

“What’s Emerging from our History? – A Lay Persons Perspective”
Whither goest thou?
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I was asked to prepare a paper that provided a lay perspective on the direction of future work of the Oblates, as rooted in the history of their work in Canada. But first, I must inform you, the audience, of my perspective, of where I am coming from: I am speaking to you from a lay perspective, as a person of faith, as a woman, as a historian and as someone who has spent a significant portion of her life within the Oblate sphere of influence. The focus of today’s presentation will be the nexus of past and future. I want this talk to be about **looking back into the future**. This is quite a conundrum, but I believe that we see where we can go, what our future can be for us, only by examining where we have come from, being able to distill what is most important and how it can aid in guiding our future actions. The prism through which I approached *your* history focuses on the two themes of **aggiornamento** and **reading the signs of the times**—so, *Renewal* and really, the *Application of this Renewal*. So how have the Oblates “read the signs of their times” while applying this to their mandate, “the evangelization of the most abandoned”? Given our time together, I want to focus on four specific themes, which are borne out from the Oblates’ historical legacy, but which strongly resonate into the future.

1. Oblates: Serving the Marginalized and the Abandoned

The first theme, not surprisingly, zeroes in on the continued work of the Oblates amongst the marginalized, the abandoned, and the vulnerable. Oblates first arrived in the British colony of the Province of Canada in 1841. Within a decade, they expanded their geographical reach to northern and western Canada, serving the most marginalized peoples on the Prairies: initially, the First Nations Peoples, and then, East-Central European immigrants. These two groups were on the fringes of the larger Anglo-Protestant society because of their race, language, culture, and/or religion. But to the Oblates, they were simply considered God’s People. Neither the territorial vastness of Canada nor the harsh conditions prevented their ministry. They remained **mobile** and **responsive**, building missions and parishes in remote areas. Father Anthony Sylla, for example, travelled almost 8000 km in 1911, while ministering to various communities in Western Canada. The Oblates knew how to mobilize scarce resources and small communities to build new missions or chapels. This trend would continue with the urbanization of Polish immigrants. So, after the Great War, for instance, we see the arrival of the Oblates in Toronto, responding to a lack of continuity of Polish clergy. By the mid-1930s, they took over the two existing Polish parishes, St. Stanislaus Kostka and St. Mary’s, and over the course of the next 70 years, they began the construction of several other churches in the area.

What needs to be emphasized is that the Oblates were always concerned about the whole person. When concern arose about the Poles’ economic needs, and their inability to access existing financial institutions, they built the St. Stanislaus-St. Casimir’s Polish Credit Union. Or when marriages and families were being undermined by new socio-economic trends, they created the Queen of Apostles Renewal Centre. Concern for the aging population led to the building of seniors’ residences, the Copernicus Lodge and Villa Polonia. When they recognized that the community needed spiritual renewal, they established shrines and led pilgrimages.

2. Oblates: Listeners, Discerners and Collaborators

The second theme focuses on the Oblates as listeners, discerners and partners. In serving the “least among them”, the Oblate leadership demonstrated a great capacity for *listening*,

hearing, and *discerning* the needs of their flock, as opposed to imposing a specific vision onto the community. Over the course of their Canadian history, Oblates have continuously *engaged* with their communities to ascertain their trepidations, and the venues for solving these apprehensions. The need to listen and hear the voices of their flocks was instrumental in furthering a sense of partnership between laity and clergy. Nothing reveals this more than an evaluation of parish life. The parishioners of Toronto's St. Stan's parish were concerned with the maintenance of Polish language, culture and history. This resulted with Fr. Puchniak creating Polish language classes. Winnipeg's Holy Ghost parish, experienced similar anxieties. By means of a collaborative relationship with Oblate leadership, the parishioners built a distinct cultural life which flourished alongside its spiritual life. The parish had its own drama group, choir and library. It also established a variety of organizations that were both religious and non-religious in nature, such as: the Sodality of the Holy Rosary; the St. Vincent de Paul Society; the Polish Falcon's Society; the Polish National Alliance; Polish Immigration Association; and Polish Alliance just to name a few. Clearly, the Oblates' ability to **listen**, to **hear**, to **discern**, the needs of their flock, and finally, to **utilize** the talents of both lay women and men, and to **collaborate** with their flocks, has led to a strong and established relationship between the laity and the Oblate Order.

3. Oblates as "Life Coaches"

The term "life coach" has become a buzz word for a modern society, but I think that it can also be a useful label to capture the Oblates' work within the communities under their charge, demonstrating the ways their work extended far beyond the walls of the church. Oblates served as legal representatives, organizers, teachers, social workers, counsellors, and broadcasters. They served as "dating agents" through whom one was introduced to one's future spouse. They served as "unemployment centres" directing people to jobs in different parts of the country. They served as translators for Poles who had very little knowledge of English, and as educators, launching English classes. The Oblates also became a means by which family members who were searching for each other across the continent or even across the ocean were able to reconnect. The community saw the parish and its spiritual leader as being responsible for both the religious and the ethno-cultural wellbeing of the community.

The Oblates recognized the importance of ethnic and cultural subtleties, and became adept at navigating what can often be a highly challenging and charged conundrum. For instance, they could respond to the needs of both the first and the second generations of Polish Canadians. Though the first generation was interested in cultural preservation, the second generation had different aspirations that were more Canadian-oriented. So, by creating youth groups and youth organizations in parishes, for example, Oblates were able to conceive an environment where the concerns of different generations could be addressed. As "life coaches" the Oblates' role has extended beyond that of just priest, to that of father, family member, and friend. Their role was always multifunctional denoting Oblate openness and ability to be part of the larger community.

4. Oblates as Readers of the Signs of the Times

Finally, the last theme depicts the Oblates as readers of the signs of the times. Oblates have continuously adapted to the changing socio-cultural, political and economic contexts that have affected their flocks. There are too many initiatives to mention, so I will hone in on three examples. The Oblates, under the initiative of Fr. Wojciech Kulawy, established the first Canadian Polish newspaper, *Gazeta Katolicka*, or the Catholic Gazette, in 1908. Kulawy recognized that the Polish immigrants were dispersed throughout Western Canada at that time, isolated from Catholic churches and other Poles. The purpose of the paper was to counteract this

isolation, so the paper contained reprints and exposition of Gospel texts, along with other articles educating the reader on the observation of Catholic values. However, it did not stop there. The majority of the paper's content focused on informing its readership about the political, economic and social issues in Poland, Canada and abroad. The paper became the main means by which the Poles were able to stay informed, stay connected to each other, and stay connected to their faith. It also demonstrated how forward-thinking the Oblates were, when in the interwar years, from 1918 to 1921, the paper came under the editorship of, Zofia Rapalska, one of the only female editors in Polish-Canadian journalism.

The establishment of KSM or Catholic Youth Studio in 1994 by Fr. Marian Gil is another good case in point. It first utilized the radio and then the internet as a medium to access the Catholic masses. Within two years of its creation, KSM was airing daily programs, and since 2001, its work expanded to the English speaking audience through Catholic Radio Toronto. For many young people, the program has become a forum for expressing their hopes, dreams and concerns. For families, it has become a source of information and education. And for the elderly it has become a window to the outside world. KSM published the magazine, *Rodzina* (Family) that served Polish-speaking families across Canada. It also led to the creation of the International Festival of Religious Song and a countless number of cultural-religious events.

Even the establishment of the Assumption Province in 1956 by Fr. Leo Deschatelets demonstrates a response to the changing times and needs. The growing number of Poles in the interwar years initiated a debate about a separate Polish province. In 1926, St. Mary's and St. Peter's Provinces were separated from the old French provinces on the basis of language and nationality, falling under the administrative jurisdiction of the Germans. Though there was consideration for a Polish province at that time, the Polish Oblates felt that they would not be unable to sustain this enterprise. The influx of Polish immigrants in the post-war period, and an increase in the number of Polish-speaking Oblates, created the means by which a Polish province could exist.

Conclusion:

So how can we summarize this formidable history by looking towards the future? Well, we can ask the following: Who are the marginalized of today—within society and amongst your flocks? In what way are they being marginalized? What are your parishioners trying to tell you about the challenges they face on a daily basis? Pastors, what are your vicars trying to tell you about what the flock needs? What are the new initiatives and collaborations that are needed today to meet these challenges? Your history has taught us that it's not enough to say "That's life!" and resign ourselves to the status quo. Christ was radical. We are called to be radical. He—like you—associated himself with the most marginalized in society: the tax collector, the unclean woman, the prostitute. He never accepted the status quo. We are called to bring about change. Your order has been bringing about change since its arrival to Canada in 1841. They were not disheartened by the challenges that came with ministering to those found among the lowest ranks of society. Instead, the Oblates found a home among the lowest of the low. They reaffirmed the dignity of these people. Most times we hear the following saying, "don't let your history define you". In your particular case, I say "**let your [collective] history define you**". You have many saints to look up to as you minister to peoples facing ever-new challenges that come with a post-modern society. The Oblates' risk-taking work, radical investment in Catholic values, ability to read the signs of the times, bold partnership with laity, and reaching out to the marginalized must remain at the core of evangelization. Do not be afraid to be radical.