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14

AS I SEE THE FUTURE OF THE CONGREGATION

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Short version for presentation

I would like to begin this reflection on the future of our Congregation with a quote from the Second Vatican Council's constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, which reads: "man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself" (GS 24)¹. The words of our own Constitutions and Rules echo the Council's statement. We read in constitution number two, "Our apostolic zeal is sustained by the unreserved gift we make of ourselves in our oblation"². I would like to suggest two ways in which we can grow in the gift of self, focusing upon the concepts of *desire* and *mission*.

First, a few thoughts on desire. What are we to desire as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate? It is clear that St. Eugene de Mazenod wanted Oblates to be men of desire. Sometime between 1832 and 1837, the Founder wrote a reflection, in which he examined his conscience before confession. He stated, "One must desire it...urge one another on to it...hunger for it; on this hangs all our progress, without that nothing...nothing comes from forcing the heart...when one desires it one applies oneself with ardour to acquiring what one desires"³. As you may have noticed, St.

¹ Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*, 1st ed. (New York: The America Press, 1966). In the Latin original, the unabridged text reads: "Haec similitudo manifestat hominem, qui in terris sola creatura est quam Deus propter seipsam voluerit, plene seipsum invenire non posse nisi per sincerum sui ipsius donum".

² *Constitutions and Rules of the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate* (Rome, 2012), 25.

³ Eugene de Mazenod, *Spiritual Writings (1812-1856)*, trans. Michael Hughes, 1st ed., Oblate Writings 15 (Rome: General Archives O.M.I., 1996), 213. French versions taken from *Ecrits Spirituels*, vol. 15, (Rome: Postulation générale, 1991). In the French original, the text reads: "Il faut le désirer...s'y exciter les uns les autres...fidèles aux exercices de piété qui nous y portent...en être

Eugene keeps using a mysterious *it* in this passage. What is this *it* that we are to desire, hunger, and yearn for? Before I suggest an answer, I would like to pose a question to us all: what do we desire? Possibly many things during a typical day. However, can we say that we have a certain fundamental, basic desire? This is a query that we can – and should – answer in the solitude of our own conscience.

Masters in the spiritual life such as St. Paul the Apostle teach us about the wide range of desire: for example, there exists disordered desire, or as St. Paul labels it, “passion of lust”, by which people are simply consumed (1 Thes 4:5). This disordered desire or passion rages and burns, without giving lasting satisfaction, and leaves in its wake destruction, disquiet, and a deadened conscience. So many times the location of this passion is the flesh, or *σὰρξ*, in St. Paul’s vocabulary. Nevertheless, we should always remind ourselves that Jesus Christ chose to become flesh – *σὰρξ ἐγένετο* – (John 1:14) precisely in order to redeem the flesh and, in fact, to divinize the flesh. The frail human body becomes a co-operator in the work of people’s salvation.

There are other desires, which do not necessarily have the strength of passions, but nevertheless can affect the way we act: for example, the desire to be appreciated and respected by others; or, the need to see the fruit of one’s work; or, the longing for comfort and stability; or the desire for personal autonomy. At this point, it would be helpful to return to St. Eugene’s quote, and define the mysterious *it* of which our Founder spoke. What are we to desire, yearn, and hunger for, as men called to be Missionary Oblates? The Founder gives his one-word answer – “perfection”⁴. Perfection is that which we are to desire.

I do not presume to speak for all cultural environments, but in the context of North America and Western Europe, perfection is not a very popular word. Even in some Catholic circles, perfection is seen as something rather unnatural, forced, and impossible to accomplish. For some, it implies relying too much on one’s own efforts. Others see in the concept of perfection a spirituality that is antiquated and obsolete. Fortunately, St. Eugene develops his thought, and in the same fragment he writes that we are to “dwell in J.C. [Jesus Christ], keep abreast of him...”⁵. This is where the Founder’s words “nothing comes from forcing the heart” begin to make sense. We are to allow Jesus Christ – who dwells in our hearts – to slowly master our desires, remembering that he has come to raise up our weak flesh. First, as St. Paul states, we are to allow him to purify our passions. Second, we ought to permit him to shape disordered desires, such as the need for appreciation, comfort, and autonomy. Finally, we are to allow the Christ to shape our hearts. Then we will not be forced – but attracted – toward the greatest good, who is the Triune God himself.

After these thoughts on desire, I would like to briefly mention some reflections on mission. If we – as Missionary Oblates – are called to grow in the gift of self, are we not then called to help others to grow in their own self-gift? Certainly, the answer is a resounding *yes*. *Gaudium et Spes*, the conciliar constitution already cited, speaks of the family as a “kind of school of deeper humanity” (GS 52)⁶. I believe that in the future, Oblates should focus more on accompanying families. This is a mission that is universal, for the family unit is present on all continents. We

affames ; de là dépend tout notre avancement, sans cela rien...point par force du cœur...quand on a le désir on s’applique avec ardeur à acquérir ce que l’on désire”.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. In the French original: “pour demeurer en J.-C. marcher au même pas que lui”.

⁶ Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*.

can accompany men and women in preparation for marriage; we can work with married couples in making their family life richer; finally, we ought not to abandon marriages and families in crisis. Working with families is often demanding, mainly because family life itself is demanding. Still, there is another challenging aspect to family ministry – it can happen that by working with families we begin to face the painful situations of our own family members, be it our parents, brothers or sisters. This is something that our Founder too had to face, after the breakdown in the marriage of his father and mother. Despite its difficulties, I would suggest that accompanying families is a field of mission for the Oblates. The family – as a humanizing influence – fits in well with the Oblate charism enunciated by the Founder: “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”⁷.

As we reflect upon the future of our Congregation, let us consider Missionary Oblates as men of desire. We are to strive for perfection, and that perfection is not a theory or an ideology, but a person – Jesus Christ. We are to desire the Christ. In various moments of the day, we are to be mindful of our desires, and should always strive to direct our yearning to the only person who can fulfill them – the Divine being. Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* reminded us that we cannot fully find ourselves without a sincere gift of ourselves, something echoed in the Constitutions and Rules. That leads us to a field of mission in accompanying families, which are training sites for *becoming gift*, schools of deeper humanity. In closing, I am reminded of a saying made famous by a certain formator in the Oblate seminary at Obra in Poland, who used to repeat the phrase “oby tylko chcieli chcieć!” – a loose translation being – “would that at least they desire to desire!” With these words, let us allow Jesus Christ to mold and shape our desires, our mission, and our gift of self.

⁷ *Constitutions and Rules of the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate*, 20. French version taken from *Constitutions et Règles de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée* (Rome, 2012). In the French original: “rendre les homes raisonnables, puis chrétiens, enfin les aider à devenir les saints”.