliminates and discriminates against those who are not productive enough and who do not prove their efficiency. In this situation people do not enter into a truly human relationship with each other but come competitors. On the one hand one is born *impoverished in human relatedness* and on the other hand the number increases of those who are excluded, on the margins of society, because they are not strong enough to breakthrough to a position of influence and esteem. The *dump of human leftovers*, of which Pope Francis speaks of so forcefully, is growing, where people may be used and then discarded. The excluded become useless leftovers.¹²

*A globalization of indifference has developed. Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people’s pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else’s responsibility and not our own. The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase. In the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.*¹³

Time for a conclusion: Oblates can’t be everywhere. They may be needed everywhere, but they *need to be where the poor are!* This is also *part of that radical fidelity to which we are called today.* In the past, we were proud when the Pope called us specialists in difficult missions. Today, these difficult missions are even more complex: to find the new poor, to respond wisely to the signs of the times, which point to them and to be with them! *The way for the Oblates must remain people, that is, the poor!*

¹⁰ Cfr. Benedict XVI, *The Light of the world*, 144-146.

¹¹ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 7.

¹² Ibidem, 52-53.

¹³ Ibidem, 54.

In his moving high priestly prayer recorded in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus says: *I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one* (Jn 17.15). Jesus left us in the world; he sent us into this world. It is not only the world that did not accept Jesus, but, above all, it is the world where humanity lives; the world in which man wrestles, falls, searches, gets up, grows, matures, and dies. It is the world in which the battle for eternity rages. *This is the world loved by the Good Shepherd*. This is the world to which we are sent, in which we remain, called to enter into the human struggle, to enter into the human search, maturing process, dying, falling and rising; to enter into the personal struggle of every person, the struggle for personal dignity and happiness. We promised not turn our backs on this world; not to turn our backs on humanity, on the poor. ***Our future depends on whether we remain faithful to this original intuition of our Founder.***

3. Towards Hope

In reference to the culture in which we live, to the atmosphere that we are surrounded by and the all-embracing intellectual climate that we breath – especially in the west, but not only in the west – we often use two designations: post-modern, and sometimes post-Christian. As if to want to underline that with the modern era, the Christian era has passed, at least as a bonding element that creates a culture that is essential for humanity and, for many in the past, which united Christian societies.

A Post-Christian world: this is something a disciple of Christ would never say! He would never say that we are now in the “after”, that the message of the Gospel belongs to the past. We are living in constant expectation of a future that will bring God. Abraham lived this way, so did his great followers, as did our Founder. We have eyes that look to the future with hope and we look for Christ in it. For us disciples of Christ, it is always Advent! Notwithstanding the amount of weakness that surrounds us, we know that before us there is future filled with hope. Regardless of the abundance of signs of renewal, change, or conversion around us, we know that the fullness of the Kingdom, God’s world and God Himself is still before us, and awaiting us. ***Besides, in the face of these new prophets announcing a post-Christian era – we say: NO!*** We are convinced that we are living in times that are always pre-Christian. This is a truly oblate attitude and it was because of this attitude that Eugene was called a “man of Advent” – a man of expectation and hope. Looking at the devastation wrought by the French Revolution, he did not say that the times he was living in were post-Christian. He saw the tremendous challenges, which moved him to give himself without reserve to announcing Christ. He looked at the future with the eyes of Abraham and saw a future filled with hope. He looked at the cinders that remained of French society devastated by the Revolution in a similar way that the Patriarch looked at the seemingly sterile womb of Sarah and saw the power of God: *“Abraham your father rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad.”* (Jn: 8.56)

It is precisely in this way of looking at reality that the *prophet dimension of our life*, our identity, and our service is based. A prophet is not a “reporter from the future.” A prophet is someone who looks at the present through the eyes of God and God never looks at the world as if “it is over” - “the end!” For

God the world always has a future. God is with us, he is present even now and says: “Behold, I make all things new!” (Rev: 21.5).

In this context pope Francis wrote beautifully in his letter for the inauguration of the Year of Consecrated Life. These words have a lot to say to us oblates, especially in places where hope is fading, where our numbers begin to frighten us, where, after 200 years of service to the Church it seems difficult to be reborn: “At the foot of the Cross, Mary is at the same time the woman of sorrow and of watchful expectation of a mystery far greater than sorrow, which is about to be fulfilled. It seemed that everything had come to an end. One might say that every hope seemed to have been extinguished. She too, at that moment, remembering the promises of the Annunciation could have said: they did not come true, I was deceived. But she did not say this. And so she who was blessed because she believed, sees blossom from her faith a new future and awaits God’s tomorrow with expectation. At times I think: do we know how to wait for God’s tomorrow? Or do we want it today? For her the tomorrow of God is the dawn of Easter morning, the dawn of the first day of the week. It would do us good to think, in contemplation, of the embrace of mother and son. The single lamp lit at the tomb of Jesus is the hope of the mother, which in that moment is the hope of all humanity. I ask myself and I ask you: is this lamp still alight in monasteries? In your monasteries are you waiting for God’s tomorrow?¹⁴”

Another conclusion is that we need to ask ourselves this question here and now: *does this lamp of hope continue to burn in our oblate communities?* If it is growing dim, this Chapter has to strengthen that flame. *There is hope and there is a future for us oblates! Let us never blow out the lamp of hope!*

4. He believed God

Where should one begin this walking towards the future? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” (Rm: 4.3) For us oblates, the key was and will always be *faith in who we are*, in what we were endowed with, and to what we have been called.

In 1982 in Gabon, St. John Paul II said the following words, which I would like to recall in this context. In a meeting with the clergy and religious in Libreville he said that the first obligation of someone who has been called by God is to believe in his or her own mystery.¹⁵ In essence, all renewal consist - first of all - in *growing in faith in one’s own vocation*, in one’s own mystery, and then in growing in fidelity to this vocation both in its personal and communal dimensions.

“Such are the customs of our God: first he bestows and then he provides an understanding of what he had bestowed” – these beautiful and wise words of St. Gregory of Nazianzus refer in a remarkable way first of all to the whole

¹⁴ REJOICE! A letter to consecrated men and women, 12.

¹⁵ En tout cas, je tiens à souligner que la première fidélité demandé à un prêtre - quel que soit son genre de vie et d'apostolat - est de continuer à croire à son propre mystère, de persévérer dans la foi à ce don de Dieu qu'il a reçu et auquel l'inévitable routine et les autres obstacles peuvent certainement porter atteinte.

Mystery of Salvation, and, above all to the Mystery of the Incarnation. God has surprised us: first he revealed Himself and we are constantly astonished by what we come to understand and uncover from this Mystery.

But *these words also apply to the mystery of our vocation* – both as individuals and as a Congregation. God first said to Abraham: “*Go forth, I will I show you.*” Then, gradually he revealed. First he bestowed and then he provided an understanding of the gift. It was the same in the life of our Founder. He received a grace, whose development he could not foresee. This is why he was continuously astonished, why he constantly called for thanksgiving, fidelity, and openness. The experience of the faith of the Founder was like that of Abraham. It is as if Eugene was saying: “*My faith in God is possible because God first believed in me!*” This should be our attitude today. We must believe in our own vocation. What will our future be? We do not know! We do not know where God is leading us, but we do know that he *is* leading us. The Church still needs our charism and God continues to bestow the Church with the grace of our charism and the Church continues to call us to collaborate in the work of evangelization. Let us respond! *Let us allow ourselves to be led into the unknown.*

The intimacy that the Church has with Jesus is an intimacy *on the journey*.¹⁶ These highly significant words have been confirmed by the history of our Congregation. We have the courage to speak of Jesus Christ and to announce to the world the hope that flows from His name because we have an intimate relationship with Him *on the journey*. For the past 200 years of our journey through history we came to know Him. We have received his Word and we have experienced his power. We have come to experience that God gives permission to act in faith to those who do not stop, who do not terminate the journey. Our availability, leaving everything behind, and moving forward, allowed us to come to know Jesus and gave us the courage to announce Him to the world.

We are talking about the Oblate vocation. How do we perceive that God continues to call us, that it is precisely His challenge that unites us? How? *By the fact that he does not leave us alone*, that is at peace. He is the source of a positive “*holy restlessness*” that is within us. This is the intuitive genius of Pope Francis that I would like to bring out at this point. He says: “*Before an idol, there is no risk that we will be called to abandon our security, for idols "have mouths, but they cannot speak" (Ps 115:5). Idols exist, we begin to see, as a pretext for setting ourselves at the centre of reality and worshiping the work of our own hands*”¹⁷. But we have placed God at the centre, his work, the Church, his Son, and the poor.

Time for another conclusion! This day of reflection precedes the election of the members of the General Administration. Let us pray *for a choice of men who believe in our Congregation, in its mission, in the mystery of its vocation*. Abraham never doubted in the mystery of his vocation. Similarly, our Founder – from the beginning surrounded himself with people, who believed

¹⁶ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 23: *The Church's closeness to Jesus is part of a common journey.*

¹⁷ Francis, *Lumen fidei*, 13.

in the mystery of our vocation in the Church. These are the kind of leaders we need today: *embolden with the courage of faith and the mystery of our Oblate vocation.*

5. Instead of an ending: a gesture that changed the world

After 200 years of our history, in a very symbolic and meaningful moment of our history we must ask ourselves the same question that our Founder asked: “*What did Jesus Christ do?*” The Founder answered: he chose disciples, formed them and sent them out. I would like to direct our attention to the school of Jesus and to one particular “*formation gesture.*” We may ask: what did Jesus do in the most important hour of his mission, when he was about to come out of the upper room and move toward Calvary? What did he do, when human history came to its zenith? In the moment when he knew that the Father gave everything over to him (Jn: 13.3), Jesus did a gesture that was to be the medicine for the illnesses of the world: he washed the feet of his disciples (Jn 13). Filled with love, he humbly bent over human misery. He shocked others by allowing a woman to wash his feet (Jn 12). He looked for a gesture, without words, a gesture that expressed authentic love. He remembered the gesture of the woman and now he repeats it at the most important hour of human history.

A person becomes what he loves. We will become courageous missionaries for the poor, *if we come to authentically love them.* **We cannot truly serve the poor, if we are only convinced that this is what we ought to do. Jesus bent down towards human poverty because he loved us.** He lowered himself profoundly, because he loved us to the end. In the prayer preparing for the General Chapter we asked for personal conversion. I think we need to continue that prayer, now asking for a true *love of the poor.* It was not our service to the poor that became the heart of our charism, but rather it was the love of our Founder for the poor; a love that impelled him to serve. I am deep convinced that *the fundamental way for our authentic renewal must run in this direction; it depends on our love for the poor.* We have very well developed structures and assured capital, a renovated General House, and all that we need for daily living. If we have authentic love for the poor, we need not worry about the rest.

Our Constitutions and Rules speak twice about love for the poor: they demand this of candidates for the institute (R 54a) and of candidates for the ministry of superior (C 82). I believe that this is also the answer to the question regarding the type of people we are looking for to fill the roles of the General Administration: *they must be men who love the poor.* This is what we are called to in the Church.

A final word. We already spoke about the kind of leaders that we want. But what about us individual oblates? When Benedict XVI abdicated, the President of the United States Episcopal Conference, Timothy Dolan said that a pastor marked by *three special qualities* has departed: one with a

*sensitive heart, a penetrating mind, and a soul secure of its union with God.*¹⁸ If we pause a moment over these words, we will become aware of the fact that this did not only apply to Pope Benedict; these are qualities of every person dedicated to God! Abraham had these traits first. He had a *sensitive heart* that was perceptive enough to hear and accept every intuition that was born from God in his heart. He had an *incisive intellect*, thanks to which he knew that the logic of the world is not enough to gain his life and to finally have the spiritual *assurance of a soul united with God*; this assurance permitted him to persevere through every shadow cast on his faith. St. Paul was also like this, as was our Founder, Eugene de Mazenod. Perhaps every Oblate should also be like this.

Let us, therefore, pray that the Lord give our present and future leaders an authentic love for the poor and a living faith in the mystery of our vocation. Let us also pray that the Lord give each one of us, and every Oblate, sensitivity of heart, incisiveness of mind, and a soul secure in its union with God.

p. Wojciech Popielewski OMI

¹⁸ *The Holy Father brought the tender heart of a pastor, the incisive mind of a scholar and the confidence of a soul united with His God in all he did. See: <http://www.usccb.org/news/2013/13-038.cfm>*