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**Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate
General Chapters -- 1972-2004**

1972-1998: Fr. Ronald Carignan, OMI
2004: Fr. Oswald Firth, OMI

**Conversion happens when we find
a treasure hidden in a field**

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Conversion: A new heart – a new Spirit – a new Mission

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The Pre-capitular Commission has asked a number of Oblates to write a reflection on some aspect of the theme chosen for the 35th General Chapter. They can be found under the **General Chapter** link of www.omiworld.org as well as under the **Documentation** link on the same page.

They are meant for the personal and communal reflection of Oblates and their Lay Associates. A General Chapter is not an event that involves only the elected and “ex officio” capitulars. It involves everyone who shares the charism of Saint Eugene de Mazenod.

**Centered on the person of Jesus Christ, the source of our mission,
we commit ourselves to a profound personal and communal
conversion.**

CORRECTION

In *Documentation OMI* # 293 (March 2010), it was stated in the article entitled *The Call to a Conversion like Philemon's*: “When the Italian government removes crucifixes from the walls in the schools for reasons of religious tolerance, there remains a culture powerful and proud of its stand — this is the religious culture that is present at the foot of the tomb of the apostle Peter.”

In fact, the Italian government did not remove crucifixes from the walls of schools. In early November 2009, the European Court of Human Rights ruled against the use of crucifixes in classrooms in Italy. The Italian government has stated that it is not bound to obey that ruling and has appealed the verdict.

Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate General Chapters -- 1972-2004

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The General Chapter of 1972

The Chapter of 1972 marked the beginning of a new era in the Congregation. From my perspective, it was a pivotal Chapter, one that set the agenda of the Congregation to this day. Three priority areas of deliberation were identified by the capitulars: **Mission, Fundamental Oblate Values and Community.** The first task accepted by the plenary assembly was to "**clarify our missionary outlook and our involvement with the poor.**" It is the theme that received the most attention. Mission had pretty well become a zone of individualism in the Congregation and the Chapter was determined to regain a collective sense of direction and mission. Its key document *Missionary Outlook* is considered to be an Oblate classic. It was divided in three sections: 1) *A look at the world from where we are.* 2) *Faced with these missionary challenges, who are we?* 3) *What concrete lines of action are now open to us?* In a sense, this document utilized the dynamics of the Founder's Preface and produced a text with which most Oblates could resonate. It became a springboard for a continuing discernment and a reshaping of our mission at the Region, Province, and Local Community levels. In the years following the Chapter of '72, a clearer focus emerged at these various levels through Congresses and Assemblies. The General Chapter of 1986 in its Document *Missionaries in Today's World* brought this reflection to fruition and set forth a vision of the world and evangelization along with our corresponding missionary convictions.

The Capitulars produced a second document, *Administrative Structures*, which addressed a stated desire in the Congregation for

decentralization and subsidiarity. Significant changes were made in the organization at the General Level. The Superior General would no longer be elected for life but for a term of six years. He would be assisted by a Vicar and two Councillors based in Rome, one for mission and one for formation. A General Councillor for each of the six Regions would serve a liaison function and facilitate communication and collaboration between the General Administration and the Regions. Thus initiated a period of learning through experimentation that was eventually finalized at the Chapter of 1998 when the Capitulars voted to accept a revised **Part III: Organization**, of our Constitutions and Rules.

The Chapter Body wanted to address the renewal of our common Oblate way of life. Due to the time and energy factors, it was not able to do so. It asked the new General Team to produce a document on community based on the values that surfaced during the Assembly's discussions. Thus, a third document associated with the Chapter of 1972, **Community**, was published in the Fall of 1972. It clearly reinforced the notion that community is an essential part of the Oblate Charism, that community and mission were inseparable in the thinking and planning of Bishop de Mazenod. The reflection called for by this document became the theme for the General Chapter of 1992 which produced a strong document on Oblate Community: **Witnessing as Apostolic Community.**

The General Chapter of 1974

The General Chapter of 1974 was convened at a rather difficult time in our recent history. Our General, Richard Hanley had resigned

since he no longer saw himself able to lead the Congregation. During his short term of service, Richard became a much loved Oblate leader. His departure was a hard blow for many. The Chapter of 1974 was convened to elect a new Superior General and to address the crisis caused by the resignation of the General.

In his letter of resignation, Richard Hanley had indicated that the fundamental values of religious life as presently lived in the Church were increasingly problematic for him. The members of the Chapter could not ignore the challenge this admission presented. The meaning of consecrated life and of the vows within the context of our Oblate missionary vocation claimed a privileged place in the Chapter agenda. There was much personal sharing in small groups as well as full assembly deliberation around three questions: 1) What are the values which are important in my life as an Oblate? 2) What are the obstacles which I meet in making these values real in myself and in my Oblate life? 3) What are the helps which permit me to make these values real?

The Capitulars reached a moment of decision around our fundamental values as Oblates and around our commitment to Religious Life as a Congregation. In retrospect, it became clear that the Chapter of 1972, so daring in its missionary outlook, had not clearly highlighted the relationship between Oblate mission and our religious life. The participants wanted to communicate an uncompromising stance as clearly as possible to the members of the Congregation. They chose to write a letter *From the 1974 Capitulars to all Their Brother Oblates*. In a key passage, the Chapter Assembly wrote: *"In order to be more meaningful our consecration to Jesus Christ commits us jointly to the ideal of life proposed by our Constitutions. The Preface, furthermore, provides the impetus and promotes an ever-timely implementations of those constitutions. That is why we restate our faith in apostolic religious life."*

Fr. Fernand Jetté was elected Superior General and Fr. Francis George was elected Vicar General. A Post-Chapter Committee was named to work on the preparation of a revised text of

the Constitutions and Rules to be presented to the 1980 Chapter. Father Jetté had insisted that all is grace and that we had to live fully the moment of grace provided by this difficult event. It would seem that we passed the test as a Congregation.

The General Chapter of 1980

The Chapter of 1974 was **primarily dedicated to producing a revised text of our Constitutions and Rules** as required by the postconciliar Church. It was not the first time that our Constitutions and Rules were revised. During the Founder's lifetime, our text was changed a number of times in response to the needs of an expanding Congregation. In 1926, our text was adapted to take into consideration the new norms on Religious Life included in the 1917 Code of Canon Law. The Chapter of 1966 drafted a text that sought to reflect the vision and spirit of the second Vatican Council. This text was to be studied and finalized at the Chapter of 1972. However, this Chapter was unable to handle that task preferring to produce three documents that eventually influenced the revised text produced by the Chapter of 1980.

The capitulars at the 1980 Chapter accepted as its working document, a text prepared by a special Commission established in 1975 and headed by Father Alexandre Taché. Along with the text, the Commission had put together 16 volumes of comments and commentaries coming from the various sectors of the Congregation. **The text was reviewed, discussed, shorten, refined and eventually unanimously accepted by the Assembly.** I was one of the moderators for the Chapter and at the end of the proceedings, I experienced a very united international congregation. Father Fernand Jetté was elected to a second term as General and Father Francis George to a second term as Vicar General.

The General Chapter of 1986

The theme for the Chapter of 1986 was **"Missionaries in Today's World"** The Assembly worked hard exploring the emerging features of Oblate mission in a world going through a time

of quantum change. How do we, in such a world, hear the call of the poor? How do we promote justice? How do we approach secularization and Inculturation? How do we blend Community and Mission. **The Chapter document is worth revisiting!**

Fr. Marcello Zago was elected Superior General. At the end of Chapter, John Paul II received the Capitulars in a private audience at which he had high words of praise for Fr. Zago. "I turn first of all to the one you have just elected as your new Superior General, Father Marcello Zago, whose good work at the Secretariate for Non-Christians I have appreciated. I offer him my wishes of fruitful service to the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate." The Pope added at the end of his talk: "I wish to end this family conversation by inviting you to look afresh at the place of the Immaculate Virgin in your personal lives, your communities and your missionary work. You recall that Blessed Eugene, having first decided upon the name of 'Oblate of Saint Charles' while in Rome had the intuition of a different one: 'Oblates of Mary'. On 22 December 1825, he wrote to Father Tempier: "Oblates of Mary! This name satisfies the heart and the ear." You know....that your Founder attributed to this Good Mother a singular grace: an interior assurance of the excellence of his society and of the good that it was going to do in the future.

The General Chapter of 1992

The General Chapter of 1992 was a mid-term chapter for Father Marcello Zago. He was unanimously re-elected as General on the first ballot. During his first term he had insisted, time and again, that community was an essential element of the Oblate charism and, as such, was the key to the future of the Congregation. And so after consulting Oblates throughout the world, he announced in his *Letter of Convocation to the Congregation* that community would be one of the main topics of the Chapter of 1992. The capitulars spent much time reflecting on the question of community, on our present practices as a Congregation and on the lack of real community life in many sectors of the

Congregation. The results of the month-long Chapter deliberation produced an exceptional document entitled: ***Witnessing As Apostolic Community***. The Chapter affirmed that *as Oblates, the first task of our evangelizing activity is to seek to achieve quality in our community life; that financial sharing constitutes an essential dimension of our life in communion and interdependence.*

The Chapter of 1992 also opened up a theme that has received a renewed attention since: ***New Forms of Association with the Laity*** "A new reality is becoming evident: families, married couples, single people, and young people wish to be more closely united with us and manifest special commitment to our charism."

The Chapter also issued a statement on ***Social Communications and Media***. In it the Capitulars requested that: "the Superior General and Council bring a special attention to the area of media, and seek to develop appropriate resources within the Congregation." The Chapter supported **"the development of an international Oblate communication network."**

In a statement on ***Finances and Sharing***, the Chapter committed itself to **Capital Sharing** in the Congregation and "mandated the General in Council to create suitable means for the implementation of capital sharing."

The General Chapter of 1992 was a very active and innovative Chapter and it ushered in six years of very creative leadership during Father Zago's second term as Superior General. Besides the above, the Chapter of 1992 also produced statements on ***The Anniversary of 500 Years of Evangelization in the Americas***, on ***Elderly Oblates***, on ***Oblate Centers of Theological Studies***, on ***The Association for Oblates Studies and Research***, and on ***Administrative Structures***. All of these are worth re-reading.

The General Chapter of 1998

The Chapter of 1998 was quite unique. It was the first Chapter since the canonization of the

Founder as well as the last one during the second millennium. The Preparatory Commission placed a strong emphasis on evaluating ourselves as missionaries and clarifying our expectations at the dawn of the third millennium. At first, the preparatory documents were seen as somewhat negative and the capitulars seemed to be in search of a theme. History will eventually pass judgment on this Chapter. However, for many of the participants, it turned out to be an event that opened up a new spiritual focus for the Congregation. *The reality of hope emerged as a unifying symbol for Oblates throughout the world.* As expressed in the Chapter Document *Evangelizing the Poor at the Dawn of the Third Millennium: "This Chapter even as it asks us to take stock of both the real pain that so often marks humanity today and of our limits, also brings to life in us an immense hope."*

A rather unique moment marked the opening of the General Chapter. Ten lay persons from the various Oblate Regions were present and participated in the deliberations. They talked with the capitulars about their experiences and presented their ideas around sharing in the Oblate charism. They see broad areas of mutuality and solidarity. The capitulars prepared a special statement in the form of a letter to our lay associates indicating that a working group had been mandated by the Chapter to further reflect on the various forms of association and "to search for better ways to express this in our Constitutions and Rules."

A new Superior General was elected in the person of Fr. Wilhelm Steckling who had served in the previous administration as Assistant General for Formation. Eugene King was elected as Vicar General. Important resolutions were passed on Media and Capital Sharing.

The General Chapter of 2004

In many ways, the 34th General Chapter was to be a moment of self-evaluation of the Congregation. In this context, the Chapter could be perceived as the pivotal point of the **Immense Hope Project**, a process through which every Unit within the Congregation was asked to evaluate and

scrutinize its vision and mission, its missionary strategy, its community life and its ministry in the light of our Oblate charism. The Chapter did not bring the **Immense Hope Project** to a close; rather it urged every Oblate unit to see this as an instrument and an on-going process of self-evaluation and strategizing for mission.

During the Chapter, the reports of the Superior General and those from the Regions helped name our present strengths and weaknesses as a Congregation and highlighted the huge demographic shifts that have radically altered the face of the Congregation. The Chapter also affirmed that our real strengths were to be found not in our numbers, but in the spirit of **solidarity** and **internationality** of the membership that pervaded the entire Congregation.

The Chapter put forward a challenge to all Oblates. Recognizing that the world is changing radically, the Chapter wanted Oblates to leave cherished strategies, comfort zones, and like pilgrims be open to the unpredictability of God's plan for the Congregation. The models for such a challenge were Abraham and Sarah when God called them to leave their homeland and set out into the unknown and the unfamiliar. Faced with a new understanding of culture, ethnicity, religion, ideology and gender in today's world, "**crossing familiar borders**" became a catch phrase at this Chapter.

While on the one hand the Chapter urged Oblate units to revitalize and update traditional missionary methods such as the parish ministry, catechesis, pastoral practice and liturgies, on the other, it encouraged Oblates to explore the establishment of new international pilot communities to respond to challenges posed by secularity, fundamentalism and sectarianism.

Other areas on which the Chapter's attention was focused were: 1) Promotion of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation both in our communities and houses of formation; 2) Developing an animation process throughout the Congregation focused on the needs of the Oblate as a minister of hope; 3) Establishing a Commission of Oblates and Associates; 4) Consolidation of

formation houses; 5) Re-introduction of mission to youth into the Constitution and Rules as a mission priority; 6)- Reviewing Leadership and Governance structures in the Congregation; 7) Developing a Capital Sharing II initiative;

8) Creating a network of Oblates in Higher Education; 9) Supporting Oblates whose focus is inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue; and 10) The establishment of a Standing Committee for Brothers.

Conversion happens when we find a treasure hidden in a field

Fr. Stuart C. Bate, OMI

Conversion happens when we find a treasure hidden in a field. Conversion comes from God. We promote conversion when we reveal the treasure to others. Conversion comes by evangelisation in witnessing good news as something good and something new. Good News can be pleasing but it can also be frightening. Conversion happens within culture: within culture in Christian activity and in socialisation into the culture of Religious Life.

Conversion happens when we find a treasure hidden in a field

The process of conversion is described by Jesus as what happens to a person when he finds a treasure hidden in a field (Mt 13:44). His life is changed and everything which was so important to him before is revealed as relatively worthless and so he changes direction by divesting himself of everything that was important before in order to stake his claim on this new treasure. For such a man “the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is near” and so he is called to “convert (metanoiete) and believe the Good news” (Mk 1:15).

Conversion is the experience of turning around; it is a change of mind, a change of heart and a change of direction. It refers to the experience of having something so wonderful happen in our life that we decide to change our life path. It is what happens in the powerful foundational moments of our lives. It is what happens when people fall in love, get married and raise children. It is what happens when a people is liberated from slavery

and oppression. It is what happens when we become true believers. It is what happened to St Eugene in the Good Friday experience. “It was a moment singularly different from what I had experienced...never did my soul feel happier... Why say more? Could I ever do justice describing what I felt at that moment? Just thinking about it fills my heart with sweet consolation” (Hubenig 2004: 29-30). Many of us can link our own vocational choice to foundational moments like this where a treasure is revealed to us; a treasure so precious that we are changed, we decide to leave our former life behind us and we begin a new life. Our Oblate vocation usually has a root in foundational experiences like this whether they happen when we decide to join or during our formation programme. And this encounter with the treasure is what should nourish it and strengthen it all the days of our life. The initial experience is one of overwhelming good and attraction and it is the attraction to the good that makes us turn around and follow a new path. That is conversion! That is metanoia!

Conversion comes from God

The treasure comes from God. It comes upon us by his action when the time (kairos) is fulfilled for us. That kairos always remains fundamental to our lives and if we lose our way as result of difficulties that happen during our journey, then we are called to return to the original experience to rediscover it again.

In conversion we are offered salvation as a free

gift because it is from love. God is love: “made manifest among us, as God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins” (1 Jn. 4,9-10). The whole of our spiritual journey is founded on this truth. For God sent his son into the world not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him (Jn. 3:16-17). It is only in conversion that we have access to this truth.

The Church on earth has been founded by God as a missionary organisation whose purpose is to proclaim conversion in order to bring people to salvation according to the plan of the Father which flows from a “fountain-like love” (AG 2).

This Divine Mission, founded on God’s love for us, takes flesh for all humanity in the Mission of Jesus Christ to proclaim God’s Love for us in word and deed. It continues in the mission of the Holy Spirit sent by Jesus as the “first gift to those who believe, to complete his work on earth and bring us the fullness of grace” (Eucharistic Prayer 4).

God's love for us is most fully manifest in the Paschal Mystery in which Jesus shows us the way to salvation. The way of salvation is the way of the cross. It is the fundamental metaphor of conversion. The Divine Son-ship undergoes the final test in the Paschal Mystery. In sending Jesus Christ, the Father has done all that was possible for the salvation of humanity. After this, God remains mute. He has no more to say¹. At this point without our own conversion to this way of life we cannot respond to God’s call.

The Mission of the Holy Spirit is to continually inspire the Church to help people find the treasure through the activity of its members. The Holy Spirit guides all our activities as missionaries of the Church for he is Soul of the Church (EN

¹St John of the Cross Ascent of Mount Carmel, II, 22, 4 Cfr. Apostolic Letter of His Holiness, John Paul II to the Very Reverend Father Felipe Sainz De Baranda Superior General of the Order of the Discalced Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel on the Occasion of the IV Centenary of the Death of Saint John of the Cross, Doctor of the Church.

75) and principal agent of the whole of the Church's mission (RM 21). In our conversion, the Holy Spirit continually prompts us to live this conversion by convincing us of sin (Jn. 16; DeV 46). For sin leads to death and faith leads to life (Romans 6:23).

We promote conversion when we reveal the treasure to others

The disciples turned around their lives because Jesus said to them “Come and See” and they witnessed the wondrous events of his ministry in word and deed. As the apostles begin their own ministry on Pentecost, Peter reveals, in the theophany, the treasure which is the Good News of salvation, about Jesus who worked wonders amongst them and who God has raised from the dead. And “about three thousand were converted on that day” (Acts 2). In his preaching to the poor of Marseilles, St Eugene revealed the treasure that God has put in each one of them contrasting it with what the world thinks of them. “Let your eyes look inward and see through the rags you wear. There within you is an immortal soul... more precious before God than all the riches of the world. Therefore O Christians recognise your dignity” (Hubenig 2004:53).

Oblate missionaries throughout the world have revealed the treasure to people everywhere and so promoted conversion. Last year I was privileged to attend the 100th anniversary of Maphumulo parish in KwaZulu Natal. It was in 1909, that Fr Julius L’HOTE, OMI, left Montebello on horseback and arrived at the kraal of Camillus Mkhize. He spent the night at Camillus’ house and celebrated Mass the next morning: 20 April 1909. This was the first Mass at Maphumulo. Fr L’Hote continued as priest serving Maphumulo until his death in 1956 and celebrated his Golden Jubilee of priesthood here. For most of these years he worked together with Camillus Mkhize who was catechist until 1947. This mission produced many outstations, schools, large numbers of Christians and many vocations including a bishop, two other priests, many religious sisters and many conversions. This witness by a somewhat unknown Oblate is important because it is replicated worldwide

through the efforts of many unknown Oblates who have revealed the treasure to people and built the Church in the modern world.

**Conversion comes by evangelisation:
in witnessing good news as something good
and something new.**

As Oblates we are called to evangelisation and in this we follow Jesus, the apostles, St Eugene, all the saints and Oblates who have gone before us. Evangelisation means bringing good news to people. Now there are two essential yet often forgotten components of evangelisation. They are obvious but because of that we sometimes don't become sufficiently aware of their importance.

Evangelisation means bringing Good News. The first criterion of good news is that it must be good and the second is that it must be new. This means that when we evangelise we are called to ensure that what we do is experienced in the heart of the recipients as something **good** for them: a treasure if you will. The gospel stories of the words and deeds of Jesus radiate goodness. This happens because in his healings, signs, words of comfort, blessing and support, Jesus inserts himself into the daily life of the people he meets and brings something good as a response to their human needs. And this is the call to us as missionaries. It is the essence of being close to the people.

But evangelisation must also bring something **new** into the hearts and souls of the recipient. When Jesus brought good news: "Amazement gripped the audience, and they began to discuss what had happened. 'What sort of new teaching is this?' they asked excitedly.... News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee" (Mk. 1: 27-28).

So good news must be good and it must be new! That seems to be a surprisingly obvious comment to make. Yet what is more surprising is how sometimes our ministry can forget these two criteria and sink into the hum drum and repetitive of daily pastoral duty. And as we repeat the same old thing we wonder about the paucity of fruits! That is more surprising! . .

In fact, God continually calls people in Christ to participate in the realisation of his great plan for the salvation of the world (Cf. Eph. 1; 1 Cor. 15). A special call is the vocation to priestly life and service. We usually hear God's call in the example of those around us, who challenge and inspire us by the witness of their own lives. It is surprising how often our own witness and example of Good News can touch others and bring them to commitment This is particularly true with priestly and religious vocation where the example of a zealous and holy priest is the way that many young men are challenged to examine the choices for their own future (DMP 32). This witness can be inspired by different kinds of priestly gifts and talents. Some parish priests reveal the treasure by preparing and leading prayerful and dignified celebrations of the sacraments. Others manifest the treasure of God's presence in their special ministry to the sick and dying. Yet others have special gift of preaching as they mediate God's word to the hearts of people. Some show a special commitment to the poor and suffering of the parish. There is no one recipe but what is common in all is the example of men who have met the Lord, who know it and who live their relationship with Jesus in service to the people they have been called to lead. And they bring the good and they do so daily anew!

Fr. Julius L'Hote, the Oblate missionary I referred to earlier, had a similar impact on one young boy who was particularly inspired by Father's spirit of prayer and his love for the people. He recalled the compassion the missionary gave during an epidemic of malaria, visiting the sick and caring for them. And as a 13 year old boy he said to Father L'Hote: "I want to do what you do". This boy, Dominic Khumalo, became an Oblate, a Priest and eventually Auxiliary Bishop of Durban.

Examples like this where missionaries bring the treasure that has been revealed to them and reveal it to others, inspires young men (and sometimes older people) to contemplate the value and indeed the immeasurable necessity of the life of a Priest. And in this frame of mind they are more open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit who may be gently challenging them to come and see more about this life for themselves (Cf. Jn. 1:39).

Good News can be pleasing but it can also be frightening.

The life of Jesus soon shows us that the Good News has two levels to it. And if we are his followers commissioned to the mission of the Church then it will be the same for us. In the early chapters of the gospel story the good news is mainly pleasant and joyful. It is very nice good news for people and the crowds grow and follow him. In our missionary activity we also bring this kind of good news especially when we meet people's immediate needs in establishing churches and places of worship, providing education, promoting social justice and development, providing sites of healing and wellbeing, preaching retreats and leading pilgrimages and so on. We Oblates have been involved in all these activities and we have revealed the joyful good news of the Gospel as treasure for people.

But in the second half of the Gospel the good news takes on an urgent and darker message in the promise of the journey to Jerusalem, suffering and death. This begins with the profession of faith of Peter and the transfiguration on the mountain (Matthew, Mark 8, Luke 9). After seeing that the disciples have understood the Good News and who he is and, as a response, Jesus begins or reveal a deeper and harder side to the good news as he proclaims the journey to Jerusalem, to suffering and to death on the cross. After hearing this frightening news Peter rebukes him and then the one who Jesus has proclaimed to be the blessed and the rock on whom the Church will be built, is himself rebuked as Satan for "you are not on the side of God but of men".

From then on the message of Good News becomes an increasingly difficult one: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Matt 16: 24-25). This part of the treasure is hard for people to see and accept and as the story goes on, the crowds desert Jesus until on the cross he is alone: abandoned and denied even by his closest disciples. This deeper and harder dimension of Good News is linked to the struggle against evil

and the inevitable suffering that this entails. It is about the journey to Jerusalem which will be most fully played out in the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross who, in this act, accomplishes his purpose as saviour of the world (Jn. 19:30).

The seemingly "bad" good news of the second part of the Gospel is however the real good news. It is the power of the cross which allows us to be saved and the kingdom to be upon us. In the crucifixion he assumes all our humanity including our sins and by his wounds we are saved. It is the real treasure since the "uncrucified is the unhealed" (O' Collins 1997: 76; Cfr. Gregory Nazianzen Epistle 101).

It is Jesus' death on the cross that opens the way to the kingdom and not the good news in the healings and the preaching. These are really the fruits of this redemption. Jesus agrees to be the sheep amongst the wolves and the victim for us in order that we can participate in his life. Ministry and mission demand that we, too, walk the same journey. This is the power and authority which is placed on us as we become apostles. It is also the hard part of conversion.

If we wish to bring Good News to people then we should remember these two parts of the Gospel message. Sometimes, those involved in ministry only recognise the "Nice and easy" good news. Failures are ignored and suffering is downplayed. Yet failure and suffering is at the centre of the good news as the life of Jesus shows. If we wish to imitate Christ, we are called to walk these two parts of the Christian way. The life we bring and the treasure we reveal in the ministries we do, is rooted in the suffering on the cross. The minister is thus the one who accepts to follow Jesus in the way of the cross. So the mission mandate is an invitation to walk where Jesus walked. It is also an invitation to journey to the suffering and pain of our Global Jerusalem as we make our way home to the Father. As we go we should preach saying 'the kingdom of the heavens is at hand' we should "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons". What we have received we have received without pay. So we should give without pay in a world sold on money (Cfr. Matt 10: 7-8).

Conversion happens within culture

1. Within Culture in Christian Activity

All missionaries cross boundaries between their own context and that of those to whom they are sent. The most fundamental boundary is of course the boundary of faith since the missionary brings the treasure of faith to a context of non faith. But there are other boundaries too. The most familiar is the one of geographical borders when we are sent from one place to another. But both outside and even within our country of birth, there are other boundaries the missionary must cross. Examples include those between rural and urban contexts, between young and old, between citizens and migrants, between religions, between worldviews and increasingly between cultures and ethnicities in fast growing multicultural urban conurbations worldwide.

“The kingdom is the concern of everyone: individuals, society, and the world. Working for the kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God's activity, which is present in human history and transforms it.” (RM 15). But the treasure of the kingdom of God wrapped up in the culture of the missionary may or may not represent something good or something new for the recipient. This is why inculturation is so central to missionary life. If we are so tied to our own cultures, languages, viewpoints, traditions and ways of doing things then we may end up being like Nathaniel who said: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" When that happens, the invitation to "Come and see," passes us by and we do not have a missionary vocation.

We tend to think that other people see the world the way we do. But the fact is that they do not. We tend to think that our values, beliefs and priorities are the beliefs, values and priorities of other people. But in fact they are not. We tend to think that what is common sense to us is common sense to others but once more this is not the case. Common sense is the sense of a community: it too is cultural. The more we can learn to see with the eyes of others the more we will be able to help people discover the treasure hidden in a field

For the treasure is there amongst all peoples. And it is our role as missionaries to make our presence the means for the fulfillment of the kairós; providing the occasion for the kingdom to be at hand for those we serve. We do not carry God, he carries us and as missionaries we reveal him through our own eyes of faith; not as part of our baggage but as part of their world. It is through this kind of culturally mediated missionary activity that we communicate good news as a response to the culturally mediated human needs of the people we serve. The essence of missionary activity and missionary spirituality is an incarnational journey into the culture of the people we evangelise bringing good news that is pleasing at times but hard and challenging at other times. It will lead us through wondrous events to passion, cross and resurrection. We should expect nothing less.

World Youth Days have been such powerful means of mission for the Holy Father precisely because he has responded to the cultural challenge. When the Pope evangelises youth he does it through the culture of youth and if he can do that, how much more should we who have a specific missionary vocation and missionary charism to which we dedicate our whole life.

2. Conversion as socialization into the culture of Oblate life

Religious life is a culture. It is a way of human living. All cultures have a foundational belief system, a set of core values and a specific lifestyle with its own behaviours. Apostolic Religious life is based on the belief system of the Catholic Church and the charism of a Religious founder. Its value system is based on the fundamental religious values of poverty, chastity and obedience. Its lifestyle is community based and its activity is apostolic.

The culture of Oblate life is based on the Charism of St Eugene De Mazenod and the history and tradition of the Oblate congregation. Our values are centred in the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Our lifestyle is community based and our missionary activity is focused on the evangelisation of the poor with their many faces. We learn and live our culture through formation.

Initial formation is the process of socialisation into our lifestyle. It comprises the daily living, in a community, of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and the development of a commitment to the Oblate missionary vision and activity. This latter is often the most problematic within houses of first formation as they can be detached from our missionary activity. Socialisation in bigger communities can lead to another difficulty as socialisation into the lifestyle can be compromised by the demands of insertion into a big structure. In smaller communities the danger is that the socialisation process gets overwhelmed by prevailing local cultural values rather than attention being paid to the newer and stranger Oblate religious ones.

The vows themselves give rise to many common cultural challenges. One is the struggle to live the vow of celibacy in a promiscuous world. Another is when the lifestyle in the religious community is perceived as much more affluent than the poverty experienced by candidates in their own families. Another is a view of obedience infected by modern consumer culture which says what I do should conform to my personal desires and reason. Formation must respond to these matters.

Ongoing formation also needs to focus on the socialisation of Oblates into apostolic religious life. The centre of such a life is apostolic activity by a religious community in which “the whole religious life of their members should be inspired by an apostolic spirit and all their apostolic activity formed by the spirit of religion” (PC 8). Often the demands of the ministry overwhelm the demands of religious life and Oblates run the risk of living the lifestyle of diocesan priests.

Religious institutes create points of cultural contradiction within modern society. The ethos of religious life as represented by the vows is in stark contradiction to the prevailing values of most modern societies. In some places where there is a strong cultural root of Christian tradition, the ethos of Religious life may still be seen as important, though impractical in the “real world”. When religious orientate their lives around keeping their vows and religious culture this can be a source of admiration, surprise and

praise. Many of the institutions established and maintained by religious have been successful and so earned the praise of the societies within which we work. In this way we reveal another aspect of the treasure to them and this witness challenges secularised value systems more than anything else.

But postmodern secular culture, which is consumer media driven, actively seeks to undermine by looking to expose the myth of these vows lived in the real world. Their goals will always be to publicise the failures of priests and religious to live up to their commitments because that’s what sells. This promotes a suspicion that the ideal is unattainable and that religious life is a sham. This is a challenge for all of us to witness through a daily conversion to faithfulness. It is also a challenge to protect ourselves against the malign influences of profit driven media groups who make money out of bad news stories particularly those that undermine leaders and public figures of all types. Former ways of dealing with these matters including confidentiality, prudence and privacy are likely to be ineffective in such a culture. We must protect ourselves here by means of approved Christian protocols and procedures of professional conduct in the culture of modern society.

To end

If we open our souls we shall find a treasure hidden in a field. This is because God wishes to reveal himself to us. As we remember the many ways in which good news has come to us so we should actively seek to bring good news to others. In wisdom we recognise that the Good news always includes the struggle against evil and that it will be tough at times. But in the good news of the paschal mystery we realise that the victory has been won and that death has no more sting. As we commit ourselves to be missionaries let us commit ourselves to the culture of our congregation and be ready to see with the eyes of others in order to bring the good news to the ends of the earth.

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