Oblate Life and Mission in the Anglo-Irish Province

JOYS & HOPES:

- **Understanding Eugene de Mazenod:** Deeper exposure to the life of the Founder, immersion into the experience that moved him to become a 'priest for the poor', his mission and the spirit that inspired him, has an important influence on majority of the younger Oblates in the Province. Among the older Oblates, understanding of the person of Eugene and his inspiration and discernment of how God was calling him deepened their sense of Oblate identity. The weekends facilitated by Frank Santucci helped in this regard. The Province's commitment to the "Refounding Mission" process commenced following the 2006 Province gathering underlined the importance of reclaiming the inspiration and zeal that fired Eugene in his life choice and missionary enthusiasm.
- **Personal Development and growth:** Many younger Oblates spoke positively about the opportunity provided by further education and personal development. The opportunity to undertake further studies in the area of "environmental issues" has helped one Oblate to find his passion and mission as an Oblate. Access to Counselling and therapeutic support/accompaniment has enabled some Oblates to recover/discover their calling as Oblate priests/brothers. Personal reflection, prayer, friendships and recreation help one to be fulfilled in mission.
- **The experience of Mission:** Where an Oblate is truly ***in mission,*** there Oblates talk of fulfillment, energy and life. Even when the mission is challenging (probably because of it) the sense of life, passion for being who they are and doing what they do are very evident. Personal sense of being an Oblate when one's mission is with those on the margins of society, with those neglected or abandoned or incarcerated. When one's "personal mission" (ministry preference/personal passion) and their mission/ministry meet there is a real sense of fulfillment as a person and as an Oblate in mission.
- **Community for Mission:** Some expressed the importance of their local and Oblate community support for them as an Oblate in mission. For some Oblates there is a satisfaction in knowing that "I am not alone". The intergenerational presence of Oblates had a very good influence in some of our Centres of Mission. Respect and charity are values that we need to cultivate in our Oblate Communities – respect for an individual's need for space, his personal mission, their ministerial preference. An Oblate has a *right* to a functional, mature environment to live and work in. One Oblate commented: "Oblate community is the ministry of the house". Presence of older Oblates can bring wisdom and support. We need to find opportunities to be creative. Freedom to make mistakes and learn from them. Mission is energising, maintenance can be a comfort zone.
- **The Association of Catholic Priests – In Ireland and now growing in the UK -** a group of priests who are trying to get a common voice on the issues that affect the church, the people and the priests. Sense that those being squeezed out by the church have found a voice and a common ground for courageous conversation and discussion around what Rome sees as "forbidden to discuss".
- **Partners in Mission:** This was the banner under which Oblates and Lay people participated in the Oblate Provincial Assembly in 2006. A significant shift occurred in how we wanted to be present in mission as Oblates in the Anglo-Irish Province. The Refounding Mission process was developed on the premise that any future Oblate mission or presence in the Anglo-Irish Province required full participation and collaboration with lay people. Through various priority groups like Partners in Mission, Adult Faith Formation and Personnel for Mission priorities, the Province engaged in the formation of informed and participative laity at all levels in the Province and local mission. Major resources of personnel and finance have been channeled to promote awareness of the Oblate Spirit and provide opportunities for people to engage in reflection and retreats. Summer Schools, personal retreats and opportunities for lay and Oblates to engage with the charism and spirit of St Eugene have been offered since 2009.
- **Friends of St Eugene:** The Partners in Mission priority employs two lay people to promote the spirit of St Eugene among the people with whom we live and work and also in places/missions we have handed back to the Diocese. This is a way for people to engage directly with Oblate Spirit especially if and when there are no direct vowed Oblate presence.

- **People in our missions:** Many Oblates spoke of the people in their mission/ministry as a source of joy, life affirmation and hope for them as men, as Oblates and as a priest. Oblates are really close to the people.
- **Encouraging Leadership**: Oblate presence is one of encouraging people and helping them to access services and activities that help people grow and become fully alive. Identifying and training people for leadership roles is important. In London opportunity exists for lots of mission initiatives. In these efforts we could lose the wood for the trees. We do have to recognize the challenges we face in our particular context and offer the required leadership which in itself is quite challenging. In offering leadership in our mission one of the significant features of our leadership would be to keep the Church on track, as Religious, we are called to act as a leaven in the Church with our commitment and sense of direction.
- **Vocation & Youth:** There is hope that there is fertile ground in Church and in world to plant seed. Our role in mission is to the most abandoned, if we are faithful to this call we will rediscover our role and men may be drawn by our witness to the Gospel. In Dublin the Jesuits [Fr Peter McVerry] and the Franciscan Centre in Merchants Quay are recognised by people as valid Gospel ventures, if we have personnel and skills to support such ministries it may be a way forward.
- **Specialised Ministries:** The initiatives in the UK in Broadwater Farm (London), Norris Green (Liverpool) and Mission to Secularity (Birmingham), the Irish Welfare Centres in Birmingham and London give evidence of a Province that can respond to specific needs and be with the abandoned. We have withdrawn from these special ministries/outreaches. Do we lack personnel, skills or support? We should be ready to accept ministries in areas where the local diocese is unable to respond to pastoral needs.
- **Returned Missionaries:** It has been good to have among us missionaries who have given their time and talent to the missions in so many places and some in very difficult circumstances. Their presence is inspiring – but their stories are seldom heard by the wider group of Oblate and lay people.
- **Foreign Missionaries:** The presence of Oblates from other parts of the world working alongside us in the Anglo-Irish mission is most welcome. They bring an enthusiasm and energy, a new way of looking at things and also the joy of being an Oblate. We need to ensure that their integration into the Province is done sensitively and well.
- **Oblate Youth Service:** A tremendous sign of hope and joy for all of us. Their presence makes us all feel younger. The commitment to youth is very strong in our Province, but we don't seem to encourage it at the local level. We are happy to have these young people and have a Youth Worker, but don't know how to use them or connect well with them. Some Oblates have a unique charism in this area. The Oblate Youth Service themselves are now led by the lay young men and women with the presence of an Oblate in Ireland and an OYS lay employee promoting the OYS in UK. The past couple of years have seen Oblate resources being invested in the employment of 2 OYS Youth leaders in UK and funding has been secured for OYS Youth leader in Ireland (to be appointed).
- **Hope in our tradition and Scripture:** Even amidst all difficulties and setbacks we can learn much from Blessed Joseph Gerard and go ahead with our mission with much hope. We can learn from the life of Noah, namely that in spite of the fact people laughed at him he continued his work according to the call he received from God. Pope John XXII after a heavy schedule of work often said "Lord, John is going to bed now, you look after Your Church". So let us do our best and leave the rest to God.
- **Finding God:** Many people are leaving religion and immersing in self-development and personal spirituality. They are looking for God. In the Church many think that God is absent. As missionaries we should be ready to find God where the Institutional Church does not exist. The task of the missionary is not one's personal agenda, but that of the Universal Mission. Along this line only, can we think of our mission and missionary task. Ultimately it is the Lord who guides us all and it is very important to reflect together where the Lord leads us.
- **Oblate mission:** Jesus is the liberator. One of our main tasks is to liberate people from diverse enslavements in life. The Beatitudes and Chapter 25 of Mathew are at the heart of Oblate mission.
- **Mary and the Oblate Mission:** Many Oblates have a great love for Mary. They are aware of her constant help and protection in their missionary life.

- **Scripture and Adult Faith Formation:** Many opportunities have been created by Brian de Burca and other Oblates in which lay people have engaged with the Scriptures and retreats (Wistaston Hall) etc. These are signs of hope and new life. Even among the Oblates the rediscovery of the treasures of the Scripture (e.g. Emmaus story) are immensely encouraging.
- **People find joy and hope** in the love of their families and the care of the neighbours. In Oblate settings, people on the margins (divorced etc.) in terms of church regulations find a real welcome and acceptance.
- **Safeguarding Children:** An outcome of the crisis of sexual abuse and betrayal has been the development and implementation of good practice in terms of our care and work with young people and vulnerable adults in the Ireland and UK. Again our collaboration with lay people has been instrumental in giving us confidence to work with and among young people – always ensuring their well-being and respect.

STRUGGLES & ANXIETIES

- **Lack of support for promoting the Oblate Spirit:** Some Oblates in community are indifferent to the Oblate Spirit/Charism promotion. The lack of support among some Oblates for Oblate focused themes/events/promotions can be disheartening and often hard to comprehend. Tensions exist in communities where we can be good social workers without a spiritual backbone.
- **Oblate Community:** Many Oblates lack a good experience of Oblate community life. Many are sole traders. Lack of community engagement in any meaningful sense can drive some Oblates to look for support, relationship etc. outside the community for mission. Concern for Oblates living in dysfunctional situations/communities. Can we be Oblate Communities when we are not eating, praying, sharing life and mission together?
- **Absence of the experience of *Mission:*** Some Oblates speak of the trap of maintenance as opposed to mission. In a positive way of speaking, many are preoccupied in "Pastoral Care" in diocesan style parishes. The question arises should Oblates be in parishes? Are we being stifled in our particular mission in the Church?
- **Scandal and betrayal by the "church":** In Ireland a deep malaise exists in the people in terms of Church and particularly religion because of the scandal of Child Abuse. Many Oblates have withdrawn from working directly with young people because of a lack of confidence and fear of giving wrong signals. The scandals have distant us from the people in some cases.
- **Believers or Seekers:** Some Oblates spoke of their frustration in being part of the "Roman" Church - a church that feels distant, outdated and not in touch with personal experience. Some felt a need to reconnect people with the Church. One Oblate commented: "Challenge today is to find spaces/ways for people to stay connected with the church when everything around them is calling them to *disconnec*t". We are called to be helping people who embrace a *particular vision of church – as inclusive, life-giving, liberating and committed to the poor and abandoned.* The dichotomy between us and the bishops are going to grow. We are being called to "inhabit uncomfortable place" [Fr General's letter in February 2012].
- **Laity v Church Authority:** We are inhabitants of the margins of society. We are in a huge margin. We move from one direction and the diocese in another. Our expressions at liturgy lack creativity. Our liturgical language does not touch the lives of the people and thus the spiritual lives of the people. With the de-structuring of the involvement of the laity one can foresee some conflicts of the faithful with the Church authority in the future.
- **Youth in our Missions:** We often neglect to cultivate and nurture constructive relationships with the young people in our parishes. Often we don't provide opportunities for them to connect on a regular basis.
- **Confusion in the Centres of Mission:** Some Oblates expressed the need to learn from the difficulties that we have experienced in the Refounding process in terms of the Centres of Mission, especially its evolution and failure in adapting to our present mission places/commitments. Among the older Oblates, and leaning toward a cynical perspective, they speak of "Centres of Confusion". It is important to realise what has worked well. But to also acknowledge that often Oblates themselves have been the stumbling block to collaboration in mission. Not everyone bought into it. Some Oblates wanted to continue in maintenance (pastoral care) ministries. Being *missionary* in our outlook is important, it is where we will find growth and energy. Often it felt as if the people (on the ground) missed what the Oblates were trying to be about. Co-operation between parishes existed in some groups and not in others. In Dublin the Pastoral Area has not worked, mainly because the majority of the Parish pastoral Council didn't understand. Only important thing was they had a priest in the parish. There is disconnection between the people and the church and even what the oblates are doing.
- **Identity in Mission:** Anxiety is often experienced around the issues of " What am I doing?" or "What should I be about as an Oblate/ as a priest?"
- **Transitions:** Times of change from one ministry to another – the movement from active ministry into reduced active ministry are fraught with tensions, anxieties and personal crisis for many. Some look forward to the "surprise" of the new experience.

- **Crisis of Vocations:** Anxiety we wonder about the future of our missions. We have many people now engaged in mission with us, paid, voluntary and partners (Friends of St Eugene). We have no one in formation at present. Our last Final Vows was in 1998. Our last ordination was in 2000. One group commented that "No life, can mean no growth, and result in no challenge". Differing visions are held by individual Oblates, yet the spirit is very good, however there is a loss of creativity. The question is asked could we invite young people to join what is our province today? Are our expectations remote from reality? There are indications that people don't want to share our vision of Oblate Life and Mission. Little interest in the parishes where Oblates are present to the "Oblate Connections" (a Partners in Mission publication). We have narrowed our ministry over the years, we recognise we are getting older, however without young blood we will not generate new life and apostolates.
- **Brazil Delegation:** We are proud of the men and the mission in Brazil. But we wonder how long it can be sustained. We are anxious for the younger Brazilian Oblates who joined the delegation and want to see them thrive in the new Brazil Province. We are anxious about the well-being of our Irish missionaries who work really closely with the poor and who are now aging, some very sick.
- **Practice of the Faith:** The lack of understanding among people of the church. The disinterestedness demonstrated by many people in terms of Sunday Mass. Expectation of wanting certain Sacraments (e.g. Baptism, Communion) but don't expect any commitment from the person themselves. Most people are happy to come to Mass but not to take an active part in parish life.
- **Inculturation:** As we welcome Oblates from abroad, there is a clash of cultures and "ecclesiologies". Trying to get to grips with the language and the nuances of terminologies can cause frustration.
- **People's experience of Church:** Often the experience of many is that the church separates and divides them. People feel pushed out because they are in second relationships or in same-sex relationship. Many don't care, but it matters to some! Oblates in the Province can be sheltered from the experience of people who struggle to put food on the table for them and their children.

SCRIPTURE QUOTES:

1 John 2:1-11 « Marriage of Cana - "Do whatever he tells you"
1 John 1:39 « Jesus invitation to the disciples - "Come and See"
1 Ephesians 3:14-21 « " may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong.."
1 John 11 « Lazarus and the faith in Christ, "eternal life"
1 Job 38 « "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world."
1 John 8:29 « "The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone."
1 Matthew 16:24 "If anyone wants to follow me… renounce yourself, pick up your cross and follow me."

The above were shared by the younger members of the Province.

The quotes below came from various Regional gatherings:

- New Wine – New wineskins
- Jeremiah: "My plans for you are for peace and not disaster… a future full of hope… when you search for me, I will let you find me…"
- Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened. To whom shall we go?
- I have come that you may have life and have it to the full.
- Archbishop Oscar Romero's Pastoral Plan: …"it helps now and then to take the long view… We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that…"
- Beatitudes & Matthew chapter 25… what you do to the least of my brothers and sisters…
- The Ryan Report – The State report on the condition and state of care of the children in Religious run Institutional Children's Homes and Reformatories… Where did our charism go? How did we live it during these times?

Significant influence in our Province journey since 2006 are:

- "Washing of the Feet" – a significant symbol that emerged from the Partners in Mission – Oblate Province Assembly in 2006.
- Luke's "Emmaus Encounter" (a gospel passage that has been influential in our Province journey from 2009 to present)
- St Eugene: "Leave nothing undared for the Gospel" – 2010 as a Year of Oblate Vocation Promotion
- John 15: "I am the vine – you are the branches" – the text that guided the reflection of the recent Oblate Assembly in June 2012.