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Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate

The State of the Congregation

The Superior General's report to the 2010 Chapter

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Superior General's report to the 2010 Chapter

Contents

A. Mission.... 4

B. Conversion.... 6

C. This Chapter.... 7

D. Timelines of world and church history affecting us directly.... 8

E. The changing map of the Congregation.... 8

F. Oblate mission events.... 9

1. As we increasingly recognize the gift of our Oblate charism, we are called to strengthen our vocation ministry.... 11
2. As demographic changes occur in the Church and among the Oblates, we are called to respond with prudent foresight. 14
3. As our missionary practice needs further adjustment we are called to continue along the lines of the Immense Hope process.... 16
4. As the practices of border crossing and inter-culturality are increasingly needed in today's mission, we are called to take bolder steps.... 19
5. Community and religious life are being valued more highly but we are still called to provide a more serious animation.... 22
6. As the quality of initial and ongoing formation has improved we are now called to cross borders even more.... 25
   a) In some cases, there is a disproportion between the formation efforts and the result.... 26
   b) For a long time we have been complaining about the chronic lack of trained formators, a problem which is aggravated by our difficulty to reduce the number of small formation houses.... 27
   c) Specifically missionary and inter-cultural formation is offered but not yet available everywhere.... 29
   d) Higher studies must become more closely connected to the needs of the mission.... 30
7. As much reorganization has been achieved, we are called to take further decisions on governance.... 30
8. As financial solidarity has increased, we are called to work on even more competent stewardship and the increase of local income.... 31

G. A world view.... 33

H. Four imperatives.... 35

1. Christ-centered communities.... 35
2. Love of the poor.... 36
3. Facing the demographic change 36
4. Love of the Church.... 37
5. Mission statement of the Central Government.... 39
6. Government in general and visits.... 40

7. Mission and ministries (Oswald Firth, Federico Labaglay, Luis Ignacio Rois, Eric Alleaume).....40
a) Immense Hope.....40
b) Mission research team.....40
c) Mission with Youth (Luis Ignacio Rois).....41
d) Towards Pilot Communities.....41
e) Seminar - Workshops on Specific Mission Areas.....41
f) Oblates and Lay Associates.....41
g) Oblate Brothers.....41
8. First formation (Paolo Archiati, Jean-Bosco Musumbi, Loudeger Mazile, Eric Alleaume).....41
a) Objectives and animation of activities in the Regions and Units 41
b) Activities organized from the center.....42
9. Ongoing formation (Eugene King, Marcel Dumais, Federico Labaglay, Andrzej Jastrzebski).....42
a) Ongoing formation for the individual missionary and the leaders.....42
b) Orientation sessions for Major Superiors.....42
c) Higher Education (Marcel Dumais).....42
d) “Centre Eugene de Mazenod” in Aix.....42
e) Charism animation (Frank Santucci; Yvon Beaudoin / Fabio Ciardi).....43
f) Postulation (Joaquín Martínez; Paolo Archiati).....43
10. JPIC (Oswald Firth, Louis Ignacio Rois, Camille Piché).....43
11. Oblate Service of Communications (Paolo Archiati, Jean Bosco Musumbi, Antonino Bucca, James Allen) 44
12. Personnel (Eugene King, Oswald Firth, Paolo Archiati, Andrzej Jastrzebski).....44
13. General Secretariat office (Tom Coughlin), archives (Maciej Michalski) and dispatching (Theophile Lepage).....44
14. Finance office (Rufus Whitley, Marcel Dumais, Loudeger Mazile), Grant director’s office (Jeevendra Paul) 44
15. General House Study (Eugene King, Rufus Whitley, Clyde Rausch, Gilberto Piñón, Roberto Sartor, Paolo Archiati).....45
16. Procuration to the Holy See (Roberto Sartor).....45
17. General House (Gilberto Piñón); International Roman Scholasticate (Mario Brandi); International de Mazenod Center Aix (Dominique Dessolin).....46
18. What has been achieved and what remains to be done.....46
19. Summary of structural changes at the General Administration over the last 12 years:.....47
20. My ministry as superior general:.....47

The State of the Congregation



Saint Eugene says about the Oblates: *"Their founder is Jesus Christ, the very Son of God; their first fathers are the Apostles."* (1818 Rule) As we begin our 35th General Chapter, at a time of great changes, let us gather around Jesus Christ, who in a true sense is our real founder. May Christ's presence, his word and his Spirit lead us in our discernment. In John 5:30 Jesus declares: *"I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me."* Let us also judge as we hear, listening together with an open ear to the voice of the Spirit, seeking the will of God. We need a profound conversion, opening up to options other than we might prefer but which are in accordance with the will of the one who sent us.

This report on the state of the Congregation is meant to be a stepping stone towards a future vision of our missionary work which is to be worked out by this 35th Chapter and its aftermath. The report does not pretend to offer ready answers but rather seeks to illustrate some of the questions we all may have.

In the following, after an introductory reflection on the proposed Chapter theme of conversion, I shall firstly identify the milestones of our recent history, secondly describe some observable trends which may constitute signs of hope but also calls to conversion for our Congregation, and in conclusion, present a few imperatives for the future. An account of the efforts of the General Administration to respond to the expectations of the last Chapter can be found in the annex.

This report is the result of a team effort by the Central Government. It is complete only with the report of the Treasurer General, which was also reviewed by the same body and which I endorse.

A mission that requires conversion - Introduction

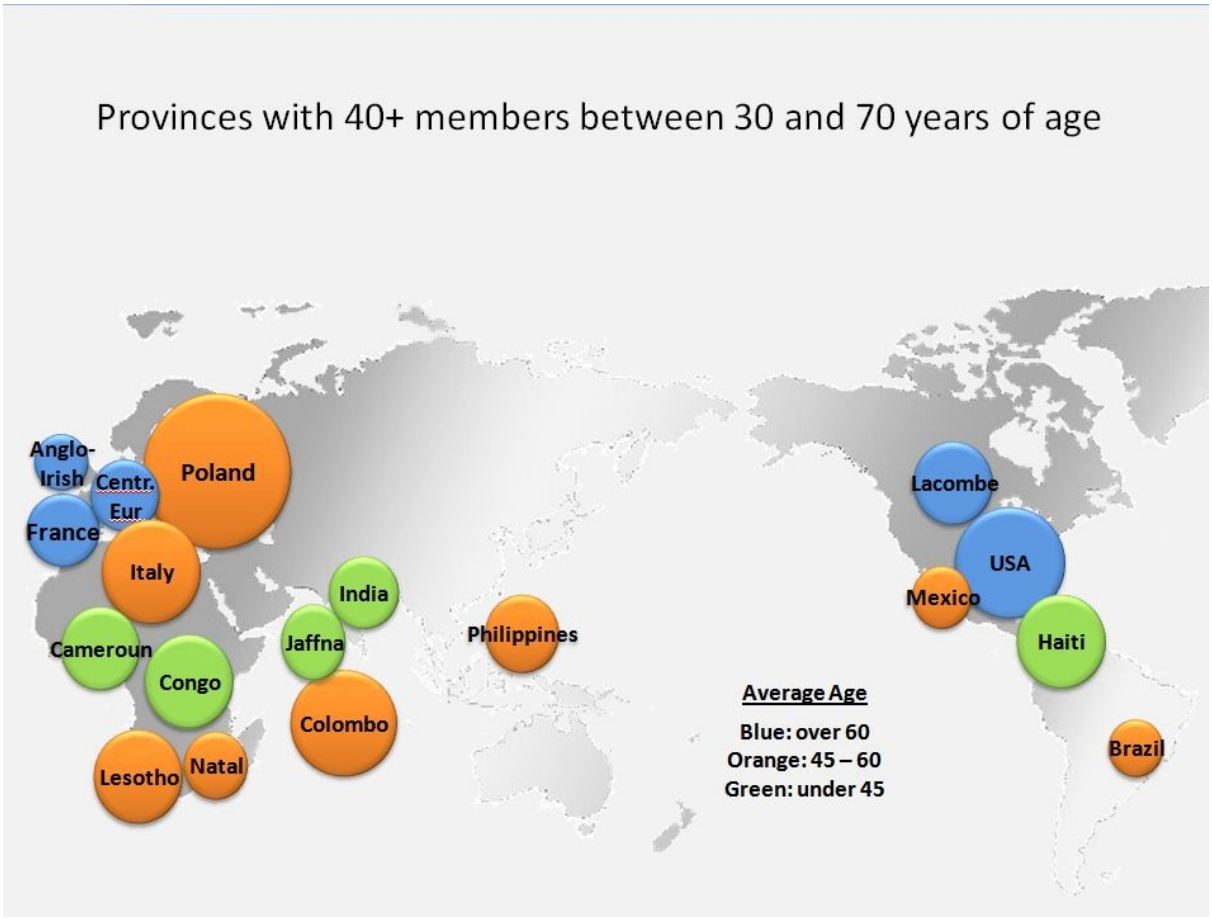
A. Mission

At the beginning of a Chapter it might be good to recall why we are doing all this missionary work. An elegant lady was accompanying Mother Teresa as she was taking care of the sick. At the sight of a leper being washed, she turned her face in disgust: "I would not do this for a million dollars!" she said. "Nor would I," answered Mother Teresa. We Oblates, like Mother Teresa, do not evangelize the poor for

money. We do it because God has given us a mission to fulfill. When we were founded, our first community responded to an urgent local need in France in 1816 but then it soon spread out to the whole world. The world's missionary needs remain as urgent today as at our beginnings, maybe even more so. The first line of the missionary encyclical of John Paul II comes to mind: "The mission of Christ the Redeemer, which is entrusted to the Church, … is still only beginning" (Red. Mis. 1).

Our mission has a special focus, as is the case with other religious institutes. Our focus, "evangelizare pauperibus", is expressed in Constitution five: "We are a missionary Congregation. Our principal service in the Church is to proclaim Christ and his Kingdom to the most abandoned." This reality has never changed.

What is changing, and dramatically so, are the times which means the people with their cultures, to whom our mission is directed; also the composition of our Congregation changes with them. It will soon be 150 years since the death of our Founder. Since 1861 the Congregation for a long time has had its center in the Western World. Today we have become multi-centered - it suffices to have a look at the map of the scattered nuclei of a strong and vibrant Oblate presence.



A General Chapter has to face the challenge to grasp the missionary needs world-wide and to make the Congregation fit for its essential purpose, to fulfill its mission to the poor today. Needs and possibilities vary according to the mission field - secularized countries, environments which understand themselves as Christian, cultures with strong traditional religions, situations of Christian minorities embedded in the midst of the great world religions, the post-communist world, etc. Everywhere the Kingdom of God can be discovered, identified, and fostered through the presence of Christ in His Church.

B. Conversion

Our Chapter theme is, surprisingly, not mission but conversion. It reads: "*Centered on the person of Jesus Christ, we commit ourselves to a profound personal and communal conversion for the sake of our Oblate Mission*." Our precapitular process was guided by the motto "Conversion: A new heart - a new spirit - a new mission".

It was the 2007 Interchapter meeting in South Africa that identified this theme. The participants realized that, in the Congregation, there appears to be an emerging consensus about our identity as missionary Oblates. It has taken years to reclaim this identity, but now most of us agree on a model with the following key elements:

- We are an expression of the Church's mission to the poor.
- We live and minister in community.
- We embrace internationality and inter-culturality.
- We make our structures more collaborative and flexible.
- We share financial resources between provinces.

It was felt that we had reached a basic agreement on these principles and even on ways to bring them to fruition, but that they had not yet become full reality. The one missing element was a change of heart. Intellectually and theoretically we may often be clear about concepts and ideals, models and action paths, but the heart is not fully engaged. We realized that our whole life style as missionaries had to change so that we could live together more harmoniously, be more consistent in prayer and reflection, and then cross the borders to witness to Jesus Christ to the poorest and most abandoned in more creative ways.

After a more formal agreement on *conversion* as the provisional Chapter theme, the precapitular commission formulated a prayer, distributed questionnaires and had several articles about conversion and mission written.

In the answers to the questionnaires, expressive phrases like "rootedness in Christ", "poverty and quality of Oblate life", "contemplative missionaries", "religious life … good news for us and for the others", etc were coined.

In the articles produced we read things like:

- Gandhi's words are indeed evangelical when he says: "We must become the change we want to see in the world" (Frank Santucci).
- "Two elements of our life appear to need considerable attention. These are the renewal of the Ministry of the Word and the discovery of a corporate mode of living Evangelical Poverty" (David Power).
- It's a question of making our Oblate communities houses of God's Word (Jean Hérick Jasmin).
- "Conversion of life style must be a primary goal" (summary responses to Questionnaire 1).

- "We must add the dimension of human maturity and integrity as being key to a realistic and effective conversion" (summary answer to Questionnaire 1).
- Gianni Colombo, recently deceased, quotes our Rule: "The OMI Constitutions state that 'the Chapter is a privileged time of community reflection and conversion. Together, in union with the Church, we discern God's will in the urgent needs of our times …' (C 125)".

Saint Eugene de Mazenod himself spoke about conversion to holiness at his opening speech to the crucial 1850 Chapter:

> *"We must understand now more than ever the need for being a perfect religious in order to be a good missionary. We must be very convinced that the most effective means to reap great fruits in the hearts of people is the holiness of life and the faithful practice of all the duties of our state."*

At the present Chapter, with Saint Eugene, we would like to connect conversion explicitly to today's missionary needs. Conversion starts in our hearts and among ourselves, and once it has started, we will clearly see that the whole world is in need of conversion. One of the examples is the environment. To this, the Canadian Bishops Conference has the following to say:

> *"Pope John Paul II reminded us that the crisis is not only ecological, but moral and spiritual. A moral crisis must be met with conversion, which is a change in perspective, attitudes and behavior. Essentially, this conversion is aimed at the ruptures we have created with nature, with our neighbor and with God."*[1]

We cannot fulfill our mission as if it were by remote control. We must ourselves, personally and as communities, enter the battlefield of the spiritual struggle that is going on. In the Preface to our Constitutions and Rules, St. Eugene puts it this way, and I quote the passage in full length:

> *"They must work unremittingly to become humble, meek, obedient, lovers of poverty and penance, mortified, free from inordinate attachment to the world or to family, men filled with zeal, ready to sacrifice goods, talents, ease, self, even their life, for the love of Jesus Christ, the service of the Church, and the sanctification of their brethren. And thus, filled with unbounded confidence in God, they are ready to enter the combat, to fight, even unto death, for the greater glory of his most holy and sublime Name. How vast the field that lies before them! How worthy and holy the undertaking!"*

C. This Chapter

The expectations towards our Chapter are high. After a long preparation it seems that we are now re-awakened for conversion as we face so many changes and challenges. But we also know that in four weeks we cannot expect to find answers to everything. One of the important decisions we could take is to become, in new ways, a "learning congregation" as it was expressed at the 2009 Canada-US joint session with the Central Government. Perhaps at the last Chapter, wanting to be practical, we went too much into details. We can learn from that experience, that less may be more. We should therefore aim at some very few, well-thought general guidelines which are internationally applicable and which then will help to incarnate our

[1] Our Relationship with the Environment: The Need for Conversion, Commission for Social Affairs Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2008

missionary religious life within specific cultural contexts. In biblical words, to find the "way" is the first important thing; Jesus presents himself as the way before he says that he is the truth and the life (Jn 14:6).

There will be, however, some concrete and practical questions to address:

- As mandated by the last Chapter, we will again make the effort to adapt our structures to a changing world and a changed Congregation.
- We will elect a new Superior General and Council.
- Some specific changes in our Constitutions and Rules may be needed to respond more adequately to our current reality or to harmonize the CCRR.
- We will pay attention to the situation of our temporal goods.

I. Milestones and factual events

D. Timelines of world and church history affecting us directly

What on the world level has marked the Oblates during the last six years? Picking a limited number of world events that have affected us particularly, I mention:

- war and strife in several countries where we are present: in Sri Lanka (2004 - 2009), Congo (even after the 2nd Congo war of 1998 - 2003), Southern Philippines and Jos, Nigeria (2009 - 2010), harassing of Christians in India and Pakistan (mainly 2009);
- the tsunami of December 26, 2004;
- the Financial crisis of 2008 - 2009;
- the settlement of the Canadian Indian Residential School affair in 2008 – 2009;
- the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in May 2009;
- the Haiti earthquake of January 12, 2010.

Important Church events over the same period were:

- the death of Pope John Paul II and the subsequent election of a new Holy Father, Benedict XVI in 2005;
- the 5th Latin American Conference of Bishops at Aparecida in 2007;
- Abuse scrutiny in North America (2003 - 2009) and Western Europe (from 2009);
- the Synod on the Word of God in 2008;
- the second African Synod in 2009;
- the ongoing exposure of the sins of the Church.

What are the milestones that mark the road of our Congregation over the last six or even twelve years?

E. The changing map of the Congregation

From the Central Government, we have given emphasis to the strengthening of existing missions and delegations, and the list is long: Zambia, Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia, Pakistan, China, French Guyana, Guatemala. Also several provinces have

received reinforcements from others who are richer in vocations, and this is still an ongoing process.

While we have slowed down the pace of beginning missions in new countries, following what had been recommended at our assemblies, a few new beginnings did come about: 2000 Rumania, 2001 Belarus, 2003 Guinea-Bissau, 2009 Vietnam and Laos. Since 2006 we have worked towards a stable presence in mainland China.

Continuous efforts have been made to adapt our Unit structures to the needs of the mission and our resources. Some of the main moves were:

- The five provinces of the US became one in 1999.
- Canada moved from eight provinces to three between 2003 and 2005.
- One vice-province and two delegations within Brazil merged into a province in 2003.
- India became a Province in May 2010.

Many other moves happened within the framework of the restructuring of the 24 vice-provinces mandated by the 1998 Chapter:

- Argentina and Chile became one province in 2003.
- the Netherlands and the two Belgium provinces merged into one.
- Scandinavia and the Polish Vice-province of France-Benelux joined Poland and
- the Central European Province was formed out of Germany, Austria and Czech Republic.
- Recently, in 2010, Thailand became a delegation of the Philippines and
- the Delegation of Japan - Korea is now governed by Colombo and supported by Jaffna and the Philippines.

The Oblate map of Africa has not changed yet but there, as in other parts of the world, regional cooperation has become a standard, especially to support our study center at Cedara in Southern Africa and to consolidate the studies of our formandi from Cameroon, Congo and Senegal.

Several restructuring scenarios are still being worked on, particularly Italy and Spain; Paraguay and Uruguay; Bolivia; Peru; Natal and the Northern Province of South Africa, and finally Namibia, Central Province of South Africa and Lesotho.

F. Oblate mission events

Some other milestones indicate the type of missionary work about which the Congregation is concerned. This is especially emphasized in the following symposia which have taken place:

- Secularity (several symposia)
- Interreligious Dialogue
- Indigenous ministry
- Mission with youth

- Migration.

Other events, moves or changes worthy of special note are:

- The Immense Hope evaluation process has been ongoing since it gained momentum at the Mexico Interchapter meeting of 2001.
- There have been important efforts to strengthen and refocus JPIC ministry: we have now a full time director at the General Administration, Fr. Camille Piche, and a permanent representation at the UN in collaboration with VIVAT[2], Fr. Daniel LeBlanc; also, new statutes for our service at the General level have been worked out.
- As to charism animation, the Central Government has been increasingly involved in the De Mazenod Centre in Aix and is set to take over 60, Cours Mirabeau completely. In addition, a person has been given the full-time task of charism animation throughout the Congregation.
- The Standing Committee on the Brothers and the Lay Associates Committee have brought new energy to these expressions of the Oblate charism
- Important financial moves have been up for discussion and eventual decision. Millions of dollars have changed ownership through the programs of Capital Sharing I & II and the Missionary Resource Campaign to strengthen our presence as evangelizers of the poor in the 21st Century. Some provinces have made additional efforts even beyond what was stipulated by these programs and have regularly shared resources with the whole Congregation: the US Province, Belgium / Netherlands, the Anglo-Irish Province, Spain and recently the Province of Brazil.
- The post of grant director has contributed to support missionary work out of non-Oblate sources; this office has facilitated in less than five years at least $17,000,000 of financial support to different projects. We had sought for a person for this office since 1999 but the appointment of Fr. Jeevendra Paul could only take place in 2005.
- The study about the possible sale of the General House was given significant attention over the last five years; the matter came close to a decision but the process was suspended in February 2010 because of the proximity of the Chapter.
- Court cases and settlements have continued to weigh enormously on provinces like Lacombe (1995 - 2009), USA (2002 - 2009) and the Anglo-Irish Province (2009), resulting in loss of public reputation and sizeable portions of our patrimony.
- An important missionary event was a kind of closure to the more than 10 years of litigations in Canada arising from the Indigenous Residential Schools. This led to an important visit of native Chiefs to the Pope and to our General House in April 2009. Litigations which had been a heavy burden on Lacombe Province and its predecessors for over 15 years are now concluded.
- Last but not least, it should also be mentioned that since 1998 we have again an Oblate cardinal, Francis Cardinal George. New Oblate bishops and prelates

[2] A UN representation of various religious congregations spearheaded by the Missionaries of the Divine Word.

are appointed regularly and their number of around 45 has remained quite stable.

Finally let me mention a few events which have to do with God's great deeds among us:

- the beatification of Jozef Cebula in 1999,
- the 10th anniversary of the canonization of St. Eugene in 2005,
- the prospect of the beatification of our Spanish Martyrs in 2011,

Will we receive the inscription of the feast of Saint Eugene de Mazenod into the universal liturgical calendar in the same year 2011, on occasion of the 150th anniversary of our Founders' death? We certainly need the prayer to and the intercession of our Oblate saints to continue the work they have begun.

Specific developments and calls to conversion

After this brief look at our recent history, I will now point out the developments and the trends I observe and the calls I hear as I reflect on the last 12, and even 18 years. Yes, I have spent 18 years at the administrative center of the Congregation! Such observations cannot always claim objectivity but may serve as a point of departure for our Chapter discussions.

I see in the eight points I have identified eight calls for conversion. In Mk 1:15, conversion means to change, responding to a favorable moment, a "kairós".[3] While the call for conversion according to the Greek expression "metanoéite" translates into "change your minds", not just any change is requested but a change towards a life in better accordance with the Gospel: "Believe in the Good News!" the gospel of Mark continues. Therefore we must be ready to react to the developments we observe around us while remaining faithful to our original purpose.

With this in mind I invite you to go through the following eight aspects of Oblate life where new developments and trends can be observed and related calls can be heard: the Oblate charism, the Congregation's membership, its mission, inter-culturality, community, formation, structures and finances.

At the end of my report, I will come back to the calls perceived, formulating four imperatives.

1. As we increasingly recognize the gift of our Oblate charism, we are called to strengthen our vocation ministry.

Fifteen years after the canonization of St. Eugene, the core of his spirituality and missionary choices are better known to us than before:

- his zeal as an evangelizer to "enkindle the flame of faith"[4] and to spread it out, and
- the important place he gave to community;
- his centeredness in Christ through the study of Scripture and the Eucharist;

[3] "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel."(Mk 1:15)

[4] Preface to our CC&RR

- his active love for the Church;
- his heroic love of the poor.

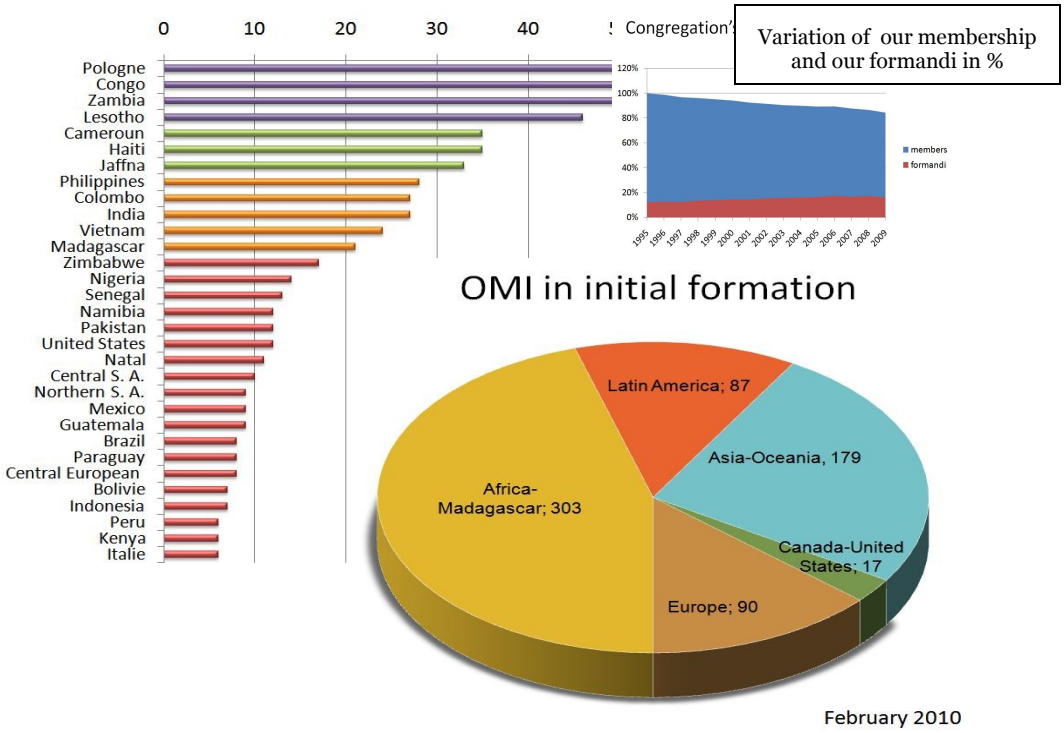
We are proud of our Saint and, especially since his canonization, many churches and chapels have been named after him. Also the names of other important Oblate missionaries have been honored in similar ways. It is no exaggeration to say that there is enthusiasm about our charism which has grown over the last decade.

Many ongoing activities show the healthy esteem of what we are as Oblates and the spread of our charism:

- Our De Mazenod Center in Aix has been active since 1991 and congregation-wide animation and research has been pursued with energy, as mentioned above.
- This awareness of our charism has led to a better appreciation of the vocation of the Brothers who are connected by a congregation-wide committee since 1998.
- The enthusiasm of lay people for the Oblate charism has increased. Associates are now present in more places than ever before and we recognize more and more that the charism encompasses laity.[5]
- There is the phenomenon of new Oblate youth movements in about ten provinces.
- We keep in touch with many institutes that are related with Saint Eugene while even new ones are founded. In 2004, 15 superiors general of such institutes met in Aix.

While the awareness of our charism has clearly grown, the repercussion on vocations for Oblate religious life and priesthood has been uneven. All in all, the number of our formandi has slowly been growing - from an average of 612 for the last five years of the past century to an average of 711 for the five years before this Chapter. However, according to the surrounding culture, the number of vocations varies greatly. Here are some graphics to illustrate the reality of vocations to vowed Oblate life.

[5] Different forms of sharing the charism are still explored with a variety of names being used like MAMI, Oblate Lay Associates, Partners in Mission, De Mazenod Family etc. While cf. R 37a & b speaks only of "associations", in this report I will use the name "Associates", following the 2004 Chapter document.



As can be observed, we have difficulties of recruiting in secularized environments, and that happens even in places where an active mission with youth is pursued. Here I perceive a call to us Oblates. Certainly the expression of faith life in families, the size of families and the public image of the Church play an important role when it comes to religious vocations but I still believe we can do better. Certain Oblates have a charism to call young people to Oblate life either as Brothers or priests - do we entrust them with vocation ministry, encourage them and give them the team support they need?

An even more important question to pose is: do we believe enough in our vocation and its importance, to truly invite others and to do so in spite of the prevailing culture? As we are proud of Saint Eugene, are we also proud of our life in vows and / or of our priesthood?

As we promote the vocation of lay associates we should ask them as well to decidedly encourage vocations to vowed life. Being concerned about vocations is an expression of our concern for mission: "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.*" (Lk 10:2).

Finally, we must not forget that just being proud to be an Oblate does not suffice - our pride should be in our conversion to Christ. Religious congregations today realize more and more that the basic constitutions and rules are the gospels. Christ alone deserves the center place and our charism only helps us to focus as we explore more deeply the infinite riches of Christ.

2. As demographic changes occur in the Church and among the Oblates, we are called to respond with prudent foresight.

The demographic change taking place in our Congregation is related to a similar movement in a world where 45% of the population under thirty is concentrated in the South, and we find a Church whose population center is moving towards the south and east. While these changes were identified years ago they are now truly hitting home.

How should we react to this trend?

The first important thing to do is to recognize the facts as the saying goes: "reality is always friendly" or: respect the "truth principle", as it would be expressed in French - even if the reality does not look so friendly and the truth might be painful. In one part of the world our demographic change means decline; the Oblates of the North American Region make a clear statement: "we, the Oblates, are in a period of decline (at least in North America)".[6] In other parts of the world the Congregation is growing; new local communities have recently been founded in provinces and delegations like Congo, Natal, Brazil, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, etc.

The second thing is that we must always keep in mind the global picture and do so in a spirit of solidarity. St. Paul's image of the body comes to mind: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free" (1 Co 11:13). We have to learn to take care of each other, considering that growth and decline are not entirely dependent on our own merits or lack thereof, and that the Spirit breathes where he wills.

As a whole, on the level of sheer numbers, the Congregation is faring quite well; we were 4,138 Oblates at the beginning of this year. But it is true that our numbers over the last 15 years have been decreasing at an average of 1.2% per year. This is due to the fact that we were very strong in countries which are now strongly secularized: Canada, Ireland, Belgium, Netherlands, France, Germany, USA etc. In these countries we find now a total population of more than 1000 Oblates older than seventy. On the other hand, there are also many young Units with important numbers like Poland, Colombo, Congo, Lesotho, Cameroon, Haiti, Philippines, Jaffna, India, Natal, Zambia, Mexico and Brazil - to a total of 1,600 Oblates with an average age under 45.

Our third reaction must be that we keep our balance of mind, avoiding becoming desperate or too euphoric. In times of demographic change we need to take care for our elders, and that is being done in an admirable way. We must meet the challenge of providing the young with a solid formation. We must also foresee that young Oblates will become old and make provisions accordingly. And, as mentioned above, we should never give up inviting those who feel called to our way of life, even if, in a given situation, numbers may become small.

What are the foreseeable consequences of the demographic change, and how can we respond with prudent foresight? What are we called to do?

As one of the consequences, younger generations and leaders from the younger Units will be more and more asked to take responsibility; therefore they must be trained so that they are prepared.

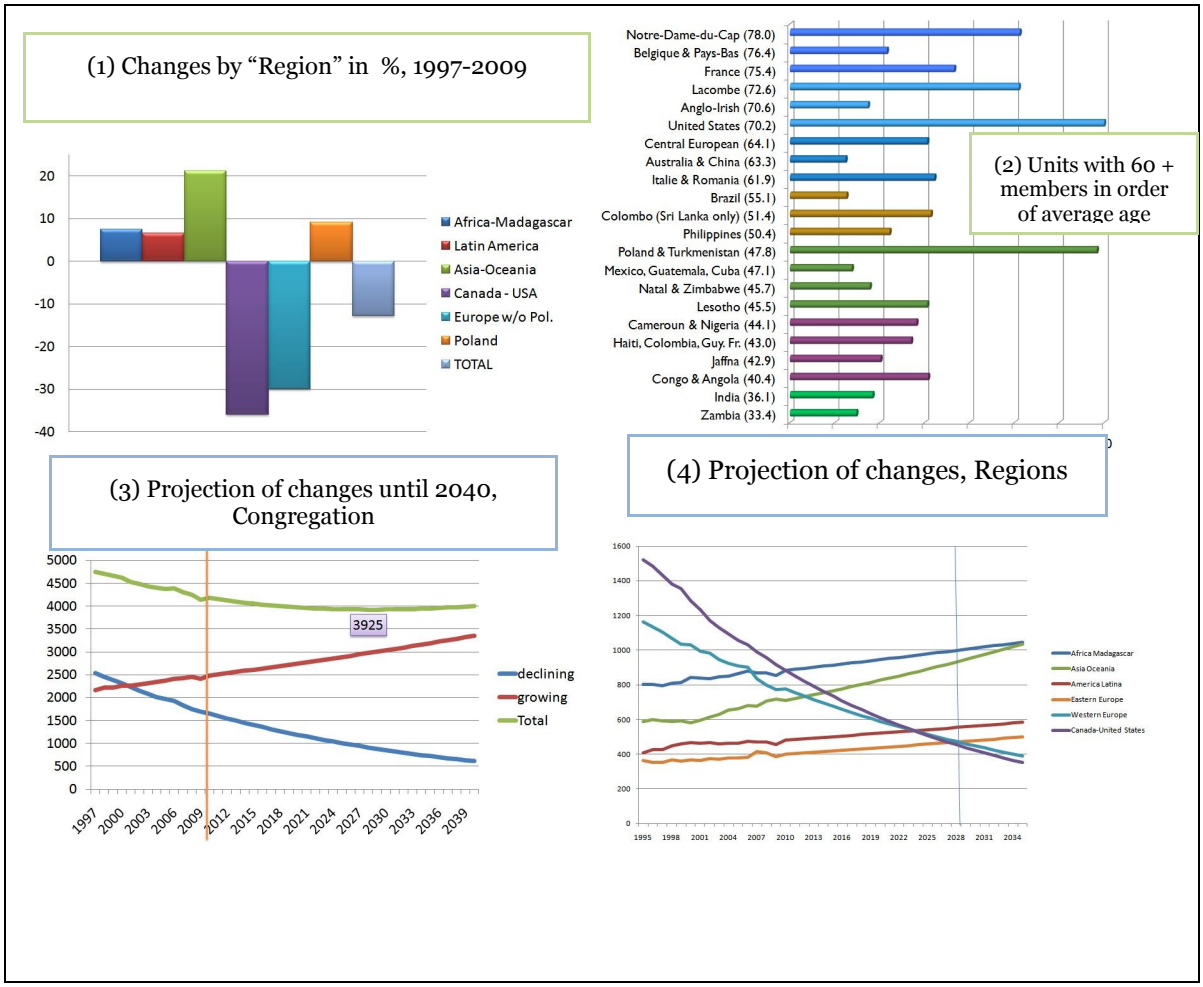
[6] Pre-Chapter Questionnaire I, answer from the Canada-US Region.

Another consequence of the demographic shift is a radical financial change. But let us keep a cool head in that field as well; through hard work, good administration, solidarity and the providence of God we will survive and have a possibility to thrive, but not under the motto: save yourself individually if you can. The financial part of this report speaks about this in more detail.

A third consequence is the need to live more and more in inter-cultural communities, something we still have to learn but which may prove very helpful for our direct missionary work itself.

One thing is sure, this trend challenges us in many ways. We must do a lot of reflection and exercise patience. For a time we will live in an unbalanced situation until the growing Units will have achieved enough strength. Zambia cannot yet do what our mother province France did in the past but hopefully that time will come. We live in an era which requires of us an ongoing conversion. We must be ready to change anything that is needed but be constantly aware of the fact that we are together one body in Christ.

To conclude, let me bring to your attention four graphs to illustrate the demographic shift. In graph 1) we can observe the dramatic changes in the Regions over the past 12 years; in graph 3), just below it, we might find it encouraging to know that since 2003 there are more Oblates in the growing sectors of the Congregation than in the declining sectors. We can clearly identify the strong younger Units on the bottom of graph 2). Future projections over a longer period are not easy to make but it is straightforward to see which Regions will be numerically strongest in 15 years or so (graph 4). About that time, around 2025, it may happen that our total numbers will be growing again (graph 3, upper line).



3. As our missionary practice needs further adjustment we are called to continue along the lines of the Immense Hope process.

The flagship of our missionary animation has been the **Immense Hope project** which started in 1999. It has been by this means that the Units of the Congregation made efforts to address changes in mission over more than 10 years! The IH project analyzes the relations between charism, mission, personnel and temporal goods. Can it be said that IH set a new trend and created a culture of constant critical review of our missionary practices? That had been envisaged at the 1998 Chapter when we said:

> *To evangelize requires a constant reevaluation of our missionary practices. Hence our plea is this: at every level - personal, community, and congregation - let us take the time needed to evaluate and discern as to whether our evangelization is in step with the reality of today's world and with God's specific call to us through our charism.* (EPM 19)

The IH process induces us not only to look at the needs of the world, it also calls us to give new expression to our attachment to the Church. The IH project was born of the missionary vision of the 1998 Chapter: "*It is the Church who evangelizes, and sends us forth on mission"* (EPM 12). As Saint Eugene passionately loved Christ the Savior, so he loved the Church; we all know how the Preface to our Rules starts

off: "*The Church, that glorious inheritance purchased by Christ the Saviour at the cost of his own blood …*". St. Eugene loved the Church despite its failings. We are called to do no less.

As a result of "Immense Hope" and of the new culture of missionary renewal, what are the recent trends in our missionary work? Which calls do we hear and how do we want to respond?

At the level of provinces we have positively recognized the fact that much of our mission passes through parishes. In Latin America, there was a Regional Oblate meeting on JPIC in parish ministry (Peru 2009) and the European Region reflected on how to make parishes truly missionary.[7] Parishes are recognized as a *de facto* key issue for our Oblate mission, and creative endeavors are called for.

At the same time more provinces face the situation that bishops are less likely to request parish work of the Oblates given that the local clergy is present in sufficient numbers. This fact, combined with an increasing awareness of our founding tradition, pushes us to strengthen other kinds of ministry if they are apt paths of evangelization (R 7b). Many options are available. If we hear the call we must make our choices in the spirit of CC. 1 to 10:

Mission preaching (there are new initiatives in a handful of our Units)

Specialized mission with youth (as mentioned, more than 10 Units have made a clear option for this)

Interreligious Dialogue

Media Ministry

Work with indigenous people

Pastoral of migrants

Mission within a secularized society (several Units have been launching new initiatives, explicitly and also without labeling it as such)

JPIC work (some younger Oblates are getting interested)

At the Congregation wide level, the following trends can be noted which again result in calls directed to us:

OVER THE LAST 12 YEARS, OUR EMPHASIS WAS ON STRENGTHENING THE EXISTING UNITS.

Some of our Units have been gaining new strength by receiving personnel from the outside, even for leadership positions. There have been positive results in places like Pakistan, Korea, Japan, China, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, Paraguay, Venezuela, and others.

In the background of these trends, a new concept of mission slowly comes into being, which challenges us in new ways. While we still announce Jesus Christ and His Father's Kingdom, trying to perceive where the wind of the Spirit blows, still building a Church at the service of God's salvific plan, we are distancing ourselves from the concept of a mission that transplants the civilization of the countries we come from. Almost everywhere we go, the local Churches are already established and we become their partners, under the coordination of their bishops, contributing our missionary spirit to make them more lively. Also in the frontiers of the mission *ad gentes* things have changed. While we recognize with gratitude that the treasure of faith has

[7] Parishes, according to the European Region, should promote: a) mission ad intra and ad extra, 2) laity also in leadership, 3) youth and family.

effectively been shared with many people, we have become aware of our errors in the past and present limitations. In the area of our work with indigenous people, we now are ready "to humbly recognize the cultural, spiritual, physical and psychological damages; the 'ethnic-centralism' of the missionaries who denied the cultural diversity"[8] and, with the Latin American Bishops Conference CELAM, to "see the indigenous as brothers and children of the same Father, God".[9] Also in other areas we are defining mission in new ways, for instance emphasizing the "dialogue of life" in Interreligious Dialogue[10] or through the apostolate of listening, in "listening centers", in the secularized environments.

Our new foundations are mostly a response to the opening-up of former communist countries after 1989

There are really only four new foundations since 1998: Romania, Belarus, Guinea-Bissau, and Vietnam. The trend has been to move into the former (or still) communist countries (we are now present in about half a dozen of them); to this also belongs our strategic move into mainland China and our new presence in Laos. How can we give sufficient support to these new foundations?

We must consider closing a few more places

All in all, we remain over-extended and too dispersed. We will have to consider consolidating resources further by closing more missions in the future . As of today, we continue on an *ad personam* basis or have already withdrawn from, Tahiti, New Zealand, Qua Qua (South Africa), Puerto Rico and Surinam[11]. More radical decisions are required to gather some of our scattered men or to free up resources for new missions. Over-extension and dispersal are not only observed at the congregational level, they often are also a reality within the provinces.

An explicit mission strategy for the whole Congregation?

As to our concrete mission strategy, perhaps the time has come to do a formal strategic planning for the whole Congregation (not just for the Central Government). Some parts of the Congregation are asking for this and also several of the General Council members see this as an important goal for the future. Such an Immense Hope process should start from an analysis of the missionary needs of the world as the Church and we Oblates see them, taking inspiration for instance from our mission symposia on secularity, migrants, interreligious dialogue, etc. We would then have to identify priorities for the whole Congregation and match our projections with the available resources. If we want to begin new missions or significantly strengthen

[8] Nicanor Sarmiento, OMI. The Oblate mission today, within the context of the cultural and religious traditions of the indigenous peoples, Documentation OMI

[9] Santo Domingo document, #20

[10] Redemptoris Mission, #57

[11] Around 1935 the Congregation had the same numeric strength as today but we were present only in about half of the number of countries.

some of the existing ones, we will have to reduce our presence somewhere else where it is less needed. This will require a great spirit of availability on the part of all and will require that the Superior General moves some personnel to new places. The benefit lies in that such global plans can open up new perspectives for the whole body of the Congregation!

4. As the practices of border crossing and inter-culturality are increasingly needed in today's mission, we are called to take bolder steps.

The last Chapter highlighted the concept of "internationality" when it stated:

" … if [the recommendations that follow this letter] were to be seen as colored by a common motif it would be that of internationality. … There is a growing desire to utilize more the strength of being a world-body in 67 countries. We recognize that if we share our resources more fully with each other this will work to the benefit of the poor and may be the well being of the whole Congregation. Our future strength lies not just in increasing our numbers, but especially in increasing our solidarity. Every part of the Congregation is rich in some way." (WH, 2004 Chapter letter)

Three years later, the idea of internationality had a general acceptance at the 2007 Interchapter. However, there was a conceptual evolution: first through the metaphor of *border crossing* which was already present at the last Chapter,[12] and then through a recent reflection which suggested that it would be more appropriate to speak not just of internationality but of "inter-culturality".[13]

It would be superficial to see in these developments just a fashion that has recently come up. Our last Chapter connected this reality with the core of our faith when it reminded us of Abraham and Sarah, of the "unpredictability of God's plan" and the self-emptying of Jesus. It is from these depths that the call to ongoing conversion in this area surfaces, to "set aside our own cherished strategies, languages, politics, and personal agendas, and like pilgrims, leave behind all unnecessary baggage that can slow us down." (Witnessing to Hope, p. 12)

While the ideas of border-crossing and inter-culturality are being accepted among us, the concrete movement of border-crossing is showing **new characteristics** and has been gaining some **momentum**.

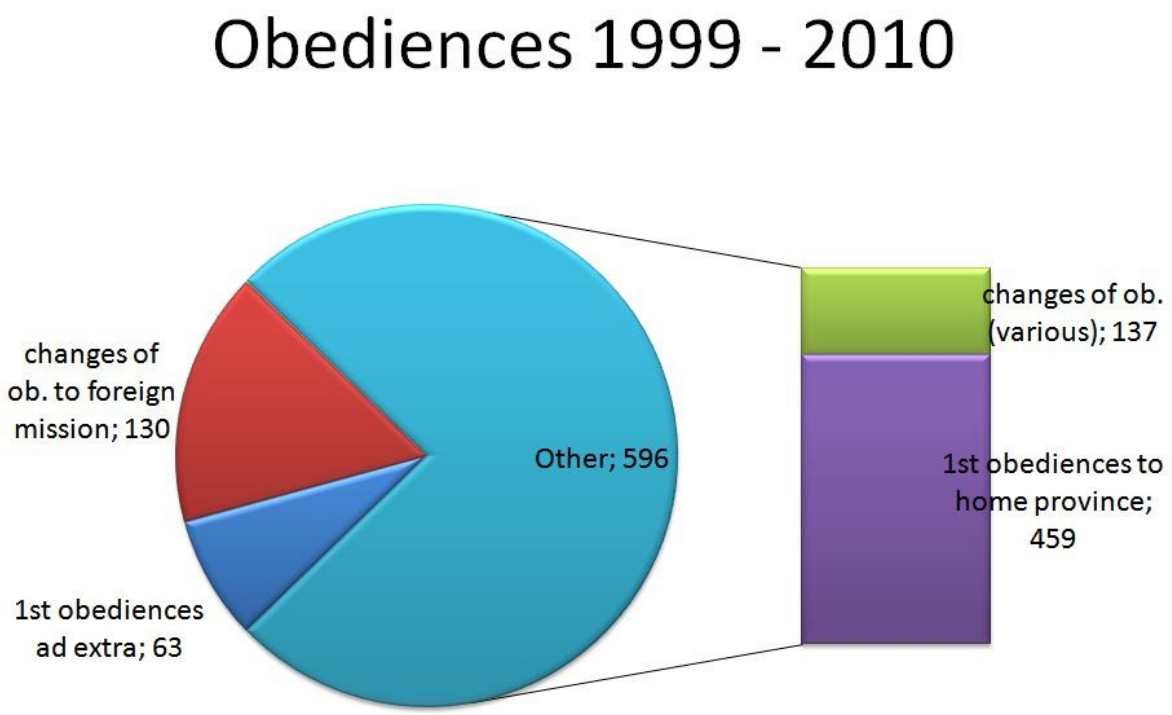
As to new characteristics, the traditional scheme of moving from north to south has been complemented by moves from south to south and south to north. New sending provinces have appeared on the scene.

As to momentum, we can observe an increase in recent years but I am giving here only the overall figures. Out of 522 first obediences given between 1999 to 2010, 63 were issued to a Unit different from the Unit of origin, which corresponds to 12%. This seems to be quite modest, but in the same period there were 130 changes of obedience for a new mission abroad[14], which doubles the figure of first obediences to another Unit. It has become frequent practice that immediately after first formation

[12] "Old borders are breaking down even as new boundaries are emerging. Our task is to be missionaries in this new pluralistic, sensitive, and complex reality where, like Jesus, we are invited to "*cross over*" and imitate his selfemptying so as to enter more fully into the life of the other, particularly the lives of the poor. The God we proclaim must be the humble, kenotic God that Jesus incarnated." (2004 Chapter letter).

[13] Union of Superiors General (of men) (USG), Assembly of May 2009

the Oblates stay in their home environment for a number of years, and if they are sent out it is at this later stage. This practice seems to have produced good results. The following pie chart shows graphically that among all the obediences I have given about a quarter (24%) were to a foreign mission.



Often border crossing is limited to some specific situations: within a Region, some provinces send out people and others do not, one Province receives more people than another, etc. It can be observed that the practical moves depend on clear and insistent invitations from the receiving provinces and a frank generosity on the part of the sending Units to give away some of their best Oblates. These are things that cannot be forced by a higher authority unless we proceed by blind obedience.

What is behind this congregation-wide emphasis of border-crossing, of interculturality? Different forces are at play. As to the pull factor, there are the dramatic needs of personnel in some of our missions which are crying for help. There are missionary needs Oblates feel as urgent: abandoned rural or urban areas, places where Islam or Christian fundamentalists are advancing fast, opportunities like those in China, migration, the need for interreligious dialogue, the silent withdrawal in secularized areas, etc. As to the push factor, there is the genuine wish of younger or not so young Oblates to become missionaries in another cultural environment. It must also be considered that some of our Units have so many vocations that there is an overflow. In the case of moves from south to north, the opportunity of finding

[14] There were a total of 267 changes of assignment between Units, of which 116 were to returning missionaries and 21 had to do with the General Administration, which leaves 130 changes for outgoing missionaries for a new mission abroad.

support for our Oblate life and mission also plays a role. Some are explicitly sent by their mother provinces to earn some income for the Oblates back home, especially to maintain the formation houses. Occasionally, we also find unmonitored private agendas that motivate Oblates to go abroad: the desire to help their family, or the attraction of specific ministries and life styles.

All in all, it should not be overlooked that there is the sincere desire in a good number of missionaries from the south to address missionary challenges like secularity and the invasion of Islam in the so-called Christian territory in the north. Such missionaries sometimes feel that their good intention is badly interpreted by Oblates or lay people in the north, who meet their good will with suspicion and prejudices. They would like to have more freedom to invent new ways of mission, as in the past the missionaries from the north have done in the south. The Oblates in the North must receive them with good will; they should not be induced to feel like beggars asking for a favor.

How should invitations to Oblates from the South to come to the North be handled. What type of mission invitations should be issued? How many people would be needed? Which communities are ready to welcome them? The reflection on these questions must continue. Certainly, in the North the local churches have to ask themselves: How many of the clergy, in a given country, should be local, how much could be from abroad? The aim cannot be to fill gaps or to find easy solutions for the lack of local vocations; on the contrary, in the secularized world we must work even harder for local vocations which are necessary for the inculturation of the gospel. A rule of thumb might be that the church and her ministers should be inter-cultural in the same measure as the society is intercultural. In addition, there is also a place for special, prophetic signs.

We must speak about all this, and overcome the existing obstacles in this important area. Encouragement and generosity are needed.

Let me mention three practical questions in this area.

(a) Some of our brother Oblates move to other countries through informal ways, for instance, staying on after higher studies. Could we prevent this from happening? If we do all what is possible so that each Oblate who goes abroad lives in a community of the receiving Unit, it might help. Often the issue simply goes to choosing well who studies and in which way, so as to support the mission of the Province. Yes, indeed, the corporate mission of the Unit should be the primary reason for advanced studies.

(b) We sometimes observe a trend to create an environment based on one's culture of origin to the point that it is not open to others. This happens in two ways, through missionaries that go abroad who are not receptive of the local culture; and through local vocations which are all from the same culture. In a missionary congregation like ours, a conscious effort is needed to overcome tendencies to create mono-cultural environments.

(c) As border-crossing increases, the phenomenon of interprovincial agreements in the assignment of personnel can be observed. It establishes a link similar to twinning for an effective exchange of gifts. We should, however, insist that the center of the Congregation is always consulted and informed so that the necessary coordination can be assured and necessary permissions are granted. In

2007, a policy about these moves was published in the Congregation.[15] Based on my experience, I even recommend that explicit approval by the Superior General be asked for.

How far will the trend to internationality - interculturality go?[16] Where is the Spirit calling us? The tradition of our Congregation is different from purely missionary institutes where everybody by principle has to leave his own country. I believe we should not change our own tradition in this regard; nobody must be forced to leave his Unit if he is not motivated to do so. But on the other hand, not everything should be left to the initiative and missionary zeal of individual Oblates; there is a need of corporate choices for mission abroad. The Immense Hope process can help to spell these out, and provinces who have stated in writing that they are ready to send people abroad, or to receive Oblates from other parts of the world, have had positive results.

To make more of this happen, we must make more effort to develop the culture of border crossing through initial formation. Important steps have been done in this sense in certain Regions through the consolidation of formation houses and regional formation efforts. We will come back to this when we will discuss formation.

5. Community and religious life are being valued more highly but we are still called to provide a more serious animation.

In the area of **community life,** there has been a clear development over the last 18 years, in the sense that living in a community is now recognized as an essential part of the Oblate charism and not just as an incidental addition. This comes with a clearer recognition of ourselves as religious. Also, in practice, the Congregation is slowly moving towards a better community life after times when the tendency seemed to be dispersion. We had given up common life in certain places, often due to the fact that we have been the founders of the church in those places and were, for a time, playing the role of the diocesan clergy. The return is not yet complete, and therefore "conversion to community" was one of the three topics of the 2009 Chapter preparation material.[17]

It is good for us to recognize that the need for conversion in this field has its motivation from the depths of our faith. *Vita Consecrata* states that community is "a form of witness to the Trinity" (VC 41). Then, communities express in a special way what the Church itself is meant to be and are at the same living cells of the Church: "we become a living cell in the Church." (C. 12) The 1992 Chapter went very far when it affirmed: "To seek to achieve quality in our community life … : that is the first task of our evangelizing activity." (WAC 7)

In which way are we called to conversion in this field?

An obvious challenge lies in the change of structures. The statistics show that we have indeed some way to go when they tell us that, according to the data available,

[15] Policy governing Oblates living outside their home Units

[16] It was questioned why internationality has not met better acceptance since the last chapter. (CUS 0911)

[17] The focus of the May 2009 animation material was threefold: "Personal conversion; Conversion in community; Conversion of our mission in the world."

in 2010 18% of all Oblates after first formation are living alone; this is deduced from the fact that 634 of our confreres live with no other Oblate at the same address. The percentage varies according to the Units between 0% for 15 smaller Units on the lower end of the scale in which none of the 120 Oblates lives alone and an average of 37% for the 17 Units on the upper end of the scale where 499 out of 1338 Oblates live alone. There are also differences according to Regions. In Eastern Europe the percentage of Oblates living alone is half of the percentage in other sectors of the Congregation.

The Oblate Congregation cannot be just a chance aggregate of individuals and therefore should strive to make even more progress in terms of apostolic community life and of understanding mission as flowing from community. As can be seen, there are structures that foster dispersion and these must be changed. Considering that, according to our Constitutions, at least three Oblates should constitute a community [18], some Units have taken bold steps to reorganize themselves into communities of and above the minimum of three. In many situations, however, we find only two members in a community, or the missionaries live alone coming together between once a week and three times a year. Districts, areas and other groupings play an important role of animation in these cases, but in the long run they cannot replace actual common life.

Besides the structures, a second challenge is that in many places, we are still seeking a valid model of local community living. We know the monastic model. It is tried and tested. But what serves best life and mission for active religious? The following questions still need a full response:

- How to dwell together harmoniously, living as religious and working as active missionaries and finding the right balances between common life and work?
- How to organize a common rhythm of life of prayer, recreation and planning of work, taking into account the fact that we also belong to many other groups?
- How to handle decisions, finances and situations of crisis on the local level?

Communities, not unlike families, are strongly influenced by the surrounding culture. Do we have the strength to be countercultural if needed? On the other hand, the environment can also provide a good encouragement and enrichment for common life as has been the case with the Oblate lay associates.

A third challenge has to do with leadership. Often it is suggested that local superiors need proper training; we have in mind the profile of a superior who would be able to animate, organize and lead without becoming a controller who takes away the freedom corresponding to adult living. We generally provide for trained superiors for the time of initial formation, where communities are relatively large, but for the communities of ministry, more needs to be done.

Finally, it would be helpful if as Oblates we could define more clearly what constitutes a community for us.

Since the 1960's, we have experimented with different models. In our present Rule, district communities are considered local communities. They do provide for community experience; for instance in the Canadian north, missionaries living in thinly populated areas can receive support and experience a sense of belonging only

[18] C 92. The local community normally consists of at least three Oblates.

through their districts, but I ask myself whether districts were ever meant to replace life under one roof, at least, to the extent that it has become a practice. In fact, the discussion about the role of districts communities has never stopped. Is the term itself not ambiguous, often hiding the fact that Oblates are living alone?

My question is whether it would not be better to change our terminology. Should we not call living alone as what it is and reserve the expression "local community" to a group of Oblates which effectively shares a common household? We would still take full care for those living alone: they, too, must be attached to a local community, and animation structures will be needed, - structures like districts or areas, or sectors. Not only individual Oblates but also small local communities can greatly benefit from animation structures (districts, areas, etc.) with an appropriate leadership at that level, a coordinator or animator for instance. Should the Chapter take it upon itself to change our present definition of "local community"?

We should perhaps have spoken about **religious life** according to the vows before discussing community - but which comes first? Celibacy and community are seen by some as the only common elements constitutive of all religious life.[19] Our communities are characterized by the vows, and our vows make us into communities. Both together are our particular way of living as followers of Christ. In any case, a report on the state of the Congregation must not only analyze our community structures but also address our faithfulness to evangelical living according to our vows. Also here, conversion is needed! I have dedicated three of my circular letters to this subject, trying to highlight the importance of vowed living.

How are we faring? I believe the quality of our vowed life can be measured indirectly by looking at some important parameters.

One is our centeredness in Christ. Here we should ask ourselves: How important is the common meditation of the Word of God to us, for instance through *lectio divina*? Is *oraison* a regular praxis? The future does not lie in our becoming just efficient organizations devoured by activism; our apostolic communities need to be deeply rooted in the Pascal mystery and this has also to show in our timetable!

Another way of evaluating the vows is checking out the frequency and quality of our fraternal relationships. True, vows can also be lived individually but they find their full expression only if Oblates live together with their brothers. It is in community that our obedience is lived through giving time to each other, planning our mission together and being available when it comes to decisions; it is there that perseverance gives stability to our common missionary endeavors; it is there that poverty translates into holding all things in common, sharing our income with each other and with the poor; it is in community that we find room for intimacy in prayer and in fraternal relationships, to make our chastity an expression of great love.

Above all, vowed life is a way of being Christians. If one would be condemned to prison for being a Christian would there be enough evidence against us? Personally, I may feel worried about a personal crisis of a community member or difficulties in our work outside, but what really would alarm me is if the wine of charity were missing on our table. How can we be apostles if there is ambition, gossip, enmity and the like? It is the responsibility of all of us and especially of the local superior, to work as quickly as possible on reconciliation in this field.

[19] Enzo Bianchi, *Non siamo migliori, La vita religiosa nella chiesa, tra gli uomini*; Qiqajon, 2002, page 52

A good sign for a healthy religious life is the presence of Brothers. I must say I am worried as I find out that the proportion of Brothers in our Congregation has decreased by more than one fifth in 12 years, especially in our younger Regions. Do we still feel that the charism of fraternity is necessary for our Congregation and gives a special flavor to our Oblate mission?

We cannot pretend that our vowed life will be exempt from failures. Some Oblates leave the Congregation each year; the number and proportion seems to have slightly decreased (from 1.7% to 1.6% per year). It is sad if an Oblate leaves us, although facing the truth is preferable to a double life. The public venting of scandals, together with its financial consequences, has forced some of our Units to seek clarity in relationships and professional practice but more needs to be done to overcome ambiguous situations. It is an act of charity not to tolerate a behavior not compatible with vowed life.

Finally, we must evaluate whether our vowed life is seen as prophetic. Does our lifestyle convince through its simplicity, through its respect for creation? Are our communities welcoming, especially towards the poor? Are our houses seen as places where people come to find spiritual resources? Are we prophets of justice and active peacemakers? Here it is up to people from the outside, including our lay associates, to tell us the truth.

There are people who doubt the future of religious life in the Church, particularly in its apostolic form. These doubts arise maybe because of the scandals, maybe because of the dwindling numbers in some parts of the world. Some think the future will belong to the Movements. On the other hand, apostolic religious life is growing in many parts of the world and new institutes are founded. Certainly, continuous reflection is needed. Spiritual depth and a clear profile that makes us visible and transparent will be of essence. I find it significant that the Unions of Superiors General are preparing a symposium at the beginning of 2011 to reflect specifically on apostolic religious life.

The local community is the place where our need of further conversion becomes tangible. It is Christ who must become the center of all our local communities, almost visible to the eye through our common prayer, our mutual love, our sharing of temporal goods, our hospitality and our apostolic outreach.

6. As the quality of initial and ongoing formation has improved we are now called to cross borders even more.

My overall impression is that the Congregation offers good quality formation to its members. Our **initial formation** professes excellent values; it intends to foster[20]:

- Following Jesus Christ according to the Oblate charism
- Missionary love for the poor of today's world
- Availability to the Church's needs
- Community centeredness
- Person centeredness, etc.

Generally, we walk along these lines. The fact that we have worked out our local formation directories on this basis constitutes an important step for cooperation even

[20] Cf. 2010 edition of the General Norms for Oblate Formation

beyond the borders of each Unit. One of our weaknesses is the lack of trained formators, which is aggravated by an excessively high number of formation houses.

Our **ongoing formation** today is often organized according to age groups like first five years of ministry, the middle aged, those over seventy, etc. It is more and more accepted that it "takes place in the context of an apostolic community" "in a process of mutual evangelization" (C. 48) and not just through seminars and studies. As to the extraordinary activities, sabbaticals tend to be more focused and planned, aimed at deepening our lives according to our Oblate charism.

Higher studies are addressed in a variety of ways according to the culture of a province; while in one Unit it may be a rare exception that someone undertakes post-graduate studies, in another place, almost all Oblates expect to get a study break after some years of ministry. It can be observed that the responsibility of a Province for an institute of higher learning or for certain ministries like counseling or management, helps to focus these studies. Studies should always be planned with the missionary needs of the larger Oblate community in mind.

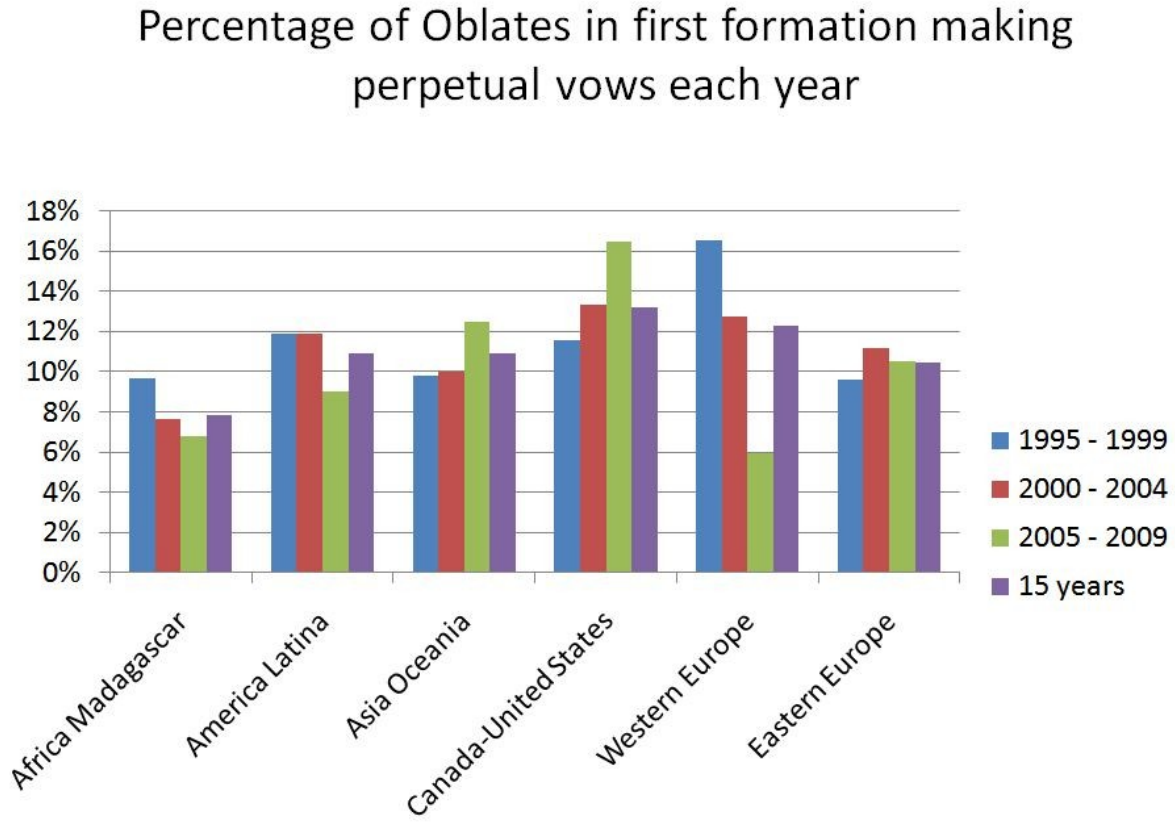
On the congregational level, there has been a tendency to offer more ongoing formation opportunities through the General Administration. The sessions for new major superiors, the De Mazenod Experience and the formation sessions for formators have continued; offers for treasurers' training (Rome and regional) and for JPIC training have increased, and planning sessions animated at the Unit level by General Council members have been introduced. Much of our annual distribution from the Solidarity fund goes into financing ongoing formation, particularly higher studies.

In the **whole area of formation**, there are also **several concerns** which must be honestly acknowledged and confronted:

a) In some cases, there is a disproportion between the formation efforts and the result

The average length of the formation process has kept increasing. The whole process has become lengthy: the combination of one or two years of pre-novitiate, novitiate, five or six years of studies, regency and pastoral initiation easily results in an eight to eleven year long initial formation period. This is without counting other programs like juniorates (in Asia especially), youth communities and associate programs. Should we ask ourselves how does this compare with similar academic careers in each country?

Looking back at the last 15 years, we observe the fact that an average of 53% of those who made their first profession also make perpetual vows. There are differences between the Regions but one must take into account that in some places philosophy is studied before first profession, and in some places after. However, the graphic below does show some variations over the past three five-year periods in the percentage of formandi that make their perpetual vows each year.



At the same time, there is the phenomenon that a number of young Brothers, priests or even deacons, even after such a long period of formation, run into serious difficulties and may leave the Congregation. One out of ten of those who made their perpetual vows in the last 15 years has left us.

Both concerns, about the length of formation and problems with perseverance, we share with other groups in the Church. Even at the highest levels, questions are asked: Does our formation ultimately create dependent individuals because we have sheltered them for so long? Does our formation create unreasonable expectations regarding the challenges of real life? Is the size of the groups of formandi right and, in the design of our formation system, how can we create groups that are neither too small nor too large? Someone brainstormed that we should spread out formation over a longer period, doing some years of missionary work in between. At the Interchapter it was also suggested that we look into our criteria of acceptance of candidates and it was felt that we need better discernment.

These questions will accompany us for a while. One conclusion we can already make is, that we need a sufficient number of qualified formators, ready to take on formation ministry for an extended period of their lives.

b) For a long time we have been complaining about the chronic lack of trained formators, a problem which is aggravated by our difficulty to reduce the number of small formation houses

For the last 24 years at least, the lack of trained formators has been highlighted again and again.[21] It is often a consequence of the considerable number of

[21] The 1986 Chapter already spoke about the "insufficient number of formators" (MTW 165)

formation houses we maintain even if we have only a few students. We count at present 30 scholasticates (or post-novitiates[22]), 16 of which have more than a dozen resident formandi. To the credit of some parts of the Congregation it must be said that the difficulty of small formation houses has been successfully addressed in certain Regions and Sub-Regions and also in the context of restructuring of small Units into larger provinces. Meetings between formators, the working out of common formation criteria and directories and following the General Norms for Oblate Formation normally pave the way for such moves. I suggest that the Chapter keep in mind the need of qualified formation teams when we will be discussing the structures of our Congregation.

A recent report by our formation portfolio holder, Fr. Paolo Archiati, has the following to say; I summarize:

Formation might not yet be seen by all Oblates as a priority ministry on which depends the quality not only of our missionaries, but also of our mission. We are " specialists for the difficult missions ", but formation may well be, today, the most difficult mission!

We have formation houses with too few formators, novitiates with the sole novice master as formator. My proposal here would be that in our novitiates there be, in addition to the master of novices at least one other formator (R 57a) and that there be a team of at least three Oblate in our post-novitiates.

We should not have a novitiate open with less than three novices, nor a post-novitiate with less than seven to eight candidates.

I can only agree with these observations. Theoretically, several solutions can be thought of whenever the numbers of formandi are small: inter-provincial formation houses, regional formation houses, inter-congregational houses within a given country (the latter have not yet been tried) or distributing our students congregation-wide. The above-mentioned report continues:

Novitiates. We have, today, 22. They are too numerous. I propose two novitiates in each region. Post-novitiates: We have 30. They are too numerous. My suggestion here would be as follows: one post-novitiate for Canada-US, two for Europe, two for Latin America, four each for Asia and Africa. Here again, I would leave it to the regional conferences to study the implementation and details. This proposal would reduce the number of our post-novitiates to 13.

If the recommendation or observation of Fr. Archiati is followed the Congregation would be better equipped to effectively staff the nine novitiates and the thirteen post-novitiates- both with well trained formators representing the international character of the Congregation.

There are several ways of arriving at a decision on this: through agreements among provinces, through some Rule changes that would give the Regions certain powers, or through strong decisions by the Superior General in Council. Under the current Constitution and Rules, the Superior General in Council does have the power to confirm the appointment of formators and to approve post novitiate and novitiates. Although this could be used more actively to reach a more rational number of formation houses it may be wiser if the Chapter would give guidance on this.

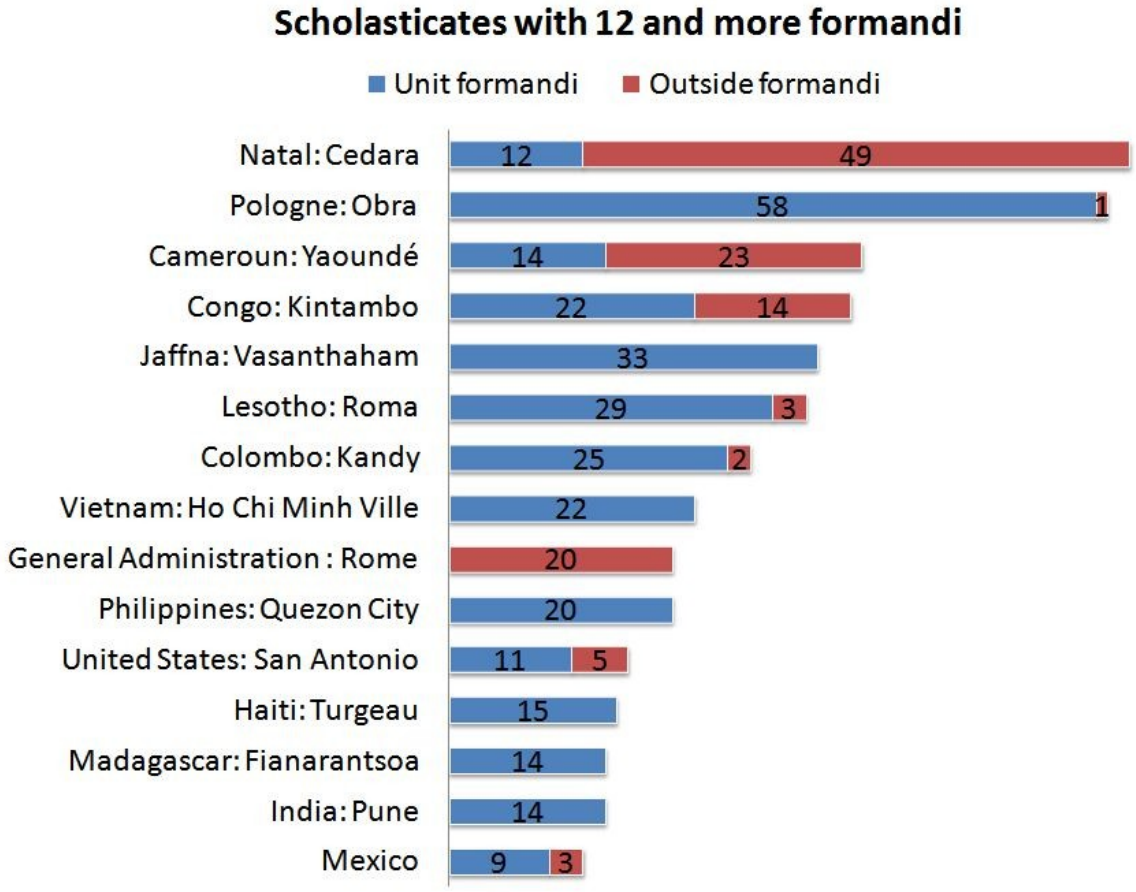
[22] I am using scholasticate and post-novitiate as synonyms supposing that both may count Brother candidates among their formandi.

c) Specifically missionary and inter-cultural formation is offered but not yet available everywhere

A specifically missionary formation is not always available to our students since, for our studies, we often avail ourselves of diocesan facilities where we get training for parish work but not necessarily for a mission to the poorest and most abandoned, and *ad gentes*. Some efforts have been made to enrich our curriculum through special courses on missiology, JPIC, media, etc. Oblates have also supported study centers of the religious conferences, or started new endeavors like the missiology institute in Kinshasa, the Asian Institute for Theology in Sri Lanka or the formation for ministry in San Antonio.

For practical missionary formation, I am convinced each one of our students should spend one year abroad and in a different culture, with the opportunity to learn an additional international language. We realize more and more that this is a very practical need, for instance at the time of seeking translators for our General Chapter. Studying or doing mission abroad in a different culture is a powerful means of maturing - on the human, spiritual, and missionary levels.

Inter-provincial formation houses go a long way to assure a more missionary formation. For now, one third of our scholasticates can be considered as international, taking as criterion, if more than 10% of their formandi come from abroad. According to this criterion about 36% of our scholastics and Brothers experience an international formation during their studies, and 64% not. The following graphic shows the picture for our larger post-novitiate formation houses.



In this context, it deserves to be mentioned that our International Roman Scholasticate throughout its 129 years of history has served the Congregation well. Also in recent years is has been almost full to capacity, that is, 23 students. It continues needing support from the Congregation in terms of formators and students. It is also worth noting that in the Philippines, a regional international scholasticate is set to open its doors next year - an outcome of the last General Chapter.

d) Higher studies must become more closely connected to the needs of the mission

Higher studies have a great potential to benefit the way we understand our mission and in practice, incarnate and inculturate the Gospel. At the same time they require a lot of resources in talented personnel and finances. How could we become more pro-active and cost-effective in this field? For an Oblate, the desire to study should be matched with the needs of a specific mission, be it teaching, specialized ministries or administration. We have a tradition of higher studies supporting formation but what about our supporting other "paths of evangelization"? Specific human sciences may help us to better interpret how we should respond to our context.

7. As much reorganization has been achieved, we are called to take further decisions on governance.

This assembly will have to decide in which way we want to continue on the road of adapting our organization to the needs of the mission. When we will discuss possible changes, our main attention should go to our values. Competing values like interculturality versus inculturation, centralization versus subsidiarity, effective leadership versus family comfort need to be looked at and weighed up against each other.

Also the figures deserve due attention. What prompted the 2004 Chapter to mandate a study on governance is the fact that our Congregation today is 45% smaller than 1966 when it was at its peak.

The growth of Oblate provinces, delegations and missions is naturally unequal. A few of our delegations, for instance, have been growing fast: Zambia, India, Pakistan, Senegal, and Ukraine have all increased in the past nine years by about 80% and more. However, we cannot expect this to happen everywhere. When we analyze the growth of a province or delegation and reflect on the complex reasons behind the increasing or decreasing numbers, we realize that richness in vocations is mostly a gift and only to a smaller extent, the result of our efforts. As we face unequal growth it is only natural that our structures must adapt to new developments. Ten of our larger Units have lost 20% and more of their membership over the same period of nine years. The Congregation has answered the changes through a good number of restructuring processes. They were undertaken for the sake of the mission and of Oblate life.

What have we learned in the exercise of restructuring? On the one hand, the creation of larger provinces has generally led to a more thorough missionary planning, clearer formation procedures and a more professional administration. It is easier to find people for new endeavors or for specific tasks in a group of 120 than in a group of 20. One insight of the experience is that we should update the organization

of our Congregation in a way that provinces remain large enough. On the other hand, we have learned that the local level must not be neglected; the creation and animation of areas, sectors or districts must complement the larger size of the province. We still need to learn more about the appropriate structures inside a larger Unit.

Restructuring may also be needed at the level of the General Administration. My experience over the last three administrations suggests to me that we need less legislation and government but more accompaniment and administrative follow-up of decisions. The idea of introducing secretariats for formation and mission deserves to be given serious attention. A less frequent occurrence of the Chapter could allow for a better implementation.

I realize that structural changes can be unsettling. They require a new reflection on our values and our purpose; they may lead us to live and work together with Oblates we have not known well before. On the other hand, such changes can effectively renew us, as it happens in families which ”broaden their tents” every time a new marriage makes new faces appear.

8. As financial solidarity has increased, we are called to work on even more competent stewardship and the increase of local income.

“We follow a Master who became poor for our sake” (C. 19) and with him we “proclaim the coming of a new world freed from selfishness and open to sharing” (C. 20). Theologically, the poverty which Jesus lived expressed God’s love for us until the end. In practical terms, during his public life, this poverty was shaped by his mission as an itinerant: within this hardship, it meant that he frequented people who hosted him and were his benefactors; he even appointed an administrator of the common purse. As we follow the “crucified Savior” (C. 4), our voluntary poverty will speak of God’s logic of the cross and allow us to “proclaim Christ and His Kingdom to the most abandoned” (C. 5). At the same time, we do need certain means for this mission. The principle we have established is that “the temporal goods of our Institute are, above all, at the service of the mission” (C. 150).

The time of Jesus was different from the time our Congregation was founded, and in our relationship with the temporal goods needed for the mission, there have been further changes in recent decades. For instance, we apostolic religious rely less on income through agriculture than before, pay more employees, run more social projects financed by external donors and increasingly rely on income from investments. How does all this influence the way we live our vows? While we may take more seriously the parable of the talents and seek to become good stewards, do we still have the interior freedom to share everything and to give away what gets between us and the Lord? Which type of conversion is needed in this field? Is there a call to conversion for us in the values mentioned in our Constitutions and Rules, especially CC. 19-22? I just pick a few of these values: *closer communion with Jesus and the poor; learning from the poor; patience, hope, solidarity; simple lifestyle; evangelical detachment; common law of labor; voluntary poverty …*

The report on finances will show that over the last 12 years, the trend has been towards greater solidarity among ourselves as our Congregation moves into and grows in poorer countries. While the sharing of finances for specific projects has

continued, the emphasis has been on different initiatives of capital transfer: Capital Sharing I and II; and the Missionary Resource Campaign (MRC).

We must be especially thankful to certain provinces which went beyond the contribution which would normally be expected from them. Let me mention some: the US Province which has made the MRC campaign a success; Spain for its policy to give 10% of all real estate sales to the Congregation; the Anglo-Irish and Belgium-Netherlands provinces for giving extra contributions to Capital Sharing II; and the Anglo-Irish province for its annual supplementary assistance distributed through the Central Government. Most recently, Brazil has decided a new policy of annual supplemental gifts to the Central Government in service of the Congregation.

It is natural that a congregation which works for the poor and among the poor must rely, to a certain extent, on financial reserves and investments. But this can be only one of the pillars of the financial structure. During our solidarity campaigns it was always emphasized that finances from outside sources must be combined with income gained through work and local fundraising. The importance of professional stewardship was also stressed. As a result, in the Congregation we are now more and more speaking about self-sufficiency of the Provinces as a goal to be achieved, and even as a criterion for being a province; however, we have not yet reached the point of converting into reality what we are striving for. It will be local level animation that will make the difference. Some Units have given serious attention to income generating ministries and local fundraising and can report a certain success.

The changes in the Congregation have today reached a point where a financial paradigm shift is necessary. The paradigm of the North helping the South works less and less. In a family, parents are expected to care for their children but there comes a moment when children have to care for their parents. There are more details about this in the treasurer's report.

Let me conclude this point mentioning that one structure directly affected by the change is the General Administration itself. On the one hand, in the context of the Missionary Resource Campaign, the net worth of the General Administration in service of the Congregation has been allowed to diminish. It was our own decision to allow a certain diminishment. On the other hand, the net worth has further declined during the 2008 financial crisis and because the General Administration had to respond to several financial crises within Units. As a result, the next Superior General and Council will have fewer financial means to address emergencies. The unrestricted net worth of the General Administration would allow the General Administration to function for at most one year if there were no other sources of revenue. In 2001 the net worth would have sustained the operations of the General Administration for three to four years.

Beyond the actual low point, the situation is problematic on the systemic level. A clear sign of this has been our attempt to sell the present General House in order to replace it with something we can better afford. If we engaged in this much discussed endeavor, it has been in reaction to a challenge: how to ask less funds from a Congregation that is not blessed with abundance of material goods. 50% of the costs of the General Administration are related to the Via Aurelia compound. Following up on the mandate of the last Chapter (WH p. 61-62), we were not far from a viable solution when we decided to suspend the project because of the closeness of the Chapter.

After the overview of the present state of the Congregation and the most important trends that can be observed this report must also contain a part that offers an account of the General Administration's activities during the period 2004 to 2010. In order not to interrupt the flow of the reflection initiated above, I have moved this part to the Annex.

Our responsibility at present, in view of the future - Conclusion

Are there any conclusions to be drawn from our recent history as a congregation, are there any inspirations we should take up? Any invitations directed to us to "be converted and believe" (Mc 1) ?

The Church is a sacrament, that is, a prophetic sign which effectively communicates God's grace, and as missionary religious we participate in a special way in the Church's quality of being a sign. Somehow, the God of Love should become visible through us, so that people may discover some features of Jesus the Christ through our help and then receive the Spirit of the Father and the Son. If this happens, it means that we have been prophetic.

Signs have to adapt to the people and cultures who are to interpret them and therefore they undergo modification when the surrounding world changes. Today cultural changes seem to be accelerating. Our own Congregation experienced them as it has been in a demographic transition for some decades now, a transition which has become very visible and incisive.

What is our historical responsibility as Oblates today? Different views have been expressed during the Chapter preparation; for instance it was said:

We must take a clear direction for the Congregation for the next 25 years and not just for the next six years. Let us look towards the distant future and act accordingly in the immediate future.

Let us make sure that the strong provinces occupy their place. It is important that the younger Oblates, from wherever they may be, now take on more responsibility.

We must continue the Immense Hope process to face the changes persistently.

G. A world view

To interpret the challenges of today we need some kind of world view, some kind of analysis of the reality. In recent years there has been a certain resistance to move into such analysis, and that resistance seems to be related to a generational change.

In the secular world, the late 80's and early 90's marked the end of most dictatorial regimes and with it, of some of the dominant ideologies. The increase of

communication technologies led to the awareness of a very complex reality, globalized but not unified. Everything seemed to be relative. A vacuum in the interpretation of the world appeared. The post-modern mentality seduced many people to be content with a private happiness, enjoying just the here and now. Within the globalized, unregulated market, social problems became more difficult to address; poverty in this context originated less from direct oppression and more from exclusion for which nobody seems to be responsible. The local cultures reaffirmed their identity in opposing globalization. Religious beliefs, but also fundamentalism, were gaining strength in opposition to secularism.

Humanity has today been freed from some ideological systems. We have also become more realistic about the emptiness of a world in which everything becomes relative. Sometimes we have experienced confusion ourselves and cannot make sense of it all. The poor are still around to challenge us to respond to their needs.

Can we draw a picture of the Church of these recent times, of the new millennium?

Christians, like everybody else, are affected by globalization and lack of global justice, threats to the environment and to peaceful living, secularism and on the other side, religious fanaticism. In a time of global communication, if someone finds a prophetic response to these challenges it will become widely known. At the same time, the inner problems of the Church and its scandals become very visible.

The Church is very diverse according to the context. In the West, we tend to think that our concerns about liberals and conservatives, about lack of priests, about child abuse, etc. are also primary concerns in other parts of the world. In regions where Christians are a small minority, in situations when corruption is a decisive factor in daily life, or when food and safety are not guaranteed, the focus of the Christians is on other things. As Oblates, we have the chance to be present in many contexts which should help us to relativize the concerns of our local churches and to find out what is essential for our faith life. This may be part of the very mission God entrusted to us within the Church.

How do we Missionary Oblates respond to the present situation of the world? How does it call us to conversion? At a time when we no longer think in terms of two opposed blocks, when we have become allergic to ideology but also have not found many of the answers we want, we still can see that human nature continues to be in need of redemption and the poor are longing to receive the Good News of the Kingdom of Christ. Today it is time to make again an option for Christ, the first representative of the new human being, called to full communion with God and among each other. Christ's way of being human must shape our life; we must learn to love the world with his own heart, caring especially about the poor whose cries are reaching our ears. "God loves this world", we said at the 1998 Chapter. In all this, the

emphasis will be more on what we live as communities than on what we teach as individuals.

Today is also a time to live our being Church in new ways. Often we Oblates, as Christians and as part of the institutional Church, have failed, and this is now being made public. The Church's moral authority is seriously damaged and we cannot blame anybody for it but ourselves. Our place as Church members must be on the side of the victims of any abuse. As a special group of religious and missionaries we should be in the frontline of those who want a change for the better, in the line of what we have said in earlier General Chapters[23]. Let us dream of and work for a Church that "mirrors the unity existing between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit", as Cyprian says, and fully responds to the challenges of its mission in a changed world, a world very much loved by God.

H. Four imperatives

Based on these general considerations let me come to the end of this report listing four specific points, which in my perception, are imperative for us Oblates today: Christ-centered communities, love of the poor, facing of the demographic change and love of the Church. I think, here concretely lie for us areas where we need conversion more than elsewhere.

1. Christ-centered communities

As religious missionaries we must learn new ways to speak to the people of today, learning with them a new language. This will only come about if we can speak out of a personal and communitarian experience. As a consequence of this Chapter, our conversion must bring about a new quality of our common life. We have a vocation to live in fraternities where "the call and the presence of the Lord among us today bind us together in charity and obedience" (C. 3). Praying together, reading the Scriptures and celebrating the sacraments as local communities will lead us to a new quality of missionary presence. The spiritual atmosphere we create at home must be open to the world and respect its autonomy - we have learned that from secularity - but at the same time grow very intense so that Christ and His Word become again the center of our lives and the presence of God's own Spirit can be felt.

As we said at the beginning of this report, St. Eugene considered Jesus Christ our Founder and the apostles to be our forefathers. Let us therefore gather anew around Christ, who in a true sense is the first Oblate and our founder. Should we ask our mother Mary to show us ways and means how to do it? She played a role in the community of the apostles after the Ascension and on Pentecost, and she formed a household with the apostle John. Her attitude will make us discover concretely how to become communities that follow Christ today when so many things tend to distract us. Our timetable must show that He is the center. Only with Him at the center can

[23] The 1992 Chapter document (WAC) says under # 3: "… abuse is found not only in the economic and political domains; with sadness we note its occasional presence within the Church in the actions of some who are her ministers". In 1986, the Chapter document (MTW), in #100, makes the following appeal: "We cannot allow the difficulties we experience within the Church to forget the serious problems of today's world: lack of faith in God, finding meaning in life, the struggles against poverty, the making of peace, welcoming of refugees, the sharing of resources, the reduction of armaments, the defense of human rights, and the confusion of youth who are without hope."

we live the life of the apostles. There is no danger that we may become too monastic through that. After a new Pentecost, at home with the Risen Christ, with Mary and all our fellow apostles, we will reach out in new ways to the ends of the earth.

2. Love of the poor

Pope John Paul II said: "It is manifestly unjust that a privileged few should continue to accumulate excess goods, squandering available resources, while masses of people are living in conditions of misery at the very lowest level of subsistence." He adds that this is "contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterized by mutual interdependence."[24]

From my traveling throughout the Congregation and the information coming in at the center of the Congregation, I have become a witness to the massive reality of poverty, often ignored even by those who geographically live very close by. But we Oblates know only too well where to find the poor: in the areas torn by war and strife in Congo or Southern Philippines, in the slums of Sao Paulo or among those suffering from AIDS in many countries, among the indigenous or the displaced people and incoming migrants, among the disoriented youth and the abandoned elderly.

We also know that Saint Eugene, right from his conversion, took special care of the poor and that during his whole life, as a young priest and as a bishop in his later years, he loved them and kept being close to them. He and his missionaries evangelized the poor, speaking to them of their dignity as sons and daughters of God, and risking their lives among them in more than one epidemic in Aix, Marseille and elsewhere, thus becoming martyrs of love.

Today, do we discern God's will as to our congregational mission to evangelize the poor or just keep doing by inertia what we are used to? Our own saints will show us the right way! When it comes to solidarity with the poor, we have many martyrs of love and even of blood among our confreres, and they all have in common that they loved the poor with God's heart.

There will be a personal and communitarian benefit from this for our conversion: The poor can in a true sense become a sacrament of God's own presence for us.

3. Facing the demographic change

In our Congregation there is a huge demographic change just around the corner, the many new faces show it. We must respond to this change with courage and with joy. In which ways?

Let us recognize how weak we are! Someone suggested during the Chapter preparation that our elders need to know of the situation of the personnel in their Units in a realistic, but positive way. We also should not ask them to do work beyond their age. Where the average age is high we must simply make whatever structural changes are needed to serve our mission best.

Let us recognize how strong we are! I know through my visits that we can count on excellent Oblates and in good numbers in many parts of the world. Some are still young but many could already be entrusted with leadership responsibility.

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[24] John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1990, quoted in "Our Relationship with the Environment: The Need for Conversion", Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2008

To the logic of demographic statistics, we should add the logic of the lighthouse. Are we too much used to measuring our relevance through numbers; is there not also a reality that works in another way? It is the gospel alive in us that counts! One can see lighthouses from many miles away, and their one light, put in the right place, offers more orientation to the seafarers than the sea of light of a whole city. It takes just one saint to make all the difference in the world!

Personally I believe in the inestimable value of every single vocation. I trust those vocations that come in great numbers as a gift to us, and I also believe in the Gospel value of the just one or two vocations that may join us elsewhere. We have chosen to love the Church in celibacy, like Christ, and this also means that we cannot control the number of "children" we will have for the next generation of Oblates. However, a believer will never remain barren - God can make children of Abraham out of stones and can set a lighthouse wherever people need it!

4. Love of the Church

Saint Eugene started off his Rule book, in the Preface, with two words: "the Church", so let us conclude with the Church. It is nothing less than the Body of Christ; through it Christ continues to be identifiable in history. We Oblates are part of this body. Through our charism, we are also especially attached to its priesthood; we are, priests and Brothers together, heirs of a Founder who wanted to give the Church excellent priests to heal its most painful wounds. The Preface reads later on: "if priests could be formed … apostolic men deeply conscious of the need to reform themselves, who would labor with all the resources at their command to convert others …".

We Oblates may sometimes not be aware of the important role we play within the Church; priests, Brothers, associates, friends - we all contribute to mother Church our passion for Christ, love of the poor, sense of global justice, closeness with the people, inter-culturality, sense of hospitality, familiarity with Mary, loyalty to the Church herself and many other values. We are responsible that this charism continues to shine with strength for the glory of God, the good of the Church and the salvation of people.

A word of thanks

Let me express my heartfelt thanks to all I was so privileged to closely work with: the General Council, all the members of the General Administration, the major superiors and those who served the Congregation in each Unit and at large in many capacities. Thanks to all Oblates who made it possible that the Congregation continue its journey.

I thank the Congregation which entrusted me with the office of creating bonds of unity between the Oblates through representing somehow Saint Eugene (whose character was very different from mine), and of being a caretaker of Saint Eugene's charism among the members of our different lay associations and within the Church. God has given me enough good health and many graces to fill the post but unfortunately, I have not responded to the full; I ask forgiveness for the many times I have neglected the common good and have lacked attention to persons.

I conclude thanking God, the giver of life and the giver of every single Oblate vocation. I feel a deep gratitude for all Oblates who respond faithfully every day anew

to their call as humans, Christians, religious and missionaries. We can all be proud of them.

Rome, July 2, 2010 - WSt

ANNEX

Chapter 2004 mandate and accountability report

This part basically follows the planning document of the Central Government, whose latest edition of September 2009 is entitled "Witnessing to Hope in Community". Our planning effort was based on the documents of the last Chapter with its many practical suggestions - our General Secretary counted over a hundred of them! The work was then distributed according to the different portfolios which reported three times a year to the plenary session of the General Council.

Under each section, the present portfolio holder and the corresponding team of councillors and assistants are indicated. While we have privileged teamwork, each member of the general council and of the General Administration has been creative and responsible in his own field. The financial part of this annex is reduced to some essentials and refers to the detailed report of the Treasurer General.

What I offer is a rather concise account of how the central government perceives its achievements and failures in response to the goals it had set for itself. The Congregation must make its own judgment which will come up in the Chapter discussion. I have added a short summary of my own activities.

5. Mission statement of the Central Government

Our Strategy Document is built upon the basis of a mission statement which contains the elements IDENTITY, VISION, VALUES and Principal OBJECTIVES of the Central Government.

About IDENTITY, we say that as the Central Government of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, we see ourselves "called to 'proclaim Christ and his Kingdom to the most abandoned' (Const. 5)", that "we live in religious community inspired by the charism of our Founder, St. Eugene" and that "we endeavor to be bearers of the hope that flows from the crucified and risen Christ".

Our VISION for the Congregation has been about "becoming more faithful disciples of Christ", "strengthening apostolic and religious community as the hallmark of Oblate life and mission, regrouping our personnel for the sake of the mission where Units experience decline in membership, creating new links with all women and men who seek to share in the charism of St. Eugene, establishing the Immense Hope process as a normal and vibrant means of evaluating, renewing and reviving our missionary practices in every Oblate Unit", etc.

As to our VALUES we committed ourselves to "assuming fully the mandates entrusted to us by the Chapter" and to "approaching all Oblates in a spirit of welcome, attention, and fraternal care".

Finally, as to our principal OBJECTIVES, we have had the aim that by 2010, seven things would have happened: implementation of the Immense Hope Project; mission with youth ; preparation of formators; training of superiors; resource planning in Units; development of a culture of internationality, and review of the system of initial formation.

We are very much aware of the fact that not all of this has been achieved a 100 percent. Faced with the great number of activities recommended by the last Chapter, we also had to slow down because of budgetary limitations.

The following walk through the different portfolios hopefully sheds some light on how we have worked as General Administration over the past six years.

6. Government in general and visits

General Council members have regularly visited all Provinces, especially on the occasion of leadership discernment; the Delegations and Missions were also visited around the time of such discernment. Special visitations (R. 138c) by teams of two, three or four were organized to Peru (2005), Brazil (2008) and India (2010), and on the occasion of restructuring, to Belgium-Netherlands, Central European Province, Scandinavia, Thailand, and Japan-Korea. Special visits (each including several trips) for assistance in financial matters were made to two Provinces in 2007 and 2009. To complement regular visits, in 2008 the requirement of general annual reports by the provinces was introduced, with good results. Annual financial reports were already in use earlier.

At our General Council plenary or ordinary sessions, the system of decision making as foreseen by our Constitutions and Rules seems to function well. A delicate moment for each Unit is always leadership discernment, and our Rules are not very explicit on the method except that they recommend that a provincial directory be worked out. A good discernment process about the needs of the Unit even before the nomination of candidates is crucial. Such processes bring also good results in those Units that have opted for direct election. It some cases the procedures of elections still need to be refined to make sure that the results are always valid, and the suitability of the candidates is scrutinized before the election takes place.

7. Mission and ministries (Oswald Firth, Federico Labaglay, Luis Ignacio Rois, Eric Alleaume)

a) Immense Hope

The 2004 “Witnessing to Hope” Chapter document stated very clearly that Immense Hope, as an “ongoing process of self-evaluation and strategizing for mission” (WH, Letter, p.8) was to continue. A new instrument, in the form of a grid, was sent in 2007 to each Unit and feedback was received. On request, strategic planning sessions were organized in several Units.

b) Mission research team

Another activity in this area was the setting up of a missionary research team, which has recently produced a series of articles on mission, the publication of which is imminent.

c) Mission with Youth (Luis Ignacio Rois)

A new enthusiasm of young people seeking inspiration by the Oblate charism has been observed in several parts of the Congregation. Several youth activities were encouraged through the Regions, often in connection with the world youth days of Cologne and Sydney. A congress on "Oblate mission with Youth" was held in Sydney in 2009. A complete summary of the activities is available.

d) Towards Pilot Communities

The 2004 Chapter suggested new missionary endeavors through pilot communities. The Birmingham (UK) mission to secularity (2003 - 2007) has found a successor mission in Indianapolis (USA, 2008). Other activities deserve mentioning as well which do not necessarily bear the name of pilot communities but can be considered as such, for instance the Buttala community in Sri Lanka, dedicated to Interreligious Dialogue or the Kokoty community in Poland for youth ministry.

e) Seminar - Workshops on Specific Mission Areas

Workshops were held in Indonesia on Interreligious Dialogue (March 2007), in Bolivia on Indigenous People (February 2008) and in Toronto (Canada) on Migration (June 2009).

f) Oblates and Lay Associates

A Commission of Oblates and Associates to explore structures that will promote the many aspects of association in its various forms has met yearly since 2007 and has contributed to a steady increase of lay associates groups. The commission will address us at the Chapter.

g) Oblate Brothers

The Standing Committee of Brothers mandated by the last Chapter has met yearly since 2006. The Committee will present its own report at the Chapter.

8. First formation (Paolo Archiati, Jean-Bosco Musumbi, Loudeger Mazile, Eric Alleaume)

a) Objectives and animation of activities in the Regions and Units

This portfolio has taken on a number of responsibilities: to encourage vocation ministry, for instance on occasion of the annual prayer week for Oblate vocations; to promote a missionary type of formation; to keep an eye on an integral formation including not only academics but also Oblatology, financial formation, JPIC and IRD formation and a special preparation for perpetual vows.

In the area of formation to internationality, it was recommended that each Oblate spend part of his first formation abroad and also be encouraged to learn another language.

There has been a conscious effort to consolidate our formation houses, and to create international formation houses and formation teams. This has resulted in encouraging initiatives in some Regions but not in all.

b) Activities organized from the center

The Portfolio has organized three formators' sessions in Aix. Peer visitations among formators were encouraged and also regional sessions for formators were given support. Another important initiative was the review of the "General Norms for Oblate Formation", now completed, and the establishment of a new formation program for Brothers. A detailed report on the activities of the Portfolio is available.

All these activities were carried out with the help of the General Formation Committee (five members from the five Regions) which met yearly.

9. Ongoing formation (Eugene King, Marcel Dumais, Federico Labaglay, Andrzej Jastrzebski)

Aware of the wide field of ongoing formation which "encompasses all aspects of our development" (C. 69) those responsible for the portfolio concentrated on five priorities.

a) Ongoing formation for the individual missionary and the leaders

In this area, the portfolio insisted especially in leadership capacity building. A database of available ongoing formation programs was developed and distributed, and Units were encouraged to establish ongoing formation programs.

The ongoing formation portfolio also worked out the annual report form for provinces which is in use since 2008.

b) Orientation sessions for Major Superiors

Special attention has been given to the sessions for new major superiors and there has been a constant effort to improve them. The process gave priority to the Immense Hope project with an emphasis on the matching of priorities and personnel. There were four sessions of two weeks each during the present term.

c) Higher Education (Marcel Dumais)

This activity followed the Chapter recommendation to recognize the place of higher education with the charism of the Oblates and to invite our Institutions of Higher Education worldwide to cooperate between themselves.[25] Our institutions of higher education have now organized themselves and keep regular contact and meetings.

The ongoing formation portfolio also assisted the superior general with the appointment of a new Rector of Saint Paul University in Ottawa. Since 2009, Mme Chantal Beauvais is holding the post; it is the first time that a person who is not an Oblate was chosen.

d) "Centre Eugene de Mazenod" in Aix

To share widely and generously the grace which stems from St. Eugene de Mazenod the Central Government felt the call to continue and to develop the activities of our Eugene de Mazenod Center in Aix through assigning personnel and appropriate funding. The CEM has continued the tradition of the ten week De Mazenod Experience which was started in 1991 and also offered many other shorter

[25] Witnessing to Hope (WH), Recommendations, H, # 1 & 2, p. 70; ibid., Recommendations, H, # 3, p. 70

activities, reaching out to the broader de Mazenod spiritual family. Very recently, moves have been made to bring all the activities at our original Oblate house at Aix, Cours Mirabeau, directly under the responsibility of the General Administration. This will only work out if the Congregation and the wider de Mazenod family makes frequent use of the Center and provides the appropriate personnel.

e) Charism animation (Frank Santucci; Yvon Beaudoin / Fabio Ciardi)

Fr. Frank Santucci was given the opportunity to take up the legacy of late Fr. Jean Drouart and to travel throughout the Congregation making St. Eugene's charism better known and appreciated.

The Association of Oblate Studies and Research AOSR has been renewed as part of charism animation. Among other things, it has been entrusted the publication of our review Vie-Oblate-Life which the Province Notre Dame du Cap and its predecessor provinces had been underwriting for many years..

A special word of thanks is due to Fr. Yvon Beaudoin who has given more than fifty years to research and publications around our founding charism and has now retired to Ottawa. Fr. Fabio Ciardi has now been appointed to a newly revised position, the "Director of Oblate Studies and Research". This position builds on the legacy of the past but hopefully responds to the challenges of the present and future.

The next important appointment for charism animation will be the 150th anniversary of our Founder's death in 2011.

f) Postulation (Joaquín Martínez; Paolo Archiati)

In 2004 a postulator, different from the person in charge of charism animation, was appointed. Fr. Joaquín Martinez has taken on this responsibility. While reducing the non-Oblates causes of beatification or canonization certain activities have become more intense. The beatification of the 23 Oblate Martyrs of Madrid seems to be imminent (2011?) and also the causes of 17 martyrs of Laos, six of them Oblates, are advancing fast. After massive backing from a number of Episcopal conferences, there is also some hope that the feast of Saint Eugene de Mazenod will be introduced into the universal calendar of the church.

10. JPIC (Oswald Firth, Louis Ignacio Rois, Camille Piché)

Twelve years ago, this portfolio did not have a full-time director. In 2004 Fr. Jun Mercado was appointed, then Fr. Seamus Finn became interim director and since 2008 Fr. Camille Piché has taken the helm of the office. The portfolio's work points to two directions: 1) animation and training within the Congregation and 2) advocacy of Oblate-related priority causes. Over the years, more and more young Oblates have become interested in this type of mission, highly recommended by our last few Chapters. The structure of the portfolio was renewed in 2009 - 2010. The JPIC committee includes five regional representatives and meets yearly.

It should be mentioned that the Oblates have become members of VIVAT, a Non Governmental Organization originally founded by the SVD Missionaries and their Sister Congregation. Through this move we have now quality access to the United Nations; Fr. Daniel Leblanc OMI works for us at the VIVAT office in New York. The General Administration also cooperates with the JPIC office of the US

Province, especially for advocacy with the US government and questions related to our investments.[26]

11. Oblate Service of Communications (Paolo Archiati, Jean Bosco Musumbi, Antonino Bucca, James Allen)

The service has concentrated on the three Oblate information bulletins (Information, Documentation and Communiqué) as well as the congregational website. Electronic communication has gradually replaced the printed form. An attempt at organizing a formation session for Oblates who want to use the web for evangelization did not come to fruition because of lack of participants. Projects are being worked out to highlight the 150th death anniversary of Saint Eugene.

12. Personnel (Eugene King, Oswald Firth, Paolo Archiati, Andrzej Jastrzebski)

The separate personnel portfolio is new and was established considering that in the Congregation, our most important asset is our personnel. The change of recruitment patterns in the world required fostering of internationality and new policies.

For some years, a "mission pool" was advertized but we reverted to the ordinary means of exchanging missionaries. Some concrete priorities were set: to send missionaries to France and to Notre Dame du Cap, which both had explicitly requested such help, and to renew the staff of the General Administration. With our experience, it has become clear that generous support of the Congregation is needed for such endeavors. We are grateful to all provinces who have contributed personnel generously.

Policies on professional and ethical conduct, and on Oblates living outside their provinces' territory were spelled out and are available. Given the developments, both policies will need to be further refined and actually and fully implemented.

13. General Secretariat office (Tom Coughlin), archives (Maciej Michalski) and dispatching (Theophile Lepage).

The work at the General Secretariat and at the archives comprises many humble day-to-day tasks which, however, are very sensitive. In these offices, as in the finance department, the Oblates are assisted by a total of four Dominican Sisters from the Philippines. As gradually part of the paper work is being shifted to the electronic format, printing and mailing activities, while decreasing, are still necessary.

14. Finance office (Rufus Whitley, Marcel Dumais, Loudeger Mazile), Grant director's office (Jeevendra Paul)

The finance office does not only take care of the assets of the General Administration but it also oversees the correct financial administration in the provinces and encourages appropriate training of personnel in the Units.

[26] Different efforts are made to ensure that not only do we exclude certain investment based on ethical criteria but also utilize our ownership positions to advocate for business policies and practices that advance a sustainable and just economy.

The new post of grant director was created to raise funds from non-Oblate sources, and the efforts made by this new service have been very successful.

A General Finance Committee with regional representatives meets twice a year to assist the Superior General and Council in exercising their responsibility for the material resources of the Congregation (R 162b). The General Council's internal finance committee (the members are indicated above) processes any recommendation before it is brought to the discussion and vote of the entire council.

Challenges have not been lacking. We count about 20 Units that struggle with serious financial problems, a fact which cannot leave the General Administration indifferent; that is about 1/3 of our 58 Units. Several provinces came to the verge of bankruptcy and needed specific assistance. Some provinces have also been severely hurt by important settlements resulting from charges of physical, cultural and sexual abuse perpetrated by individuals and institutions (three provinces, taken together, had to pay out 75 million dollars US), and the Congregation as a whole is indirectly affected through this. In addition, the portfolio holders had to steer the Congregation through the 2008-2009 financial crisis.

On the other hand, there is also some good news. We observed new local fundraising efforts and some successful income generating projects. Some of our Provinces are generously sharing with the Congregation beyond what was suggested to the Units, as mentioned above under II.8.

However, even the good news should in no way obscure the fact that our resources in temporal goods are decreasing, not increasing, and that the new overwhelming priority must be to courageously set out on the path to self-sufficiency. We owe it to the poor we serve that we take on our responsibilities to build our future mission on solid financial ground!

15. General House Study (Eugene King, Rufus Whitley, Clyde Rausch, Gilberto Piñón, Roberto Sartor, Paolo Archiati)

This task force of the General Administration processed the findings of the General House Study committee and the orientations from the Central Government, and consequently evaluated the different offers to purchase the present General House and to build the future one.

The General House study, undertaken to lighten the financial burden of the General Administration on the Congregation, came close to a deal but was suspended in February 2010 because of the proximity of the Chapter.

16. Procuration to the Holy See (Roberto Sartor)

This office which takes care of all procedures that need authorization from the Vatican. The presence of a few Oblate officers in the different dicasteries is quite helpful. The office holder also serves as our canonical adviser.

A specific area in which we have sought to work together with the Holy See is the definition of our relationship with Oblates who in more recent years have founded other religious institutes, like Father Arul Raj Jesuadimai , India, (founder of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate, 345 members, and of the Missionaries of Mary Immaculate; 59 priests, 300 seminarians); Fr. Gerard Francis, India (founder of the Daughters of Saint Eugene de Mazenod and of the Sons of Eugene de Mazenod - 12

priests and 120 Brothers) and Fr. Gilson Sobreiro, Brazil (with Sister Serva founder of the Fraternidade O Caminho, more than 30 houses).

17. General House (Gilberto Piñón); International Roman Scholasticate (Mario Brandi); International de Mazenod Center Aix (Dominique Dessolin)

There are around 70 people living at the General House compound, divided into three communities - Central Government, Scholasticate and General House. We have hosted an average of a dozen graduate students a year over the last 12 years; the present number has even reached 17. While members are occupied in varied activities - mainly General Administration, studies, and work in town - one of the main thrusts of the house is to offer hospitality. We have 30 rooms for visitors, mostly Oblates and their friends who come for sessions or pilgrimages.

Over the past 12 years, the International Roman Scholasticate has been quite full, close to its capacity of 23 formandi, and the scholastics and Brothers have generally expressed happiness about their opportunity of studies and international living, close to the tombs of Peter and Paul and to the Holy Father.

To the General Administration belongs as well the International de Mazenod Center in Aix and the two Oblates assigned there.

18. What has been achieved and what remains to be done

Going through the long list of the mandates given by our last General Chapter to the Central Government, the following can be said.

We have fulfilled to a certain extent what we were asked for in the following points:

- continue the Immense Hope Project
- facilitate the establishment of pilot communities
- create a portfolio or service at the level of the General Administration for Mission to Youth
- organize an International Congress on Mission to Youth
- provide effective resources on leadership and governance
- maximize the potential of the Centre de Mazenod
- strengthen formation to internationality
- create international formation houses
- establish a permanent committee of Brothers
- organize a Post-Chapter Committee on Government
- establish a commission of Oblates and associates
- launch Capital Sharing II
- promote sharing financial responsibility for formation among the Units
- undertake a comprehensive study regarding the possible sale of the General House
- seek the inclusion of St. Eugene into the universal liturgical calendar.

There have been areas where the result has not been fully achieved. There are two areas in which we feel we have not fulfilled the Chapter mandate:

- revive and foster Media Ministry
- consolidate and regroup existing formation houses

19. Summary of structural changes at the General Administration over the last 12 years:

Following Chapter recommendations of 1998 and 2004, a number of new posts and entities were created at the Center, and others were modified. Here is a summary:

- The post of executive assistant was created, and administrative assistants were no longer maintained; part of their work is done by outside collaborators by email;
- the posts of Director of JPIC and of Grant Director were created;
- the General Formation Committee switched from bi-annual to annual meetings;
- the JPIC Committee recently switched from semi-annual to annual meetings;
- the Standing Committee for Brothers was newly created;
- the Committee of Oblates and Lay Associates was newly created.

The above-mentioned committees have representatives from each Region. Also several international taskforces were struck as mandated by the Chapter or the Rules:

- for the restructuring of vice-provinces,
- for the study of a possible sale of the General House,
- about Governance and
- for the preparation of the General Chapter.

All these initiatives have produced good results; however, the Chapter should in the future consider financial implications when mandating new extraordinary activities.

A constant limitation of the work at the General Administration lies in the lack of secretarial employees, which has to do with the fact that foreign language skills are not easily available in Rome. Outsourcing of translations and some secretarial work through email is on the increase. Much of the secretarial work is still handled by the members of the Central Government themselves.

20. My ministry as superior general:

In order to fulfill the mission of being a “living bond of unity” for the Congregation (C. 133) I have sought a balance between visits, government at the center and animation in the spirit of Saint Eugene.

During my 12 years of office I was able to visit all the Provinces and Delegations and most of the missions at least once. I had also the chance to meet many Oblates at the General House itself, individually and at sessions.

At the office, there has been constant contact with the Congregation through correspondence and approval procedures. Decisions in council were mostly taken by consensus; important responsibilities were delegated to members of the council or the General Administration according to portfolios. A task specific to my office has been the discernment of first obediences and changes of obediences.

For animation in the charism of St. Eugene, I have written 12 major circular letters and about 14 smaller ones, complementing them for the last nine years through monthly "Missionary Meditations".

In virtue of my office I had to represent the Congregation to the exterior in many ways. While traveling, visits to bishops and nuncios were a normal part of the program; many of the bishops also frequented our General House. I was normally present at the semi-annual assemblies of the Union of Superiors General, often inviting one of the council members to come along, and served as co-president of the JPIC commission for five years. I have participated, through the USG, at regular meetings first of Propaganda Fide and then at the Congregation of Religious, was elected to the Second Synod on Europe and to the Synod on the Word of God, and was appointed in 2009 consultant to the Council for Interreligious Dialogue and to Propaganda Fide.

There have also been regular contacts with those religious institutes, today about 25, which are related to us through Saint Eugene de Mazenod, more frequently with the Holy Family of Bordeaux, the Rosarians, Voluntas Dei, O.M.M.I., C.O.M.I. and the "Oblatas" of Spain and Paraguay.

While talking about my ministry, a word of thanks is due to the General Council and all the members of the General Administration, and in particular to my Vicar General, Eugene King who faithfully and loyally helped to bear the burden of the office. I am also grateful to my successive personal secretaries, Edward Carolan, Leopold Ratnasekara and Eric Alleaume who took care of much of the correspondence and documentation.