

Rooted in the Gospel, Sent to the Most Abandoned:

“A Reflection on the Bicentenary Commemoration of the OMI Constitutions and Rules”

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A. Introduction

What began in 1816 within the humble walls of a former Carmelite convent in Aix-en-Provence, France where St. Eugène de Mazenod first gathered young priests to re-evangelise the poor who abandoned their faith, of Provence in the aftermath of the French Revolution has today blossomed into a global congregation dedicated to those most forgotten by society. The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate heralded as “specialists in difficult missions,” now serve the poor and marginalised in approximately 70 countries across the world.

This year, the congregation marks a momentous milestone: the bicentenary of their Pontifical Approval as a Congregation of Pontifical Right, formally granted by Pope Leo XII on 17 February 1826, when he recognised the Oblates’ Constitutions and Rules, affirming their mission, their way of life, and their place within the heart of the Church.

B. Identity of the Congregation

A community of men set apart for the Gospel, close to the people with whom they work, embracing their values and aspirations (CCR 2, 8). “Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2) is the central to their lives and mission. They are a religious family comprising priests and brothers at the service of the Church and called as members of the prophetic Church, to witness to God’s holiness and justice. As a global missionary community, they remain attentive to the cry of the poor and voiceless, dedicated

to the most abandoned (CCR 9). It is a community of men whose Patroness is Mary Immaculate.

C. Nature of Community

I. Sacred in Nature:

A religious community whose sacredness flows from Jesus the Saviour as its Head. They remain intimately connected to Him and experience Him daily in and through the Word of God, Holy Eucharist, and fraternal charity among members. They follow the model of the community of apostles with Jesus and witness to Christ. They strive to be saints through living virtuous lives (CCR 1). A group of men who are united in heart and mind rejoice in their suffering because they believe that the suffering turns out to be a blessing. “But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you” (1 Peter 4:13–14).

II. Apostolic Root:

The religious family has its root in the experience of its founder who encountered Jesus the Saviour on the Cross. Their life and mission, therefore, are deeply rooted in the apostolic model. Their priority is the sanctification of the brothers and sisters with whom they work, pursued through dedicated service within the community and, at the same time, through the pursuit of their own sanctification in a world that thirsts for divine mercy (CCR 37). They are called to see the poor and marginalized through the eyes of the crucified Jesus. “The call and the presence of the Lord among us today bind us together in charity and obedience to create anew in our own lives the Apostles’ unity with him and their common mission in his Spirit” (CCR 3).

III. Global Family:

The religious family is a group of men, human like anyone else, with their own strengths and challenges. They form an intercultural family, bringing together diverse traditions, characteristics, and strengths from different backgrounds and countries. They follow the legacy of the founder: “Among yourselves practise charity, charity, charity and, outside zeal for the salvation of souls.” Practising charity among themselves is what makes them feel at home. This lived experience drives them to mission in the world. The zeal of each member is sustained by the bonds of fraternal charity (CCR 37).

IV. Close to the Most Abandoned:

A group of men who follow the charism given to the founder by the Holy Spirit for the good of the whole Church are bound together by obedience and charity (CCR 38). They dedicate their lives to the sanctification of the brothers and sisters “the most abandoned”. The mission they undertake requires them to become interdependent in their lives and missionary activities. “We will always be close to the people with whom we work taking into account their values and aspirations. Awareness of our own shortcomings humbles us, yet God’s power makes us confident as we strive to bring all people especially the poor – to full consciousness of their dignity as human beings and as sons and daughters of God” (CCR 8).

D. Historical Background

Pope Leo XII approved the Constitutions and Rules on February 17, 1826. St. Eugene submitted the Constitutions and Rules for the Church’s approval at the age of 43, and in his 14th year as a priest. When the Constitutions and Rules were approved by the Church, the congregation was very young, still its members together with the Mother Church placed their trust in God and in the charism entrusted to them for the good of the

whole Church. With a few members and practically no resources the young congregation designed its mission and trusted fully in the missionary vision focused on the poor. For two centuries, the Constitutions and Rules of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate have remained the driving force that shaped the congregation. They have kept it relevant through changing social, economic and political climates.

E. The Impact of Constitutions and Rules of OMI

The Constitutions and Rules are not born of a philosophy of the world, but of the Gospel and tested by history. It is a profound reminder of the ecclesial trust. It was approved by the Church to give life and mission, but not to preserve a structure. The Constitutions and Rules helped the Oblates to live faithfully, adjusting to new context and culture. It created saints and martyrs all over the world especially in Canada, Africa, France, Asia and particularly Jaffna, Sri Lanka.

This article would like to gratefully quote one of the testimonies offered by a former Superior General Fr. Leo Deschatelets (1899–1974) regarding a saintly Oblate Fr. B. A. Thomas OMI in Jaffna.

“If you want to see a true saint, you should go to Jaffna. You will find in that old man everything that word “holiness” implies. Everything about him corresponds to the idea we have of a man of God”

The Constitutions and Rules are the way for the Oblates that leads to freedom, life, communion, sanctity, and eternal life. Therefore, ‘Do this, and you shall live’ (cf. Lk 10:28).

The members of the present millennium are specially blessed and privileged to celebrate the bicentenary of Papal approval of CCR.

F. Future of the OMI

As the congregation solemnly celebrates this great historical event, the members of the congregation are invited to focus on the following key issues, which will weigh heavily on them if left unattended to:

Spiritual renewal and future vision:

Under this essential topic we have five important subtopics:

1) Looking Forward

A call to be missionaries of hope: These call demands much from religious life today. It invites them to read the signs of the times, which reveal the hidden presence of hope among ordinary people (Late Pope Francis). To discern the hidden presence of hope, they must first critically examine their present structure personal, and communal life, mission, formation, and income resources of their units and then plan, deliberate on and implement appropriate strategies. “Our life is governed by the demands of our apostolic mission and by the call of the Spirit already dwelling in those to whom we are sent. Our work makes us dependent on others in many ways; it requires real detachment from our own will and a deep sense of the Church” (CCR 25).

2) Renewing Commitment

“By obedience we become the servants of all. Challenging the spirit of domination, we stand as a sign of the new world wherein persons recognize their close interdependence. Religious obedience is our way of making real the freedom of the Gospel, in common submission to God’s will (cf. Gal 5:13)” (CCR 25). It is a fitting time to renew the commitments they have already made, and to prepare for those still to come.

3) Focus on God’s Faithfulness

It is a time to engage in theological reflection on God’s ongoing providence, and guidance over more than two centuries.

God never failed His chosen people, He was compassionate, kind and unconditionally faithful when they went through war, hardships, and conflict.

4) Focus on Community and Time for Outreach

It is a time to come together, to care for the members, to listen to them, to forgive, reconcile and let go of the things that imprison and enslave them. A time to give the opportunity to each member to update themselves and to contribute to the betterment of the community. A time to make Christ the centre of their lives and mission. A time to think anew and to deepen the conviction 'For God alone and for His glory' for it is for God that they live and engage in their various missions. A time to think of the ways and means by which they can reach out to the marginalized, the addicted, the oppressed, the youth in turmoil, and the poor with many faces.

5) Finally, It Is a Time to Reflect on Our Impact on Wider Society and Local Communities

Let us interpret the charism expressed in and through the Constitutions and Rules according to our own time and context a context marked by addiction, exploitation, and unfair, violent social systems that make the poor poorer and the rich richer. Lack of love, and concern for Mother Earth, selfishness, individualism, and violation of international laws, and human rights are some of the evils that make life difficult and challenge the survival of the human family. Let us read these signs of the times, interpret them through our charism, and let them shape a community that makes a meaningful impact.

G. Conclusion

A small beginning became a global reality, bearing fruit in more than 70 countries. It is a miraculous work of God. Preserving its identity, nature, and rich historical background, the

congregation has journeyed for two centuries. God, indeed, has done great things for the Mother Church and the congregation. God never failed in His promise; therefore, it is a time to show our faithfulness and gratitude to Him through the renewal of our life and mission. God expects much from us and the times demand us of it.

Gracious God, grant that this bicentenary be a time full of grace and a time for renewal. Help us to grow day by day in a deeper appreciation of our rule of life so that by internalizing its values we may be authentic and faithful Oblates.

Source

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