



OBLATES OF MARY IMMACULATE

NATAL PROVINCE

THE MOTHER PROVINCE OF THE OBLATES IN AFRICA

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Good News about Oblate Mission **Ngome Shrine Confided To Oblates**



The Natal Province has accepted a request from the Bishop of Eshowe, Rt Reverend Xolelo Thaddeus Kumalo, to take over the running of the popular Shrine at Ngome in Zululand. Two Oblates will be sent to Ngome after Easter,

The Shrine of Our Lady Tabernacle Of The Most High at Ngome has today, become one of the most popular places of pilgrimage for Catholics in Southern Africa. It is a haven of peace for many pilgrims. People feel very close to God here.

At this site a Benedictine nun Sister Reinolda May claimed to have experienced ten Visions of "Mary, Tabernacle of the Most High". She subsequently felt a pressing urge to spread the Message that Mary had brought to her..

Fr Wayne WELDSCHIDT OMI is appointed Rector of the Shrine



and Fr Nkululeko MEYIWA OMI is appointed Assistant Rector. It is the intention of the Oblates to develop a special focus on youth ministry at the Shrine in addition to the existing ministry. Fr Meyiwa will direct this programme.

During 1989, Bishop Manuset Biyase of Eshowe met with Fr. Paul B. DECOCK OMI, then chairperson of the Theological Advisory Commission of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, to discuss the Ngome Affair. At their request, Fr. Paul B. Decock compiled the following statement about Ngome:

"There is nothing objectionable in this (the promotion of the sanctuary at Ngome and the veneration of Our Lady under the name of Tabernacle of the Most High). One does not need divine sanction to start a sanctuary and venerate Our Lady. Pilgrimages could be allowed even if we are not sure of the 'authenticity' of the visions...The content of the visions is doctrinally acceptable. These views can be put forward in sermons and leaflets...Holiness and the mental sanity of the person (who allegedly had visions) are no proof that the visions are genuine. The only objective criterion would be a miracle, which is seldom ascertainable...At this stage the visions cannot yet be declared worthy of credibility." (Cf. Paul B. Decock, *The Ngome Visions*, 07-05-90; Ngome File).

The Diocese of Eshowe was originally part of the Vicariate of Natal and the main Oblates who worked there were Fr A ROUSSET who is regarded as the Father of the Zululand Missions together with, Fr. A. VAN DER LANEN and Brother Leo GUMEDE. They established missions in Emoyeni 1896 and Entabeni in 1896. In addition Fr Rousset "said Mass occasionally at Eshowe Empangeni, Umfolozi, Mahlabatini and Impaplala as well as in the sugar mills of Amatikulu and Mandikini" (Brain, *Catholics in Natal II* p. 224). In addition Fr Rousset also established Mbongolwane (1914) and said the first Mass at Mangete. As we go to Ngome we remember their pioneering efforts.

Good News about Oblates

Fr Danker in African Christian Biography

Last year the online *"Dictionary of African Christian Biography"* published an entry on Fr Albert DANKER OMI. He is the fourth Oblate to have a biography published following Bishop Dominic KHUMALO OMI, Fr Jerome SKHAKHANE OMI and Archbishop Peter BUTELEZI OMI



The purpose of the dictionary is to provide "information on the major creative and innovative local figures most vitally involved in the growth and character of Christianity in Africa who are virtually absent from the standard scholarly reference works".

The *Dictionary* which is an ongoing project "will cover the whole field of African Christianity from earliest times to the present and over the entire continent. The *Dictionary* is "simultaneously produced electronically in English, French and Portuguese"

It is a "non-proprietary electronic database" which means that material within it can be "freely reproduced locally in printed form" As a free electronic resource "the material will be simultaneously accessible to readers around the world. Contributors are drawn from academic, church and mission communities in Africa and elsewhere

The articles on the Oblates mentioned were compiled by Dr George Mukuka a former student at St Josephs Theological Institute. He is now a faculty research manager at the University of Johannesburg. He is the author of, *The Other Side of the Story: The Silent Experience of the Black Clergy in the Catholic Church in South Africa (1898-1976)*, published by Cluster Publications.

Fr Danker's Biography is available at

http://www.dacb.org/stories/southafrica/danker_albert.html

Good News about Oblates

Fr Michelson Receives Interfaith Award

Fr. M. Garth MICHELSON received an Interfaith Award when the Turquoise Harmony Institute hosted its third Annual *Ubuntu* Lecture and Dialogue Awards Ceremony on Saturday, 13 February 2010 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Rosebank, Johannesburg.



Turquoise Harmony Institute is an independent, non-partisan and not-for-gain NGO operating to promote inter-cultural and interreligious dialogue and tolerance among the people. It gives annual awards to "Outstanding individuals who made noteworthy contributions to dialogue, peace and harmony in the society"

In a statement the Institute said it believes that it is of great importance to acknowledge the selfless sacrifices made by exceptional individuals who contributed to building a peaceful society where everyone coexists in harmony. Nations will be

deemed successful if they are able to celebrate such people of great personality and integrity.”

Archbishop T. C. Makgoba Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town also received an Interfaith Award. Other awards included the Gulen Peace Award to Mr Ahmed Kathrada; The Human Rights Award to Mr. Jody Kollapen; The Academia Award to Prof. Stanley Ridge; The Art Award to Dr. John Kani and the Sport Award to Mr. Chester Williams. The Citation to Fr Michelson read as follows:

Fr. Michelson while serving the parish of Sobantu Village in Pietermaritzburg, founded a Community of Reconciliation comprising some 32 members including two families, each with five children. The members were all Christians; some Zulu speaking, some English speaking. Many people became deeply involved with the vision and work of the community some of whom were Muslim some Hindu. Through prayer and work the members lived frugally; they strove to further integral education for all and to serve the needs of the poor. Their living together was done in flagrant defiance of the country's laws of separation, discrimination and oppression, which prosecution failed to stop!

Since 1985 Fr Michelson has worked in Catholic parishes mainly in Zulu-speaking rural and urban areas of Kw Zulu Natal. He has continued his involvement in worship and work in certain Muslim and Hindu communities and organisations. In 1999 he was invited to give a presentation at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Cape Town. The title of the presentation was *Religion Ahead: Relevant or growing Irrelevance?* He emphasised the challenge and imperative of dialogue and collaboration on all levels in service of humanity and God. Fr Michelson is also a long standing member of the Department for Ecumenism and Inter-religious Dialogue and Collaboration of the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference. At present he is living and working in the Matikwe and Inanda areas north of Durban.

Good News about Oblate Mission Four Missionaries sent on Mission

On 15th January the province celebrated the Feast of the Approval of our rule at St Joseph's Cedara. At a special ritual during the liturgy, four Oblates were sent on mission. Fr Sholto DOUGLAS and Fr Donovan WHEATLEY were sent to the

Zimbabwe Mission and Fr Wayne WELDSCHIDT and Fr Nkululeko MEYIWA were commissioned to serve in the Diocese of Eshowe in the Shrine of Ngome.

Good News about Oblates

Perpetual vows of Two Oblates

Scholastic Isaac ZANDONDA professed his perpetual vows as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe on 16 January 2010.



Scholastic Phumlani NDLOVU professed his final vows as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate at the



Altkler heiligenberg kapelle in Lahnstein Germany on 31 January 2010.

Transition

Fr. Karl Friedrich (Charles) STRUVE OMI

Father Karl Friedrich STRUVE OMI (87) passed away on 22 January at Nazareth House Durban. Fr Struve worked for many years at St Josephs Scholasticate as professor in Canon law and then in parishes mainly in the Pietermaritzburg area until his retirement. He was living in the Oblate community at



Woodlands parish in Durban until late last year when he was transferred to Nazareth house a result of his increasingly frail state of health. The funeral was on Wednesday 3rd February at St

Josephs Scholasticate Church, Cedara. A large crowd participated and could not all be accommodated inside the Church. Fr Struve was the first scholastic at St Josephs Scholasticate when it opened in 1943. together with Fr Kevin CAWTE who is retired in Johannesburg. Here is the rest of his Curriculum Vitae

21 November 1922 Born in Amsterdam Holland
 1936 Arrived in South Africa with his parents.
 17 February 1943 First vows Novitiate Germiston.
 28 February 1946 Final Vows St Joseph Scholasticate
 11 July 1948. Ordained Priest Pretoria
 1949 First obedience: Transvaal province
 1949-1950 Assistant Priest in parishes in Transvaal
 1950-1954 Studies in Rome for Licentiate in Canon Law and Licentiate in Theology
 3. August 1955 Obedience Natal province
 1955-1970 Formator & Lecturer St Josephs Scholasticate
 1965 Superior St Josephs Scholasticate
 1970 – 1972 Assistant Priest Mayville
 1973 Supplies Pinetown, Addington and Virginia
 1974 -1979 Assistant Priest St Anthony
 1978 Acting parish priest Raisethorpe and Eastwood
 1978 Parish Priest St Martin de Porres PMB
 1982-1985 Seconded to Western Transvaal Delegation
 1986-1988 Assistant Priest St Mary's Pietermaritzburg
 1989 Supply and formator Cleland
 1993 Assistant Priest St Mary's Pietermaritzburg
 1996 Superior Sabon House
 1998-2006 Retired Cleland
 2006 Retired Woodlands
 2009 Retired Nazareth House
 Friday 22 January 2010 Died Nazareth House

Obediences and Appointments The following take place after Easter

Diocese of Eshowe

Fr Wayne WELDSCHIDT OMI Rector of Ngome Shrine and Parish Priest Ngome
 Fr Nkululeko MEYIWA OMI Assistant Rector Ngome Shrine. Director of Youth Ministry. Assistant Priest Ngome Parish

Archdiocese of Durban

Assumption Umbilo

Deacon Mthokozisi MNCWABE OMI
 Pastoral Assistant

St Johns Estcourt

Fr Bafana NDLOVU OMI Assistant Priest

St Anne Sydenham

Fr Siyabonga DUBE OMI Assistant Priest

Christ the King Wentworth

Fr Merlin INCE OMI Parish Priest
 Fr Andrew KNOTT OMI Assistant priest
 Residing at Sabon House

Provincial's Diary

February 2010

3rd Funeral Fr Struve
 5th Inchanga Land Committee
 7th Retreat Scholasticate
 11th Visit to Ngome
 15th Feast of Approval of Rule. Cedara

March 2010

5th Inchanga Land Committee
 17th Special Provincial Council Meeting
 19 Academic Mass and Graduation St Josephs Theological institute

April 2010

6-10th Visit to Zimbabwe
 19 Board of Members SJTI
 20-22nd IPC Meeting Sabon House
 26th Council of Superiors
 27-28th Provincial Council Meeting

Dates to Give Thanks

FEBRUARY

Date	Name	Occasion
08	S David	Ordination
08	A Henriques	Ordination
09	T Shoba (Schol)	Birthday
11	P Schroder	Ordination
12	P Schroder	Birthday
14	S Dube	Birthday
19	S Bate	Ordination
19	P Horrocks	Ordination
19	S Kunene	Ordination
19	D Corijn	Birthday
22	J Patterson	Birthday
23	P Mudzudza (Schol)	Birthday
25	P Ndlovu (Schol)	Birthday
26	Z Ngubane	Birthday
28	M Madlala	Birthday

MARCH

Date	Name	Occasion
09	M Gumede	Birthday
22	N Peters	Birthday
25	A Henriques	Birthday
30	H Niemann	Ordination
31	Mxolisi Ngcobo	Birthday

APRIL

Date	Name	Occasion
01	D Wheatly	Birthday
06	N Nkosi	Ordination
06	B Gumede	Ordination
10	B Gumede	Birthday
24	M Dlamini	Birthday
27	V Mazibuko	Ordination
27	M Ngcobo	Ordination
27	S Dube	Ordination
27	M Ince	Ordination
27	M Madlala	Ordination
28	E Boulle	Birthday
29	M Mchunu	Ordination
29	S Sithole	Birthday

Errors and omissions contact the Administrative Assistant
 (admin@omi.org.za)

OMI NATAL Update

Newsletter of the Natal Province of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate

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This newsletter is available at

www.omi.org.za/natal/news.htm

NATAL PROVINCE CHAPTER REPORT 2010

Part I. Elements of the Current Human Context

1. We are celebrating more than fifteen years of freedom in South Africa.
2. Southern Africa is becoming somewhat more stable, somewhat more democratic and somewhat more prosperous though some significant pockets oppose these trends.
3. The situation in Zimbabwe is an aberration and will eventually change. Then this country will join the rest of the region in reflecting the new emerging realities. Some signs of progress have already been seen with the formation of the unity government in 2009. However there will probably be many ups and downs before a better future comes.
- 4 Currently Zimbabwe generates a refugee crisis which is affecting the rest of the region. *Medicins sans frontieres* estimated that there are 3 million refugees just in South Africa but this figure is disputed¹. The total population of Zimbabwe is only 12 million

5. Principal Social and ecclesial in the two countries include:

5A. *The Information Revolution*

Southern Africa like elsewhere is experiencing the effects of a new global configuration that is transforming the structure, behaviour and beliefs of human life. This 'technological revolution, centred on information technologies' is radically transforming the shape of human society leading to the emergence of new social structures and new social concerns.

5B. *The African Renaissance, the African Union and NEPAD*

The African Renaissance' refers to the emergence of a new consciousness and awareness in the continent expressed as the rise of Africans universally, on the continent and in the Diaspora, from slavery, colonialism, segregation, Apartheid, and neo-colonialism'. The African Union was launched in Durban in July 2002. It took the place of the organisation for African Unity. Its goal is to increase African solidarity, economic and political development and integration. NEPAD is the acronym for The New Partnership for Africa's Development. It is a vision and strategic framework for Africa's renewal. It falls under the African Union

5C. *Special faces of the Poor in Southern Africa*

i. *Poverty and unemployment as apartheid and colonial legacy:*

South Africa is a developing country ranked 85th out of 207 countries in GDP per capita. However it has one of the highest levels of inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient meaning that poverty and unemployment remain huge problems. Zimbabwe is ranked 141st in GDP per capita. Mission here needs to focus on humanising the social victims of apartheid through education, skills training and job creation and collaborative development

ii. *Social and cultural sickness as apartheid and colonial legacy.*

This kind of sickness is the experience of unwellness brought on by psychosocial, economic and spiritual marginalisation and disempowerment. South Africa's very low ranking on the Human development index gives a quantitative statement of this reality. It is 129th in the *Human Development Index* out of 182 countries and only 10th in Africa. Mission needs to focus on developing human dignity in particular on the spiritual and moral level. It requires at least three missionary activities: firstly in a healing ministry of prayer, care and empowerment; secondly, on the level of human and spiritual development, including moral regeneration; thirdly in specific responses to the major symptom of this, the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

iii. *The youth as main social grouping where Catholic influence is declining.*

It is the group most affected by i and ii above. Mission here implies a special focus on new forms of youth ministry which respond to their particular needs. These would include specific programmes of evangelisation amongst youth coupled with attempts to prepare them for a better future

5D. *The Move from Mission Church to Local Church*

Mission churches are dependent for resources: human, material, intellectual, cultural and ministerial. Local churches are rooted in these resources and export them in mission. The current missionary challenge is thus to grow these resources within our own context and to become missionaries elsewhere. The local church increasingly conforms to the requirements of *Ad Gentes 19*.

¹ <http://www.msf.ca/focus-countries/zimbabwe/> For dispute see "Fact or fiction? Examining Zimbabwean cross-border migration into South Africa". Forced Migration Studies Programme (FMSP) & Musina Legal Advice Office (MLAO) Sept 04, 2007

This means that Oblate mission in the local churches we founded must gradually move from supplying basic resources for local churches such as personnel and other resources for parishes and diocesan structures to a search for new forms of mission which respond to the current needs of the poor and marginalised in society

Part II: The Response Of The Natal Province

A. Responses of the Natal Province 1990-2010

Natal province has enabled three major missionary endeavours in the last twenty years. All three are ongoing and are showing pleasing growth and development since the last chapter in 2004.

1. A Focus on the First Formation of Oblates from the African Region and Beyond

St Josephs Scholasticate at Cedara has seen considerable change. In 1990 it was a seminary style scholasticate offering education and formation for priests from a number of congregations. In 1992 it became a house of formation for Oblate scholastics only. A new building comprising small community houses promoted formation within a small group. Each community had a formator as chaplain. The number of Oblate units sending their scholastics has grown and currently there are 63 Oblates in the community from ten Oblate units. In 2009 Cebula House of Formation was constituted at the former Cleland prenovitiate. It offers a prenovitiate programme and Oblate community life for those studying philosophy.

2. The Development of a Tertiary Educational Institution for the Church in Southern Africa

In 1990 St Josephs Theological Institute, Cedara, was established to provide education for those studying for priesthood. Initially offering a seminary programme, it has grown into a tertiary educational institution offering programmes in Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies. In 2004 it was accredited as a tertiary education provider by the South African Government. It is a founder member of the ecumenical Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Institutes. In collaboration with the University of KwaZulu Natal it now offers graduate studies in Theology. In 2009 there were 250 students from 23 countries and 23 religious congregations including 9 congregations of women religious.

3. Transfer of the Zimbabwe Mission to Natal

In 2002 responsibility for the Zimbabwe mission was transferred to the Natal Province. Fr Michael Foley was mission superior until 2007 when Fr Siphon Kunene was appointed. The first Zimbabwean was ordained in 2006 and there are now four Zimbabwean priests. The Government of Robert Mugabe asked three Natal Oblates, including the mission superior, to leave the mission in 2008. Since the Government of National unity, two of them, one the mission superior, have been allowed to return. The Mission is now stabilising and doing well.

B. New Missionary Responses of the Natal Province since the Last Chapter

In 2003 the Province adopted this Mission Statement: *We, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate of the Province of Natal, Called by Jesus Christ to bring good news, Commit ourselves in apostolic communities, Guided by the Spirit, to serve the Church in transition with a renewed response to the poor.* The vision has realised the following developments:

1. The Mission to Youth

The Oblate Youth ministry was established in 2006. A committee drives the ministry and two young Oblates were appointed full time: one in a rural area and one in Durban. The ministry has had considerable success in bringing young people together and developing new youth initiatives such as evangelisation through theatre and the media, youth missions to schools and parishes. Two specific youth centres exist: one in Sydenham in Durban and the other at Inchanga.

2. Retreat and Pilgrimage Ministry

In today's world Retreat and pilgrimage ministry are increasingly important in evangelisation. Since 2005 we have improved our Redacres Retreat centre which is providing excellent facilities at a reasonable cost for ordinary people including youth. It is well utilised and often full. In 2009 we were asked to accept the

Ngome shrine in Eshowe diocese which we will take over in 2010. Two young Oblates will go to develop this ministry. A special focus will be on youth.

3. Missionary Development

In 2009 in collaboration with the Anglo-Irish Province we initiated our missionary development programme. The vision is to co-ordinate and to promote development work involving Oblates. Currently this involves ministry amongst youth, marginalised women, those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS, and education at the secondary and tertiary levels. The purpose of these ministries is to first make people human and then Christian and then saints (St Eugene). From 2010 a team will drive this mission. It will compile a dossier of Oblate development work and provide skills training in project writing. A lay associate is employed in this ministry.

C. Developments in Our Oblate Religious Life since the Last Chapter

In our congresses, strategies were identified to help us to live our Oblate life more deeply. These were: Creating greater province unity; greater commitment local community; owning our giftedness as Oblates; recognising God's spirit working in us; recommitting to regular community and personal prayer; and looking for ways to provide on-going formation. The strategies have been implemented in the following initiatives.

1. Establishing Eight Communities Each With a Superior

Three Oblate Houses were constituted since the last chapter (CIC 608 and R77): Sabon House, Durban, Cebula House, Pietermartizburg and Gerard House, Hilton. Together with our three districts this means that all Oblates are living in one of seven local communities each with a superior. A council of superiors was established in 2008 comprising the Provincial, the Vicar Provincial, Superiors of local communities and the Zimbabwe Mission Superior. Clear authority has been devolved to local superiors so that individual Oblates no longer deal directly with the provincial. A *Training Workshop for Newly Appointed Superiors* was held in December 2008.

2. Building Unity in the Province

Whilst there are good interpersonal relations between Oblates, the demographics of the province show two different groups with different backgrounds, cultures and approaches. There is a predominantly English speaking group of older Oblates mainly missionaries from overseas and English speaking South Africans. There is also a younger, predominantly Black African group. It was clear that in 2005 hegemony in the province was with the older group and little authority had been devolved from this group causing some resentment amongst younger Oblates.

We responded with three strategies: Empowerment of the younger group (our future); implementing ways to ensure respect for cultures; and ensuring ministry placements which break traditional cultural and racial prejudices. Since then more than 20 young or black Oblates have been appointed to leadership positions in the province. These include the Superior of the Zimbabwe mission; the President of St Josephs Theological Institute; ten provincial councillors; the youth ministry committee, the formation committee, and others. Oblate local communities now have black and/or younger leadership. A series of workshops on cultural diversity was conducted 2007. Since 2005 nine younger black Oblates have been appointed to parishes in urban formerly "white" areas.

3. Providing Support for Oblates

The *Missionary Support and Conduct Committee* was initially set up to help Oblates become aware of problems that can occur in ministry and to look at ways to support Oblates in difficult personal circumstances. Initially the group met with experts to build up its capacity to understand professional conduct processes. Subsequently the group split in two. A formal *Professional Conduct Advisory Committee* was set up to help the province deal with accusations against its members. Secondly a *Missionary Support Group* was set up to deal more deeply with matters of personal support of Oblates as well as ways to develop programmes for the whole Province.

Provincial directories been updated to reflect changes in the South African constitution and other legislation since 1994. They include protocols in financial, legal and professional conduct. These will protect and support Oblates and those they minister to, in accordance with the requirements of civil law. Both documents were presented to the Province at the assembly in July 2009. In our ongoing formation programme eight Oblates are currently involved in postgraduate studies and two in courses improving their capacity in ministry.

4. Working towards Financial Sustainability

In the past Natal Province was reasonably sustainable. But in 2005 we began to experience severe financial problems. There were two reasons. The financial meltdown in Zimbabwe meant all resources had to come from Natal. Secondly, the numbers in first formation has grown since 2000 particularly in Zimbabwe. We responded with a number of strategies. More professional campaigns were organised for parish collections. A website was set up for fundraising. Three young Oblates were sent for training in fundraising. Oblate communities and works were required to present budgets and provide annual financial returns encouraging sustainability. Administrative capacity was improved by appointing a fulltime Provincial Treasurer as well as a young Oblate as his part time assistant. He was also sent for training. The Provincial Office was restructured to allow a more effective administration. A number of workshops and courses have been provided to improve our ability to fund raise, do project management, and have a better understanding of financial administration. The results have been reasonable. Local collections have improved. Three ministries have become relatively sustainable. All of our houses are also sustainable except the retirement home which has nevertheless made great strides forward. The Province is now fully compliant regarding banking legislation, labour legislation and tax legislation and is making progress with regard to property legislation and administration. Improved fundraising structures are in place. A few Oblates have developed administration skills. Fortuitously, Capital Sharing II came along and we applied for Zimbabwe. The allocation has rendered the mission sustainable.

D. Declining Ministries

The main ministries in decline are those in parishes in the Archdiocese of Durban. Since 2004 we have given up three parishes in the Archdiocese of Durban. Two more will be given up in 2010. Hospital chaplaincies are also likely to be given up as those doing them retire.

E. Issues for the Chapter

1. Missionary Spirituality

Can the Chapter set in motion a process to characterise the elements of a missionary spirituality for the 21st century globalised world which can drive mission in the way that the geographical model of *Ad Gentes* did in the period of Western hegemony. .

2. Missionary Activity

Can the chapter set in motion a process to examine and coordinate Oblate missionary activity which responds to the global challenges of: a) the information revolution; b) sustainable mission to the underclass in urban informal settlements; c) globalised crime and d) youth.

3. Use of effective Catholic Cultural Symbols and Rituals

Can the chapter address the issue of the role of religious catholic symbols in our community life and mission? Can it examine the effect of secular culture in the congregation in terms of dress codes, religious symbols which no longer carry power and the implementation of rituals of transcendence?

4) Alcoholism and Sexual Misdemeanours

In an increasingly open and promiscuous world can the chapter examine ways to respond to the pressures placed on Oblates to remain faithful in these two areas

Father Stuart C Bate OMI
Provincial

CONVERSION HAPPENS WHEN WE FIND A TREASURE HIDDEN IN A FIELD

Stuart C. BATE OMI

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

Conversion happens when we find a treasure hidden in a field

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

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

Conversion comes from God

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

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

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

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

God's love for us is most fully manifest in the Paschal Mystery in which Jesus shows us the way to salvation. The way of salvation is the way of the cross. It is the fundamental metaphor of conversion. The Divine Son-ship undergoes the final test in the Paschal Mystery. In sending Jesus Christ, the Father has

done all that was possible for the salvation of humanity. After this God remains mute. He has no more to say². At this point without our own conversion to this way of life we cannot respond to God's call.

The Mission of the Holy Spirit is to continually inspire the Church to help people find the treasure through the activity of its members. The Holy Spirit guides all our activities as missionaries of the Church for he is Soul of the Church (EN 75) and principal agent of the whole of the Church's mission (RM 21). In our conversion, the Holy Spirit continually prompts us to live this conversion by convincing us of sin (Jn. 16; DeV 46). For sin leads to death and faith leads to life (Romans 6:23).

We promote conversion when we reveal the treasure to others

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

² St John of the Cross Ascent of Mount Carmel, II, 22, 4 Cfr. Apostolic Letter of His Holiness, John Paul II to the Very Reverend Father Felipe Sainz De Baranda Superior General of the Order of the Discalced Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel on the Occasion of the IV Centenary of the Death of Saint John of the Cross, Doctor of the Church.

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

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

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

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

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

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

From then on the message of Good News becomes an increasingly difficult one: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. (Matt 16: 24-25). This part of the treasure is hard for people to see and accept and as the story goes on, the crowds desert Jesus until on the cross he is alone: abandoned and denied even by his closest disciples. This deeper and harder dimension of Good News is linked to the struggle against evil and the inevitable suffering that this entails. It is about the journey to Jerusalem which will be most fully played out in the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross who, in this act, accomplishes his purpose as saviour of the world (Jn. 19:30)

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

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

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

Conversion happens within culture

1. Within Culture in Christian Activity

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

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

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

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

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

2. Conversion as socialization into the culture of Oblate life

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

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

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

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

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

Religious institutes create points of cultural contradiction within modern society. The ethos of religious life as represented by the vows is in stark contradiction to the prevailing values of most modern societies. In some places where there is a strong cultural root of Christian tradition, the ethos of Religious life may still be seen as important, though impractical in the “real world”. When religious orientate their lives around keeping their vows and religious culture this can be a source of admiration, surprise and praise. Many of the institutions established and maintained by religious have been successful and so earned the praise of the societies within which we work. In this way we reveal another aspect of the treasure to them and this witness challenges secularised value systems more than anything else.

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

To end

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

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