



The Oblate Associate

A Newsletter for Oblate Associates in the United States

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November 2008

OBLATES AND LAY ASSOCIATES INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION MEETING

From June 2 – 5, 2008, the members of the International Commission for Oblate Associates met in Rome, Italy. After the resignation of one of the members from Canada this summer, Geri Furmanek, USA National Director for Oblate Associates was appointed by the General Council to the Commission. It is an honor to serve the OMI Congregation in this capacity and it was a pleasure to share with the Commission members about each of the Associate groups in the USA via a powerpoint presentation. In this newsletter Fr. Sal de George and I share the report from our meeting.



Meeting participants: Front row L to R: Fr. Jean-Marcel Gatshuya, Anne-Yvonne le Cloirec, Fr. Oswald Firth, Father General Guillermo Steckling, Denise Heon; Middle row, L to R: Geri Furmanek, Omar Tejería, Laura Nuin, Beltrán Acosta, Sr. Berchmans (translator); Back row, L to R: Andrzej, O.M.I. (commission secretary), Trudy & David Maiden, Fr. Santiago Lyons, Fr. Sal de George, Fr. Frank Santucci [hidden in back] (Charism and Founder Animator), Teodori Vincenzo.

MEMBERS OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION

AFRICA - MADAGASCAR: Ms. Malebohang Veronica Ntja {Lesotho, South Africa}

LATIN AMERICA: Mr. Beltrán Acosta {Paraguay}

Omar Tejería {Uruguay}

Laura Nuin {Uruguay}

ASIA – OCCEANIA: Mr. Peter Liu {Hong Kong}

David & Trudy Maiden {Australia}

CANADA – USA: Ms. Denise D. Heón {Trudeau, Canada}

Ms. Geralyn (Geri) Furmanek {USA}

EUROPE: Mr. Teodori Vincenzo (Enzo) {Italy (Frosinone)}

Ms. Anne-Yvonne le Cloirec {Ploermal, France}

OBLATES: Fr. Jean-Marcel Gatshuya {Rep. Dem. Du Congo}

Fr. Salvatore de George {USA}

Fr. Lauro S. de Guia {Cotabato City, Philippines}

Fr. Santiago Lyons {México D.F.}

IDENTITY OF THE LAY ASSOCIATE

- What are the essential characteristics that help define the nature, function and role of a Lay Associate? What is more important is the “being” of the Lay Associate, than “doing” something as Lay Associates.
- Does the term “Oblate Partners in Mission” fully determine the nature of the Lay Associates? In some countries, ‘partner’ would refer to a funding relationship. Some still prefer the term “Associate”. Some others prefer a more generic term such as members of the “Oblate Family or the Mazenodian Family”. This model of the “Family” seems to best describe the prevailing relationship between Oblates and Lay Associates: all belong to the same family but having ‘complementary’ tasks and functions. One group does not replace or undermine the other within the “Family”. We need to recognize and appreciate the diversity of groups that form the “Family”.
- The model that determines the Associates of the Holy Family of Bordeaux are too formal and too rigidly structured. The Associates that form part of the Vincentian Family are too loosely structured. We need to find a model between the two where Lay Associate groups would have some common characteristics, yet different in terms of context, history, culture, specific needs, etc.
- There are common characteristics that determine belonging to the “Family”. They are: the charism of St. Eugene, Oblate spirituality and tradition, regular prayer and community faith sharing, apostolic work with the poor and the most abandoned, openness to cultural differences, having an Oblate as animator within the group.

REPORTS FROM THE REGIONS

Asia-Oceania:

- Peter Liu of Hong Kong was unable to attend due to his duties as a teacher.
- Fr. Lauro de Guia had problems with obtaining a visa.
- The 2004 General Chapter called for specific action:
 - a. Each Oblate Unit to review its own commitment to forms of association in the areas of ministry, formation, community life and charism; and
 - b. Establish a Commission of Oblates and Associates to explore structures that would promote association.
- In 2006 the Provincial Council responded to this call and established a **Project Team**. The Project Team concluded:
 1. The approach to encouraging association should be as open and flexible as possible, in order to be inclusive.
 2. The formal term “Associate” had different meanings for different people and had exclusive connotations.
 3. The concept of “Oblate Family” was representative of the situation we are in: “people with different roles, responsibilities, abilities and ages, sharing a common meal and a common spirit”.
 4. “Association” was best viewed as a verb (a process) rather than as a noun (formal organization structure).
 5. The Oblate Family includes the Congregation and all lay people who identify with the Oblates and the charism/spirit of the Founder.

The Project Team therefore adopted the working title of ‘Oblate Family Committee.’

➤ Current Activities:

- Preparation of Formation Flyers for July celebrations (IOYE/WYD= World Youth Day) and Feast of the Immaculate Conception;
- Examination of a Christmas Card concept in which each member of the Oblate Family is given a card at the start of Advent and is asked to pray for another element/ministry of the Australian Oblate family;

REPORTS FROM THE REGIONS *cont.*

- Review of publication “Sharing the Oblate Spirit”(1994) with a view to its use as a formation resource;
- Review outcome of 2008 meeting of Commission of Oblates and Associates for guidance/opportunities for further action;
- Examine concept of small, ministry-based groups for formation and missionary action;
- Examine how to broaden representation on Committee, and/or have greater involvement outside Melbourne.
- The Australian team has made inroads into mainland China and is preparing a group of volunteers to work there for six months as English teachers.
- Need to have a layperson from the Philippines on the team.
- **Africa-Madagascar:**
 - The need for lay members on the Commission.
 - Distances to cover are too great.
 - Need to take into account Francophone and Anglophone Units.
 - Financial needs are to be considered. Present resources are limited.
 - The Oblate animator wants more training to help associates and he wants more exposure.
 - How will Madagascar be represented?
- **Europe**
 - The representative personally met Associate groups in Italy, Germany, Spain, plans to visit Poland and other Eastern European countries.
 - Right now, he is all by himself. Need for another dynamic lay person and an Oblate.
 - Europe prefers the term “Associates” to “Partners”, because the former is task-oriented while the latter is not.
 - Groups in Europe prefer a flexible model to accommodate different lifestyles and groups (youth, women, etc.).
 - Aix Congress documents need to be studied and developed.
 - A Congress at the regional level is needed to include many different groups.
 - Vowed religious need to recognize the complementary nature, role and function of the laity. The laity are not ‘mini-religious’. Having spent years in mission work, what would be the future of the lay associate? What about health insurance? Pension?
 - Many Oblates are still not familiar with the Aix Congress. Will it be the same with future documents?
 - Oblates work in 67 countries. Will we be able to identify at least one contact person per Unit?
 - Does the ‘Charm School’ Orientation Program have provision to speak about the ‘complementary role’ of the laity in the Congregation?
 - Will the Oblate mission be complete without lay participation? In other words, what role does the laity play in our mission.
- **Latin America**
 - Started living the charism 10 years ago. We are still a young group, but the distances we have to cover is too great.
 - Communication is very difficult. Some of us do not even have a computer through which to communicate. One person has to travel 10 km to find a computer to communicate.

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REPORTS FROM THE REGIONS *cont.*

- We have no idea of all the lay groups working with Oblates.
 - We have to live, work, study and support our families as lay persons. Our resources are very limited. We have different tools and different means to work.
 - Do we have a space on the OMI webpage? Can we send information to that webpage?
 - In Latin America using the term “partners” or “associates” is acceptable.
 - We have a three year program based on the words of St. Eugene: First year, to make people more human, second year, to make them good Christians, and third year, to make them saints.
 - We continue to work on the four points decided on last year.
 - Not all parishes are still ready to organize lay associate groups.
 - Our monthly meetings last a whole day and we want our children to be with us so that they too could become part of the associates.
 - Some of us work as pastoral ministers: catechists, ministers of the Eucharist, working with youth and children.
 - Training of the lay associate includes one year of accompaniment, an initial formation for three years, then they make a commitment for 6 years, and after 12 years a commitment until death.
- **Canada-USA**
 - Volumes of very rich material have been produced in print and electronic form to help in the formation of Lay Associates. These could be made available.
 - Lay Associates play an important role in the life of the provinces.
 - We prefer the name: “Lay Oblate Partners” as an ‘umbrella term’ for all lay associations. We insist that we are lay persons associated to Oblates. Oblate lay associates collaborate with Oblates and live the charism. This distinguishes them from the rest of the Christians. “Oblate Partners in Mission” does not suit us. We prefer “Lay Oblate Partners”.
 - As for formation of Lay Associates, we agree that there be a team of formators. First formation should include: Coming to know Eugene De Mazenod, the Oblate charism, the Oblates and the Oblate Mission. More advanced formation should include a deeper understanding of the writings of St. Eugene, and teachings by Oblates on the charism and mission of Oblates. It is also important that Oblates who accompany the laity go through a process of formation on the role of the laity.
 - We need to be inspired by the Aix Congress of 1996, which can serve as a guide. This Congress gave us the identity of lay associates, and spoke of their formation.
 - As for structures: There should be a Directory which proposes the number of meetings a year, themes for meetings, and tells us whether we are on the right track instead of telling the associates what to do. The directory should also provide directives for the election of permanent committees (international, provincial, local), with certain orientations.

INPUT TALKS

- Sr. Winifreda Wasalathanthri: Holy Family of Bordeaux
 - All are associates in the Congregation. Some are religious, others are lay associates. All have the same roots, spirituality and mission.
 - The entire Congregation is structured in such a way that lay associates have definite links at different levels of the Congregation, whether this be international, regional or local.

- Fr. Manuel Ginete: Congregation of the Vincentians
 - There are numerous lay groups that are associated with the Congregation. The links that bind them are very loose and are mainly through the charism and charitable works.

- Fr. Steckling, O.M.I. General Superior: *Call of the Laity in the Church and in the Congregation*
 - First “Who are we”, second, “What is our Work...our Mission”.
 - What are we in the eyes of faith: Eugene’s sermon at La Madelaine to the poor and marginalized: “You are God’s children...”
 - Called by the Love of Christ; called to serve and called to be sanctified.
 - Respond to God’s love through prayer; build an Oblate partners community; and serve God in the poor.
 - Do not quench the life of the spirit in and through the laity.
 - Use the services of the Regional Secretariats to push forward with work of the associates.
 - Laity represented on Congregation’s structures: just make it happen. Don’t wait for Constitutions, just do it. We have already started with some provinces and with recent General Chapters.
 - Appointing a lay person in each Region to promote Lay Associates. This idea must come from the group. This means to get organized. Present it in the right way!
 - The lay associates help us to get connected to people, to get closer to them.

- Fr. Oswald Firth, O.M.I. General Councilor: *The Mission of the Oblates*
 - The first ten CC RR and how this is a call to mission also to the lay associates.
 - The various types of mission to which both Oblates and lay associates are called.
 - The challenge of mission today.

- Fr. Frank Santucci: *Deeper understanding of the Eugene’s Charism*
 - Questions posed by Eugene: Who is God for me?
 - Who am I?
 - What must I do?
 - Experience of Eugene’s conversion
 - Eugene’s personal response: To look at himself and the world with eyes of faith.
 - Eugene was a Powerhouse: a source of energy, a dynamo.
 - Wanted to lead others to the same experience of the Savior.
 - Who were the poor?
 - Those who were not being touched by the Church’s structures and ministry.
 - Those who did not know that Jesus was their Savior.
 - Those who did not live in relationship with the Savior.
 - Methodology: ‘Be’ in order to ‘Do’.
 - Be yeast; Be witnesses.

- Proposals

1. Create a small committee (2-3 persons) to gather existing information. The committee: Fr. Frank Santucci, GERALYN Furmanek, Fr. Santiago Lyons.
2. Financial resources need to be sought to support a project person dedicated to the work of the Commission. Geri will supply a guideline for budget, etc.
3. 2-3 persons to be in touch with O.M.I. Formation Committee.
4. Propose the 9 points raised during the 1977 Charism Congress as a resource for formation of Associates.
5. Holding a Congress before the General Chapter 2010.
6. Organize Congress at Regional level.
7. Each representative on the Commission should return home and by September prepare a report on the work accomplished and have it published in the respective Unit's publications.
8. With the energy that we were blest with during these days, have at least one project organized for the coming year.
9. Recommend that a lay associate from the Philippines be on the Commission because the Unit has many active lay groups.
10. Next Commission meeting to be in Rome in October, with regional meetings in 2009/2010, also with the intention of preparing for the General Chapter. Possible theme: "Where have we come from, where are we going".
11. Latin America Region is very extensive. We need to divide the Region. There are very few associates in Latin America, and we do not have any experience of organizing a Congress. They would like to participate in one before preparing one.
12. In Africa we are still in a period of learning as regards Lay Associates. Before we organize a Congress in Africa, we would like to attend a Congress being organized elsewhere.
13. Ask Regions whether they have resources for a Congress.
14. Can the General Administration support us financially if a Congress is organized, especially for those regions that need financial support?
15. Better that we leave 2010 to work on our intervention at the General Chapter.

NEXT MEETING - Next Meeting of the Commission: October 2009 in Rome.

FINAL NOTES -

1. Commission members please use the internet to communicate with the International group.
2. Make your communication short, and let everyone know whether the message was received.
3. Could the Lay Associates have a webpage to post what happened last year and this year? We need to contact Fr. Jim Allen and Fr. Nino Bucca.
4. The new Directory should include the names and contact addresses of the members of the Commission.
5. Denise Heon will continue to be the president of the Commission for the year 2008/2009.
6. Group photograph with Fr. General after the celebration of the Eucharist.
7. Each Commission member will receive a CD with the power-point presentations. Thanks to Thomas, O.M.I and Andrzej, O.M.I.
8. Thanks to the translators: Paola Fabrisi (French-English) and Sr. Mary Berchmans (Spanish-English).
9. Thanks to the secretary: Geri Furmanek.

DRAFTING FINAL STATEMENTS (these statements can be found on the following pages)

- **Structure and Model of Lay Associate groups:** Omar, David, Laura, Fr. Jean-Marcel and Fr. Sal
- **On the Congress:** Anne-Yvonne and David.
- **Formation plan of Lay Associates:** Denise, Trudy, Beltrán, Fr. Santiago and Geri

Being an Lay Oblate Associate is one of the many forms of association within the Oblate Family. In relation specifically to Lay Oblate Associates the International Commission recommends the following to the General Administration.

N.B. Keep in mind that certain principles* form the basis of the formation of Lay Oblate Associate Groups.

Complimentarity

Golden Rule; i.e. laity respect the charism as lived by professed Oblates and the professed Oblates respect the Lay Vocation.

Ideal is not a common life but a **common structure** for common communion.

Structure must be elastic yet visible and organized and capable of providing support and animation to the groups.

Structure is directed towards evangelizing, planning and evaluating together.

*(see especially Vie Oblate, Volume 54, pp. 14-16 with text of description by Fr. Zago, OMI)

Against the background of these principles the Lay Associate Commission proposes a simple structure to guide our gatherings.

1. A monthly meeting that includes time for:
 - prayer
 - formation in the charism of St. Eugene
 - community building
 - sharing of ministries
2. An annual retreat to ensure a deeper formation in the Oblate charism.

We also propose that the General in Council encourage the strengthening of existing Lay Oblate Associate groups with this simple structure as well as the creation and formation of new groups. Already formed Oblate Lay Associates would serve as the best resource to help form the new communities. (The Local Oblate Administration will be informed about the new communities.)

PROPOSAL FOR THE YEAR 2008/2009

- **REPORT OF THREE DAYS WORK OF THE COMMISSION** -Forward to the respective provincials and their councils a report on the three days work (2-5 June 2008), to be published in the official bulletin of the respective provinces.
 - **MEETING OF THE COMMISSION OF OBLATES AND LAY ASSOCIATES** – October 2009 in Rome. Add to the Commission a lay member from the Philippines as soon as possible.
 - **CONGRESS**
 - Objectives: 1) To create the dynamics necessary at the level of the Region or province/delegation to help identify the lay associate members and to provide them with the opportunity to get to know one another.
 - 2) To have a better knowledge and understanding of the charism of the Founder and the challenges it brings.
 - For Whom?: For lay persons who are well motivated who will subsequently engage others in the places where they live and establish a link among the different Mazenodian involvements.
 - Date and Place for Europe: From Friday 19th to Sunday (evening) 21st June 2009 at Pozuelo in Madrid.
 - Themes and Issues to be Surfaced:
 - An exchange of our experiences and the realities that we encounter.
 - Formation based on the Founder's charism.
 - The challenges of tomorrow.

- NB:** 1) Each Region will decide whether or not to hold a congress following its needs, capacity and down to earth reality of the Region.
- 2) Financial requirements: participating laity will be requested to make a small contribution depending on their means.
- 3) To make the Congress in Europe a rich experience, we strongly desire the presence of delegates from Africa and Europe.

FORMATION FOR OBLATE ASSOCIATES

Throughout the world, groups of laity have special bonds with the Oblate Congregation and the charism of St. Eugene. Provinces and Delegations are directed by the Rule to foster the development of Oblate Associations in their areas. The role of Oblate Associates is clearly recognized by the Oblates in their *Constitutions and Rules*. Rule 37a, adopted in 2000, states:

The charism of St. Eugene de Mazenod is a gift of the Spirit to the Church and it radiates throughout the world. Lay people recognize that they are called to share in the charism according to their state of life, and to live it in ways that vary according to milieu and cultures... in a spirit of communion and reciprocity amongst themselves and with the Oblates.

In response to a call from Christ, Lay Associates live their baptism, enlightened as they are by the charism of Eugene de Mazenod. Animated by a family spirit, they share among themselves and with Oblates the same spirituality and missionary outlook. (May 1996 Aix document)

Oblate Associates are encouraged to learn more about the life and charism of St. Eugene and the mission and spirituality of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate during the process of formation.

At the local level, there is initial and on-going formation--

- ❖ **Initial formation**, in which the person is initiated into the life of the Founder.
- ❖ **On-going formation**, in which the following topics are explored:
 - Charism of St. Eugene
 - Prayer
 - Vocation of the laity
 - Community
 - Outreach to the poor and most abandoned
 - Jesus Christ
 - the Cross
 - Mary
 - the Church

At the Provincial level, there is support for the Associates by—

- ❖ Ensuring that formation takes place in each area by a lay person and an Oblate. The Oblate on this team is chosen for his understanding of the lay vocation and the charism of St. Eugene, and appointed by the Provincial.
- ❖ The appointment of a province committee to support the local groups. This committee is to be composed of no more than 7 persons, with 1-3 Oblates represented.

Oblate Associates both extend the reach of the Oblates, and enrich the community with their own experiences. They strive to live the charism of St. Eugene de Mazenod in the different aspects of their daily lives by building relationships based on the dignity of each person and the love of Jesus Christ crucified.