Pozuelo – Tuesday, November the 20th

"READING THE OBLATE EXPERIENCE IN EUROPE"

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The first day of our gathering consists in looking at our experiences: the joys and hopes, the anxieties and challenges, the strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities and threats. We are here about 60 Oblates together, most of us between 5 and 25 years in ministry. We come from very different backgrounds and cultures, though we are united as Oblates of Mary Immaculate within the European Region. The exposition this morning shows both the unity and the differences. There are differences between East and West, between young and old, between parish ministry and other ministries, between flourishing Oblate Units and dying ones. The unity between us is our Oblate charism, the vision we inherited from Saint Eugene de Mazenod, the ideal of bringing good news to the poor, the marginalized, and the abandoned.

1. Individual Oblates

We first looked at the reality of the individual Oblates. How do I feel myself as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate? In general it can be said that the Oblates in Europe are happy and fulfilled, both as religious and as missionaries. **What gives them joy and happiness? What are their joys and hopes?**

A few examples:

- My relationship with Jesus Christ and the joy of serving Him; my awareness of being called by God, being part of God's plan; prayer; personal reflection; Eucharist; force of religious vows; personal development and growth; ongoing formation.

- Community life: fraternity and family atmosphere in community life; regular common prayer; community for mission; awareness of not being alone in all this; possibility of sharing deeply with others.

- Mission: reclaiming the inspiration and zeal that fired Saint Eugene in his life choice and missionary enthusiasm; the zeal of the young Oblates – the desire to go beyond the ordinary pastoral care; true missionary work (with the neglected, abandoned or incarcerated) gives fulfillment, energy and life; proclaiming the Word of God; ministry of spiritual direction and confession; there are signs that my ministry brings people joy and hope.

But this morning you also indicated quite a few **anxieties and challenges, weaknesses and threats**. Here are some of them:

- Need for personal conversion to Christ; to seek God's will and to agree with it; lack of commitment to spiritual life, acceptance of mediocrity; there is a lack of support for promoting the Oblate spirit.

- Community life: lack of good experiences of Oblate community life; burn-out of elderly and very busy Oblates of middle age; renewal of community life is needed; concern for financial sustainability and transparency.

- Situation of society: Europe moves away from its Christian roots; Jesus Christ is taboo in society; European culture is no longer "Christian"; the media are anti-religious.

- Situation of the Church: crisis of the institutional church; scandal and betrayal (child abuse) created a deep malaise; lack of people coming to church, especially young people; problems around marriage

and divorce; crisis of vocations ("we wonder about the future").; the Church needs genuine witnesses, as in the days of St Eugene.

- Mission: absence of true missionary experience; the trap of maintenance opposed to mission; we have to make "choices for the poor"; times of transitions and change create tensions, anxieties, personal crises; we need simplicity of life style, with the people, closer to the poor; new ways of evangelization are needed; we need to be more committed to work with youth, families, the poor; we need a renewal of missionary dynamism; mission has to be done together with lay people.

2. Oblate Units

Oblates talked about **the joys and hopes** not only as individuals but also specifically as Provinces/Delegations/Missions and as communities, e.g.:

- As Oblate Units we, in fact, are engaged in a lot of good ministries: we do respond to the urgent needs of the Church; we do go to the poor who do not know Christ; we do reach out to the un-churched and those who live as if God is not needed.

- Our youth ministry and missions together with lay people are joyful signs for the future.

- Here and there a renewal of Oblate community life is taking place.

- What gives joy and hope in our Oblate Units are regular retreats, sessions, prayer, Eucharist, divine office, meditation, rediscovering of the treasures of Scripture.

But there is also a list of **anxieties and challenges, of weaknesses and threats.** The Oblates in Europe have lots of questions and perceive large areas where change and renewal are necessary. These weaknesses should be seen, however, as **opportunities for new life.**

- Changing society: the various crises in society (demographic, economic, and political) and the rapid secularization process, which many times leads to secularism and materialism, provoke in people a feeling of depression and of "being lost". For us, missionaries, these situations can be opportunities for new initiatives of evangelization, like in the time of St Eugene de Mazenod. Our mission should bring peace, happiness and hope.

- Church: in our time, when the institutional Church is in great trouble, we have to find spaces and ways for people to stay connected – we need to embrace a particular vision of Church as inclusive, life-giving, liberating and committed to the poor and the abandoned. This is a time of purification for the Church: we have to re-discover the essentials of our faith, and to announce them in a simple, clear and attractive way.

- Vocations: the reality of aging personnel and the crisis of vocations (for the Church in Europe, as well as for the Oblates) is a real problem. It brings about a loss of creativity. We wonder about the future of our mission. In any case, mission will have to be done in a new manner, a way in which lay people will be more and more actively engaged.

- Lay movements following the charism of Eugene de Mazenod exist in some Units and are a wonderful addition to the Oblate Family, but wherever Oblates are ministering, be it in parishes or

otherwise, lay people should be involved. Mission today requires full participation and collaboration with lay people.

- Conversion: we believe that we are in need of a radical conversion, both individually as in community, both in the religious aspect of our life as in the missionary activity, but we lack the desire to change. Change is always a demanding process, and it is easier to remain in the status quo which gives more security. And still, we have to develop a creative attitude in our life and mission. The temptation is to be drawn more and more into ordinary parish work, whilst, in fact, as missionaries we should move to specialized ministries where the local diocese is unable to respond to the pastoral needs, e.g. ministry with youth, families, immigrants, and training of lay people for leadership roles. "Mission" is energizing, "maintenance" can be a comfort zone!

- Finances: there seems to be a need for transparency and co-responsibility on all levels. There seems also to be a need to find new sources of income for a number of Oblate Units.

- International and intercultural reality: geographically people move more than ever, and so Europe, and each country in Europe, becomes more and more an international and intercultural reality. We are confronted both with people from other European countries and with people coming from continents such as Africa, Asia and Latin America. Some Oblates are present in this world of immigration and exercise a great apostolate.

3. Scripture texts

Many biblical images and scripture texts were used to indicate the deeper feelings underlying our experiences. Some indicate the mission, our willingness to do the will of God, and the need for renewal and new beginnings; other texts indicate the hope that remains strong within us.

- "Yes, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life" (Jn 3:16)

- Image of the Good Shepherd (cf. Jn 10:11-15)

- Image of the good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:29-37)

- "You did not choose me, no, I chose you and I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last" (Jn 15:16)

- Christ uses the disciples to feed the poor (cf. Mk 6: 32-44)

- "I am the handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1:38)

- Mary waiting in the Upper Room together with the Apostles for the coming of the H. Spirit …. and the Apostles preaching the Word with great courage (Acts 1-2) – a new Pentecost

- "New wine in fresh skins" (Mt 9:17)

- "Son of David, Jesus, have pity on me" (Mk 10:47)

- Christ calming the storm on the lake (cf. Mt 8: 23-28)

- "Do not be afraid, only have faith" (Mk 5:36)

- "Put out into deep water and pay out your nets" (Lk 5:4)
- "Know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time" (Mt 28:20)

4. A More Systematic Approach

The sharing of our experiences is a very valuable beginning of our dialogue. We looked at the reality of our life and mission as Oblates of Mary Immaculate in the European Region and we became aware of a number of aspects in society, church and Oblate congregation, which we will have to take into consideration in the future. Some salient points are the following:

4.1. European society has changed and is still changing rapidly. Where, until relatively recent, the culture in many countries was Christian, this can no longer be said today. The East has experienced a communist ideology, in which God has no place whatsoever. The West has known a secularization process, leading to a rampant secularism, where God is absent or has been moved to the private sphere. There might still exist a certain belief in a Supreme Power or in other spiritual entities, and therefore some scholars do not agree with the idea of secularization or secularism, but say that belief is not disappearing but shifting and being reformulated and pluralized. Whatever vision you accept, the reality is that religion as such is vanishing. European culture is no longer Christian! We live no longer in a Christian society.

4.2. The Church has lost a lot of its credibility. Just days before his death, cardinal Carlo Martini said in his last interview: "The Church is tired in affluent Europe and in America. Our culture has grown old, our Churches are big, our religious houses are empty, the bureaucracy of our Churches is growing out of proportion, our liturgies and our vestments are pompous. Yet maybe these things express what we've become today? …. The Church is 200 years behind the times. How come it doesn't rouse itself? Are we afraid? Fearful instead of courageous? …" The decline in Mass attendance is visible everywhere. The fall in vocations to priesthood and religious life is as bad. The sexual abuse scandal and betrayal by the "church" in many countries only increases this malaise and loss of credibility. The Church in many European countries is suffering a crisis of confidence.

4.3. The Oblates in Europe. Our Congregation lives in this European society and is part and parcel of the Church in Europe. What is our concrete situation as Oblates of Mary Immaculate? First of all, we are aging rapidly; and secondly, we have far fewer vocations (even the Polish Province experiences a serious drop in the number of vocations). I think we are all quite aware that this implies questions like: why do people no longer want to share our vision of Oblate life and mission? What is the future of our religious life and missionary apostolate in Europe? - "We are getting older, and without young blood we will not generate new life and apostolates". There is a loss of creativity.

4.4. The aspects mentioned above are not purely negative but should be seen as opportunities for renewal and revival. However, in order to be able to realize a new evangelization, we ourselves have to experience **a true conversion**. The last General Chapter indicated ways of conversion for the Congregation, and in the sharing this morning this point was repeated many times. We also could return to the inspiration and vision of Saint Eugene de Mazenod after the French Revolution: "The Church, that glorious inheritance purchased by Christ the Saviour at the cost of his own blood, has in our days been cruelly ravaged ….And how should men who want to follow in the footsteps of their divine Master Jesus Christ conduct themselves if they, in their

turn, are to win back the many souls who have thrown off his yoke? They must strive to be saints….They must wholly renounce themselves, striving solely for the glory of God, the good of the Church, and the growth and salvation of souls. They must constantly renew themselves in the spirit of their vocation. …" (Preface).

4.5. In the new evangelization and in the missionary work of the Oblates, **the role of the laity** is crucial. In some countries lay movements following the charism of Saint Eugene exist and are a wonderful addition to the Oblate Family. But we should not limit ourselves to that aspect. Oblates who work in parishes, for instance, will have to collaborate more and more with lay people, and lay people with them. This too will require a conversion, a change of mentality. Already the General Chapter of 1986 dedicated in its final declaration "Missionaries in today's world" a section to "Mission with the laity". What is written there remains valid for us today: "Oblates are called to involve themselves more fully in promoting the mission of the laity in the Church and in the world. This implies … for us Oblates a conversion of thought, heart and action as well as a greater trust, openness and willingness to share power and responsibility with the laity." (MTW, 73-74).

4.6. Many of you indicated the need for a **renewed missionary spirit.** Are we not too much drawn into ordinary parish work, whilst, in fact, as missionaries we should be involved in specialized ministries, e.g. youth work, apostolate with the immigrants, care of families, training of lay leaders, etc. ? "Mission", it was said, is energizing, "maintenance" can be a comfort zone! Is the missionary zeal of Saint Eugene, who originally did not want to accept parishes, an example for us? And in the parishes we keep, what kind of missionary spirit do we bring there? Does Constitution 6 have a message for us today? "We are a missionary Congregation, Our principal service in the Church is to proclaim Christ and his Kingdom to the most abandoned. We proclaim the Gospel among people who have not yet received it and help them see their own values in its light. Where the Church is already established, our commitment is to those groups it touches least."

4.7. Youth ministry was mentioned several times this morning. The 2004 General Chapter had this to say: "We Oblates are moved by the situation of the youth and, like the Founder, we want to respond to these calls, affirming that mission to youth is a fully Oblate ministry. It is to this purpose that the 34th General Chapter has re-introduced mission to youth into Rule 7b of our *Constitutions and Rules*. The Chapter further recommends, and invites Oblates to develop a **Youth Outreach …" (***Witnessing to Hope, 17-18).* Some Oblate units have done a lot concerning work with youth, and this Oblate commitment to youth ministry is a tremendous sign of hope.

There are other realities that have been mentioned this morning, such as presence of foreign missionaries, media ministry, ministry in shrines, rediscovering of Holy Scripture, etc. These are all positive elements within a rather problematic context of European society and church. No doubt, in future the Christian community in Europe will be rather a "little flock" of believers, but hopefully animated with a missionary outlook and zeal, in order to bring about a new evangelization or even sometimes a first evangelization. The Good News has to be announced, and all people have a right to hear it. As missionaries we are called to commit ourselves to spreading the message of Jesus Christ, a message of peace and happiness, a message of hope and joy. We surely are already doing that, but can we do more and better, with a revitalized commitment, with new enthusiasm and zeal? Our further exchange and sharing, today and the days to come, will certainly help us to build a renewed vision of the Oblate Life and Mission in Europe.