

## Reflection for Assumption Province Congress

Delivered via Skype, on Tuesday, January 19, 2016.

My dear confreres, I have been asked to reflect with you on the future. This is not to predict the future, because predicting the future is risky and counterproductive. We can't even guess what the price of gas will be, much less tell the future. The theme of my talk is possible future directions for Assumption Province, the Oblate unit to which we belong. Assumption Province is our common Oblate home, so to speak. And so I would like to invite you to reflect with me on our common Oblate home with the use of three words: uniqueness, freedom, and communion.

Let's start with "uniqueness". It's my conviction, that when speaking about large realities, such as a congregation, a province, or a district, it's necessary to start with the person – because large realities are composed of people. Oblate units are made of consecrated men. And so, we start with ourselves – each and everyone of us. Dear confreres, as we look across the room at ourselves, we see many things in common. We have been called to consecrated life, to living the vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and perseverance. We have been called to live our consecrated life and our mission in community. Many of us have been called to the ministerial priesthood; some have been called to be brothers. So, we have many things in common. And yet, each of us is unique, and our call, our personal vocation, is unique. There is a fascinating Scripture verse in the Book of the Apocalypse, which reads, "To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it" (Rev 2:17, NRSV). Each of us has received a "white stone with a name that no one knows". Each of us has his own, personal way of being: a Christian, a religious, a brother, a priest<sup>1</sup>. This way of being is entrusted to us by God. Because God knows the name written on the little "white stone", that the book of Revelation speaks about. "Uniqueness" - each of us has received a unique, distinctive personal way of being, that nobody else has. This individual, one-of-a-kind way of being can affect our "doing", or the ministry that we accomplish as Oblates. For example, there are people who excel in pastoral ministry, others do well at teaching, others still in being chaplains, others in administration. These particular missions need to be discerned first individually, and then in community. This, I believe, needs to be a key element upon which we can base the task of choosing future directions for our province. Why? Because we can only discern the future of Assumption Province while being attentive to the personal vocations of the Fathers and Brothers that make up Assumption Province. As I said, we have many things in common, things that unite us: religious vows, the way we minister as a group; also our being priests and brothers. In this commonality, however, each of us has been given his own particular, unique way of being – a Christian, a religious, a priest or a brother. This can lead to a mission, which needs to be discerned first individually, and then in common. And so, "uniqueness" is our first word.

The second word that I'd like to bring into this reflection is "freedom". We hear a lot about freedom these days. It seems that in our culture, the freedom of the individual is one of the highest values of all. To give you an example – last Sunday was supposed to be a day without cars in Rome. Every so often, the municipality bans private cars in a certain area of the city, to reduce smog and improve air quality. Sunday was supposed to have been a day like that.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Herbert Alphonso, *The Personal Vocation. Transformation in Depth Through the Spiritual Exercises*, 9th ed. (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2006), 41.

However, Sunday was also the last day of the post-Christmas sales in stores. The municipal office had to back down on the ban of cars, because people wanted to drive, in order to buy things on sale. It seems that the freedom of the individual – and the force of the market - was more important than the quality of the air in the city.

I would like to contrast this idea of “freedom of the individual” with “freedom of the consecrated man”. For us, as consecrated men, priests and religious, “freedom” is our freedom for the mission. We are called to desire the freedom that makes us available for the mission. Constitution 25 from our Constitutions and Rules, speaking about the vow of obedience, puts it this way “Religious obedience is our way of making real the freedom of the Gospel, in common submission to God's will”. As consecrated men, we have a deep need in us, I believe, to really immerse ourselves in the mission. We have a need to be fruitful, to be fertile, through our mission. When you and I put everything we have into the mission, we make a gift of ourselves – we live our Oblation. The Second Vatican Council’s constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, echoes this sentiment, saying: “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). St. John Paul II, one of the co-authors of sections of *Gaudium et Spes*, would take up this statement many times in his writings. When we reflect on our personal freedom for the mission, we also need to take account of the things that block our freedom – the things that weigh us down. These things can be both internal and external. They can distract us, confuse us, absorb us or even frighten us – in the end, we become less free, less available for the mission, and paradoxically, less satisfied with ourselves. Still, the divine life that Jesus Christ has put into our hearts is more powerful than anything that may bind you and me. The divine life that we carry inside, is freedom. And it is through our freedom that we live our consecration, our priesthood and our brotherhood.

Thus far, we have reflected upon two key words: “uniqueness”, in relation to our personal vocation, and “freedom” as in freedom for mission. At this time, I’d like to mention the third key word, which is “communion”. The opposite of communion seems to be alienation. Alienation is the deep sense of not being rooted, of being separated, disconnected from the “other”. At the beginning of one of his essays from the 1970’s, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła questioned whether our entire Western civilization is not threatened by alienation – not just due to technology, but also due to the breakdown of human relations<sup>2</sup>. We seem to be more disconnected from each other. The experience of immigration only adds to the sense of being disconnected, as people are separated from families and familiar surroundings. Can we, as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, in Assumption Province, help people to reconnect? First and foremost, we can do this through ministry to families. We 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. Families don’t have fixed schedules and on a daily basis have to deal with unforeseen situations. Still, there is

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<sup>2</sup> Karol Wojtyła, “Uczestnictwo czy alienacja?,” in *Osoba i czyn oraz inne studia antropologiczne*, 3rd ed., Człowiek i moralność, IV (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 2011), 456. In the Polish original: “Zachodzi pytanie, czy niebezpieczeństwem alienacji nie jest zagrożona cała nasza cywilizacja, zwłaszcza atlantycka, z jej prymatem interesu i techniki. Prócz tego przykładów takiej alienacji dostarcza - z pewnością w wymiarach mniej drastycznych, choć często bardzo dotkliwych - życie codzienne....Każdy z nas bowiem przeżywa swoje własne człowieczeństwo w proporcji do tego, jak zdolny jest uczestniczyć w człowieczeństwie drugih, przeżywać ich jako "drugie 'ja'”.

another challenging aspect to family ministry – it can happen that by working with families we are reminded of the painful situations of our own family members. This is something that St. Eugene de Mazenod, our Founder, too had to face, after the breakdown in the marriage of his father and mother. Closely tied with family ministry is youth ministry, because young people often are heavily affected by conflicts in their families.

In concluding my reflection on future directions for Assumption Province, I would like to repeat the three key themes of this talk. Uniqueness: each of us has received his own way of being an Oblate and a religious. Freedom: let us desire to be free for the mission. Communion: by working with the family, we can help people overcome alienation and reconnect with each other. When Oblates here in Rome ask me “how big is Assumption Province”, I reply that we’re not a big province, but we’re strong and relatively young. This is why we can do many good things. Thank you for your attention.

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