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FRAMEWORK TO HANG OUR EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

The XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops during the month of October discussed "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith". Before any new strategy or initiative was mentioned, the Synod insisted strongly that Jesus Christ is the center of it all. In suggested Proposition 5 it is stated:

"Jesus offers the gift of the Holy Spirit and reveals to us the love of the Father. The New Evangelization is a time of awakening, of new encouragement and new witness that Jesus Christ is the center of our faith and daily life. It calls on every member of the Church to a renewal of faith and an actual effort to share it."

If we want a framework to hang our experience as Missionary Oblates, we have to return to the core of our life and mission, and that is nothing else, or rather nobody else, but the Person of Jesus Christ. The original kerygma is the message of salvation of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. That kerygma was first experienced by the Apostles, and once the Holy Spirit had come down upon them, it was proclaimed boldly and with great spiritual power. If we want be true missionaries in today's world, we have to follow the same path: first experience and live the salvation brought by Jesus Christ, and then announce and proclaim what we have experienced. As St John states in his first Letter: "Something which has existed since the beginning, that we have heard, and we have seen with our own eyes; that we have watched and touched with our hands: the Word, who is life – this is our subject. That life was made visible: we saw it and we are giving our testimony…." (1 Jn 1-2). Or as the good Dominicans used to say: "Contemplata aliis tradere" – what we have contemplated, we will hand on to others.

1. CONVERSION

Obviously in this "Year of Faith", 50 years after the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, we have to start the reflection on our life and mission by the very foundation of our Oblate reality: Jesus Christ, our Saviour, our Lord, our Master. How can we put into practice what Const. 2 has to say? "The desire to co-operate with him draws us to know him more deeply, to identify with him, to let him live in us. We strive to reproduce in ourselves the pattern of his life." These expressions are pretty radical. They indicate a tremendous ideal for which we have to engage ourselves day after day. It surely is not easy, but our vocation as religious, as consecrated persons, as missionaries, demands of us to go forward: it is a road to be walked, a challenge to be realized, an aim to be attained. And although none of us will ever arrive, here on earth, at knowing perfectly the mystery of this human-divine person Jesus Christ, our calling to the Oblate life implies an ever renewed conversion to the Lord and what he stands for.

We could ask ourselves today: what have we done with the 35th Oblate General Chapter's "Call to Conversion"? There it is stated in bold letters: "**We are in need of a profound personal and communal conversion**". It is a conversion "centred on the person of Jesus Christ", and the General Chapter indicated nine aspects which could help us in this endeavor. Let me comment here today on a few of them.

The first recommendation is addressed to **each individual Oblate** and reads as follows:

"That each Oblate reflect on the witness of his religious life, living the vows in a prophetic way so as to share these values with the world, as an invitation for others to join our Oblate family."

We are invited here to live an authentic religious life, as a prophetic witness to the world. Whether such a life attracts vocations should not be the primary aim. We have been invited by the Lord Jesus, and if we have decided to follow him, then each one's personal life style needs to reflect, like in a mirror, the life style and the values of the Lord Jesus Christ, as Constitution 2 states: "We strive to reproduce in ourselves the pattern of his life."

Several other recommendations talk about conversion **within the Oblate community**, e.g. No 2 talks about "personal and shared co-responsibility for the life of the community (House, District, Unit)"; No 3 talks about reviewing lifestyles "in the areas of acquiring and use of finances, sharing of goods, and living in a transparent and accountable way"; No 4 talks about reconciliation and healing within the community; No 5 about "personal and community prayer and fidelity to the practice of oraison"; and No.6 about "ongoing formation, Scripture reflection and Oblate studies"

If the Oblates in the European Region want to "revitalize Oblate Life and Mission", personal and community conversion is the necessary first step. Many of you indicated this already yesterday, when you were describing your experience. So, let us be serious about conversion, give a credible witness in our modern world, and thus become signs of joy and hope for the future.

2. A RENEWED MISSIONARY SPIRIT

Isaiah's text that Jesus used in the synagogue of Nazareth at the beginning of his Galilean ministry is a text loved by Oblates all over the world, because it expresses also our mission: "The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour." (Lk 4: 18). The evangelization of Europe began when St Paul was asked to go to Macedonia, modern-day Greece. The message spread rapidly all over Europe, with Christians witnessing to their new-found faith and not being afraid of testifying until death. The blood of the martyrs became the seed of new Christians. And when Emperor Constantine declared freedom of religion and later on Christianity was even made *the* religion of the Empire, the foundations were laid for a Christian culture in the whole continent. Even when the tragic separation of East and West occurred and when later the Reformation divided the Christian western area even more, the culture and background of Europe remained Christian. It was really first the French Revolution and later the Enlightenment that gradually destroyed the Christian fabric of Europe in the West, and Communism destroyed it in the East. Today we are faced with a secular culture in Europe. How can we be true missionaries in such a situation?

St Eugene de Mazenod faced this reality in his homeland after the French Revolution, and with great passion he wrote in the "Preface" to our *Constitutions and Rules*: "The Church, that glorious inheritance purchased by Christ the Saviour at the cost of his own blood, has in our days been cruelly ravaged… Faced with such a deplorable situation, the Church earnestly appeals to the ministers whom she herself enrolled in the cause of her divine Spouse, to do all in their power, by word and example, to rekindle the flame of faith, that has all but died in the hearts of so many of her children…" Faced with a secular culture in Europe, how can we be true missionaries? "To rekindle the flame of faith" – how can we do that?

2.1. Chronologically Saint Eugene used several ways, which were all **special ministries**. In the beginning he did not want to accept parishes in order to be free to re-evangelize the poor and abandoned people in the Provence: "We must lead men to act like human beings, first of all, and then

like Christians, and, finally we must help them to become saints" (*Preface*). He got involved in four main ministries: youth ministry, parochial missions, ministry to the immigrants, and missionary work *ad gentes.* Today the European Region is still involved in all four of these ministries.

Youth ministry was a special ministry that the young priest Eugene de Mazenod loved strongly. Already before becoming a priest, he had noticed that the youth in Provence was growing up without any Christian education in schools, where an atmosphere of indifference and even hostility towards Christianity was the norm. After returning to his home town as a priest, Eugene committed himself to the youth of Aix-en-Provence with his whole heart and with all his energy. Today we ourselves are convinced that evangelizing the youth is a very important ministry, and some Provinces dedicate a lot of resources (personnel and finances) to it. They should be encouraged and their example followed. Youth ministry is a sign of joy and hope.

The conducting of **parochial missions** was the Oblates' main apostolate in the early days, and is still alive in some European countries like Poland, Germany, Italy, and perhaps even others. The format of such missions is, of course, now adapted to our modern ways of living, and the missionaries are not necessarily just Oblates – they may include other religious and priests and even lay people. If full missions cannot be organized, one can think of renewal sessions, revival gatherings for parishes or for groups within a parish. In our re-evangelizing efforts, we should not be afraid to learn something from the evangelical and charismatic revival movements, which attract all kinds of people, young and old, rich and poor, believers as well as nonbelievers. Why do they attract so many people, whilst our churches get emptier by the day? In their prayer sessions they surely know how to create an enthusiastic spirit and "to rekindle the flame of faith" through a lively and dynamic approach to evangelization. After all the Gospel is "Good News".

A third ministry that the Founder promoted was **work with immigrants**, especially the Italians in Marseille. After his arrival in that city as vicar general of the diocese in 1823, Eugene noticed their spiritual deprivation because there were no priests who could speak their language. So, he asked the Oblates of Italian origin to engage in this ministry, and they did so for a long time. Today in several European countries Oblates are exercising this ministry with immigrants, be they Polish, Sri Lankans, Latin Americans or Africans. As more and more immigrants come to our continent or to individual countries, this is a ministry which should be expanded in the future, not only as a service to the Christians belonging to these groups, but also as a field for first evangelization and as an aspect of re-evangelization of the European people. These immigrant groups can be very joyful, enthusiastic and full of hope. They are a sign of new life.

Finally, Saint Eugene sent **missionaries to foreign countries**, and this decision created a huge new missionary spirit within the Congregation. Even today many of our brother Oblates are working in other continents, helping the younger Churches in their growth and development. Their visits home or even their definitive return to their countries of origin can be a source of missionary animation, among ourselves and among the people we serve in Europe.

2.2. Eventually the Founder also accepted **parishes** which he wanted to be a kind of ongoing missions. Today, most Oblates are in fact working in parishes. How do we make of our parishes ongoing missions? How do we inflame our Oblate parishes with a missionary spirit? How do we create missionary parishes?

This question has been discussed already many times and various responses have been given. I would propose here five elements which might be helpful:

First of all, the Oblates involved in parish ministry, themselves, need to have a **missionary outlook**, that is to say they should be persons who reach beyond their borders, pastors who are concerned with men and women who do not turn up for religious functions, priests who "set foot outside the parish church to contact

people who never set foot inside the parish church" (said Fr. Laprise in 1991), pastors who have a heart that embraces the whole world and thus draw attention to the worldwide missionary endeavor of the church.

Secondly, Oblates should develop a **welcoming presence** in the parish, a presence which respectfully receives, with understanding and even compassion, the reality and concrete context of the parishioners, and reveals their unique value in the light of the Gospel. In such a spirit of sharing, the key word for mission will often be "dialogue".

Thirdly, Oblates in parishes should be **close to the people**, especially the poor and abandoned. There is a long Oblate tradition of closeness to the people. People find that we are simple, open, informal, straightforward and genuine. As Oblate pastors, do we spontaneously reach out to the deprived, those in need, the poor with their many faces? Or would we spontaneously seek out the company of the well-to-be, or simply confine ourselves to our rectories?

In the fourth place, an Oblate in a parish is a person who is humble, yet **bold in proclaiming** the message of the Lord, a man of the Word, who takes great pains in preparing his preaching and religious teaching, a person who, in order to arouse his pastoral creativity, is not afraid to take inspiration from the encounter with other priests, religious or the laity.

And fifthly, in parishes we are strengthened by the **Oblate apostolic community**, even if we do not live under the same roof. Belonging to an international missionary Congregation and meeting other Oblates regularly can provide Oblate pastors with a missionary vision and models for fruitful pastoral action.

During the sharing yesterday, a number of relatively new aspects of Christian life and ministry have been mentioned, such as the expanding role of the laity, the ministry of J.P.I.C., and the mass media. Let me say a few words on each of these.

3. NEWER ASPECTS

3.1. THE EXPANDING ROLE OF THE LAITY

In a recent talk to a group of lay people in Italy Pope Benedict XVI had this to say: "Co-responsibility requires a change in mentality, particularly with regard to the role of the laity in the Church, who should be considered not as "collaborators" with the clergy, but as persons truly "co-responsible" for the being and activity of the Church. It is important, therefore, that a mature and committed laity be strengthened, able to make their own specific contribution to the Church's mission, in accordance with the ministries and tasks each one has in the life of the Church, and always in cordial communion with the Bishops". (Papal message to Catholic Action – Aug.27, 2012).

There is no doubt that the third millennium will see within the Catholic Church an expanding role of the laity, and this not only because of a growing shortage of priests. Since the Second Vatican Council the theological awareness has been growing that lay people, by the very fact of their baptism, have a right and a duty to proclaim the Gospel and to witness to their faith. Even Canon Law now says so: "Because the whole Church is of its nature missionary and the work of evangelization is to be considered a fundamental duty of the people of God, all Christ's faithful must be conscious of the responsibility to play their part in missionary activity" (Can 781). Lay people will play a greater role both inside and outside the Church. John L. Allen, Jr, in his book *The Future Church*, Doubleday 2009) has a whole chapter on the laity. He writes: "What makes expanding lay roles a major trend in the twenty-first century is that laity are emerging as protagonists both

inside and outside the Church. Internally, lay people are occupying ministerial and administrative positions once held almost exclusively by priests. Externally, laypeople are taking it upon themselves to evangelize culture and to act on Catholic social teaching." (p. 182).

Where do we, Oblates, stand in this regard? Already the General Chapter of 1986, in its document "Missionaries in Today's World" dedicated a chapter to "Mission with the Laity". That message is today even more important than it was then: "… Oblates are called to involve themselves more fully in promoting the mission of the laity in the Church and in the world. This implies study and updating in the theology of the laity, especially the issues of the meaning of baptism and the royal priesthood of the faithful (LG, 34.36). It likewise involves 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. Furthermore, mission with the laity demands that we fully respect the primary, irreplaceable role of the baptized in all the circumstances of their daily lives… It also demands that we respect their specific role in the ecclesial community, since evangelization is a duty of every baptized person." (MTW 73-75). There are also lay people who are more closely associated with the Oblates. The M.A.M.I. is a reality in many of our Units. Now there exist also groups or associations of lay people who want to live more intensely the mission of evangelization according to the Oblate charism. We should encourage these developments as much as possible. They are signs of hope for the future.

3.2. JUSTICE, PEACE AND INTEGRITY OF CREATION

Concerning J.P.I.C., movements for Justice in the world and movements for Peace exist in many countries. Basic to any action for justice and peace is our conviction that each person is created in the image and likeness of God and thus possesses an inalienable dignity. The Plan of God (or: the Dream of God) revealed throughout the history of salvation is: a humanity that is fraternal, just and peaceful. In C. 9 we, Oblates, describe ourselves as "members of the prophetic Church … We announce the liberating presence of Jesus Christ and the new world born in his resurrection. We will hear and make heard the clamour of the voiceless, which is a cry to God who brings down the mighty from their thrones and exalts the lowly (cf. Lk 1: 52)."

Of late, the Ecological movement (Integrity of Creation) has been gaining a lot of attention. Already in his 1990 message for the World Day of Peace entitled "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility" Pope John Paul II urged Catholics to become aware of the fact that concern for Creation is "an essential part of their faith". In 2001 the same Pope urged an "ecological conversion" in order to prevent a looming environmental "catastrophe". Pope Benedict XVI has continued this insistence on ecology, explaining that human beings are stewards of creation, meaning caretakers, and not masters or owners. We have to recognize that creation belongs to others just as much as to us and that we have a responsibility also for the wellbeing of future generations. And so, the Oblate CC & RR declare that "action on behalf of justice, peace and the integrity of creation is an integral part of evangelization" (R. 9a). Working for "the new world" born in Christ's resurrection can bring hope and joy to many people.

3.3. MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

The **Mass Media** and the modern means of communication have a tremendous influence in the world of today. They can be powerful instruments of evangelization, and they form themselves a culture to be evangelized. "Redemptoris Missio", the 1990 encyclical of John Paul II on Mission, says that "to some degree perhaps this Areopagus has been neglected" (*R.M.,* 37). Recently we have become aware that the influence of Radio, Television and especially the Internet is not to be underestimated. So let us be "daring in

opening new ways of evangelization…. Let us have no fear to find new means to answer new needs" (1998 General Chapter: *Evangelizing the Poor at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, 17). The recent Synod of Bishops insisted on the use of the means of social communication for a new evangelization: "The use of the means of social communication has an important role to play in order to reach every person with the message of salvation; in this field, it is necessary that convinced Christians be formed, prepared and made capable to transmit faithfully the content of the faith and of Christian morality. They should have the ability to use well the languages and the instruments of today that are available for communication in the global village." (suggested Proposition 18). Some of you are involved in media ministry, and that is surely a positive sign.

CONCLUSION

So, our sharing and exchange here these days in Pozuelo may help us to overcome the tiredness that we sometimes experience within the Church in Europe. Cardinal-designate Luis Tagle, archbishop of Manilla, after the recent Synod of Bishops, declared: "Often I hear the fear of some other Churches that have been used to being the majority and being very influential in society. They're afraid of the declining numbers and influence, but as I listen to them, I say: that has been the story of the Church in Asia for 2.000 years. We don't panic, we trust that the Lord is risen and that the Holy Spirit continues to blow. … May-be a time will come when we can share our experience with other Churches that are afraid, or are not used to be a minority. We can share the joy we have and the heroic way in which people testify and share their faith." (*The Tablet*, 03/11/2012, p. 7). Christians in Europe need to accommodate themselves to the idea of minority status, which, of course, is a staggering concept from the viewpoint of nineteenth or twentieth century overwhelming majority Catholicism (Poland being an exception, as the majority is still Catholic). We are not used to consider ourselves to be a minority group in society. But being a minority is not a negative reality: the early Church for three centuries was a minority, but a creative one. We too can be a "creative minority" – there is plenty of potential in being a creative minority. The Church of the future will be smaller but strong. "If in fact a church stands no realistic chance of incorporating all members of a society, then it can become a smaller and more focused body, more rigorously committed to personal holiness and transformation. Pruning can promote growth, and the sharper the pruning, the stronger the growth" (Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent*, Oxford 2007, p.)

The Oblates in Europe should not be afraid of diminishing numbers and regret the "good old days". Perhaps, these good, old days were, in fact, not so good. The past surely was not all positive. In any case, today we live in a new context and a new culture; so we have to readjust ourselves and " be salt and light" in this new world. Even with less people, we still can do a great ministry in Europe. Surely, we have to relinquish certain apostolic works, but that can be the best opportunity to take on new ones with courage and enthusiasm, and to focus better our missionary involvement in this continent.

You, the younger Oblates of Mary Immaculate, have the capacity to bring about a renewed missionary outlook, creating optimism and joy within our ranks. Fired by the Holy Spirit with missionary zeal and enthusiasm, like St Eugene de Mazenod, you are asked to commit yourselves to a new evangelization in Europe. This will be a great sign of hope for the future. The mission depends on you. The Oblate Congregation depends on you!

God bless you all.