

Oblates are Pioneers

S. M. Selvaratnam, OMI

B.A., Dip. Etu., M. S., M.S., D. Psy.

Fully Certified Clinical Supervisor,

A member of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors.

Introduction

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) were originally founded to restore the destroyed Church of France after the French revolution. The founder of this religious congregation initially concentrated in the South of France, and more particularly in Marseille. He and his companions spoke the language of the poor people of Provance. The reason for speaking the language of the people is to be relevant to the people, to be with the people, and to understand the people. The polished French was spoken by an upper class of people. It must be noted that the founder De Mazenod himself was from an aristocratic family. This aristocracy never left him even though he founded the congregation for the poor. This in itself is a pioneering endeavor.

In 1973, I was asked by the then Oblate provincial of Sri Lanka to go to Strasbourg to study French in order to follow a six-month course in San Foy de Lyons in Audio Visual. I was on a UTA flight, and the guy next to me was a French. He began a conversation with me in English, and during the conversation he asked me, why I was going to France. I told him: to study French in Strasbourg. He had a sarcastic smile on his face, and said to me: Strasbourg is not the place to study French for they did not speak 'real' French. I came to know that he is a Parisian. Strasbourg region is also called Alsace bordering Germany, and my provincial was from Alsace. When it comes to language and culture, I found in my travels that almost all

countries that I have visited have this complex. The Sri Lankans are not exempted. Those who speak about interculturality must take this too into consideration.

Expansion of the Vison

When the call came to the founder from various countries including Sri Lanka for priests to minister in those countries, the founder de Mazenod discerned and expanded his original vision, and the Congregation evolved as a Missionary Congregation, and the Oblates were called the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. The founder of the Oblates answered a very difficult call to send his men to some very difficult mission countries like North Canada, to the Eskimos (1841), to South Africa (1851), and to Sri Lanka (1847). Yes, at that time these were very difficult places to minister, because people were economically very poor, educationally illiterate, and lacked even basic medical facilities. The founder sent his men to these places of which he had no clue at all. It was venturing into the unknown. I must mention here that the early Oblates who came to Sri Lanka were dying from cholera, and the first brother who died was buried in my own parish (Fel Leydier 16.06. 1851), St. Anthony's church in Karaveddy, the North of Sri Lanka. I wonder whether I am writing this with certain pride or sadness that he was buried in my parish! I am proud that an Oblate ministered amidst lots of difficulties in my parish as well but I am sad that he died a premature death being a victim to cholera in my parish. When de Mazenod heard about the deaths of his priests in Sri Lanka, he is supposed to have said in anguish, that 'Sri Lanka is the grave yard of the Oblates.' The fact that the Oblates ventured to go to these very difficult missions inspired Pope Pius XI to call the Oblates "*specialists in difficult missions.*" These missions were pioneering indeed.

Pioneering in our own way

I would like to register here that two of our Oblates pioneered into a new field in ministry, and that too during the war (1983-1992), and introduced professional counseling to all people irrespective of caste, creed, or ethnic differences in Sri Lanka. In addition, an Oblate is venturing today to speak **not dialogue** between different faith traditions, but **inter-faith spirituality**, and going beyond to articulate a Universal spirituality that goes beyond (transcend) all religions, and embraces humanity for the future. This is a need of the hour, as the world is increasingly becoming divisive. Jesus of the gospels was universal. Christ is universal.

The Call of the Oblate of the Future

I wish to recall three phrases from what I have written above. 1. Oblates are pioneers, 2. Oblates are specialists in difficult mission, 3. Expansion of the vision.

When I am addressing the Oblate of the future, I don't mean those Oblates who will join the Oblate congregation in the future. On the contrary, I am referring to all of us who are Oblates today irrespective of our age or the various ministries in which we are involved. Because, it is not my call but the call of God, the call of Christ, the call of Jesus in the gospels, and I would add, **the call of the hour**.

What is this Call?

When I joined the Oblates, influenced by my then parish priest who was an Oblate, I had no idea of what religious life is or the distinction between a diocesan priest and a religious. I was not even aware of other religious congregations in Sri Lanka, because none of them were working in our region (North of Sri Lanka) at that time. What was present in my mind is to be a priest. Was that clear at that time? To be honest,

no. From the second year of my theology, and then more after my priesthood, and still more penetratingly after my what I may call a 'mini-conversion' experience or a wee bit of inner freedom experience (call it a numinous experience) in 1985, in my mid-life, I began to reflect more seriously about religious life, priesthood, and about other religious congregations as I was called to minister with them. It was a long search, and the search continues. In this spiritual journey of mine, I re-committed more consciously to live my religious life.

The call of Vatican II (Lumen Gentium) to every Christian that he/she is called to holiness (wholeness, Mt.5:48) challenged me to reflect deeply as it did for many others. If that call is taken seriously, then we have to extend that to what Jesus said about the purpose of his coming that is *"to give life and to give it to the full"* (Jn.10:10). Jesus also said because our life here is incomplete, he came to give *"completeness"* (Jn.15:11). The word "full," I interpret it today as fully awakened, and the word 'complete,' I interpret is as Wholeness, as God is Whole. I read universality in all these invitations of Jesus. Finally, at the last supper, Jesus invited us and prayed for us that we all become one, *"just as the Father and I are one that they all may be one in us"* (Jn.17:21). The invitation to Oneness rings not only universality but also a call to mysticism, when I am no more separate (the emptiness of Buddhism), the non-duality (Advaita) of Vedanta (the non-dual consciousness). This is the call to mysticism. When I look deeper into it, it becomes evident that this is the purpose of human life.

Meister Eckhart, the 14th century Dominican, theologian and mystic, the Vedanta, the Upanishads, the Buddhist concept of emptiness (sunyata), quantum physics (the unbroken wholeness of the Universe), depth psychology

(the concepts of individuation, and 'self vs. Self' of Carl Jung), all affirm my conviction that all of us are called to mysticism.

Karl Rahner affirms my conviction when he wrote: *"The future Christian is called to be a mystic or else everything else is useless."* (Theological studies, XX, N.Y.: Cross Road, 1998, p.149). He further said; *"If by mysticism we mean, not singular parapsychological phenomena, but genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence, this statement is very true and its truth and importance will become still clearer in the spirituality of the future."* It is indeed becoming very clear today in the emerging contemporary spirituality. I would underline the fact that Karl Rahner wrote the above statement in 1945, when Europe was Christian. If Karl Rahner were to write today and that too from the Southern hemisphere, he would write 'that the **future human person** is called to be a mystic or else everything else is useless'. I am convinced of my interpretation. If so, how much more should an Oblate in the future be?

Contemplation is not the sole possession of the so-called contemplatives (contemplative life-style). I may not be exaggerating if I say that there are not many contemplatives in the contemplative congregations, and there are not many mystics in the monasteries. What I mean is that the mere fact that one joins a contemplative congregation does not make him/her a contemplative or mystic. It needs to be a personal journey, and a personal experience. Michael J. Cunningham wrote: *"Even the contemplative orders had forgotten the contemplative tradition, they had reduced prayer to saying prayers"* (Treasures Within, 2011, p.11).

What is Contemplation?

This may not be the place to speak about contemplation at length but since I am calling an Oblate to be a contemplative it may need a brief description. True spirituality is not a search for perfection or control or the door to the next world; **it is a search for the divine within or it is a search to be awakened to the divine within.** The paradox is that what I am seeking is already within me. I don't find it, but it finds me. In the parable of the loving Father, it's the father who found the son before the son found the father. Sufi mystic Rumi said "*what you seek seeks you.*"

When one is involved in one's inner journey one comes to the core of oneself where he/she encounters Christ. That encounter is a contemplative or call it a mystical experience. Coming home, coming to the core of oneself is a mystical experience. The way to this experience is the contemplative prayer which was called by the desert Fathers and Mothers as "pure prayer," or "the highest form of prayer," or "the real prayer." What is this prayer? It is the 'prayer of the heart,' where no words, no thoughts, no feelings, no images are entertained. It's emptying our minds. It's non-identification with our minds. In that emptiness, one experiences fullness of life. I can confidently say to my dear fellow Oblates that **this is our future.** This is our call - to be an Oblate contemplative, or more extensively **a contemplative prophetic evangelizer,** nothing short of it. We, the Oblates are called to pioneer - are called to be "*men of Advent,*" meaning, lead the way for ourselves (personal leadership), and others (interpersonal leadership) to encounter Christ.

Commenting on contemplation, Albert Nolan writes, "*Contemplation is described almost universally today as a form of consciousness or awareness. It is not so much*

*a matter of changing reality as **becoming aware of what is already there**. Contemplation is the experience of waking up to reality, developing a heightened awareness of what is happening around us and within us, and above all having a deeper consciousness of the presence of God in everything.*” Yes, we are called to consciousness. “*Could not,*” wrote Bede Griffiths, “*the church be more aware of the tremendous search for God, for a new consciousness beyond the mental consciousness, for a new age of spirituality which many believe is now dawning?*” (1979). Translating Bede’s words for us, we could ask: ‘could not the Oblates be more aware of the tremendous search for God, for a new consciousness beyond the mental consciousness, for a new age of spirituality?’

Crisis we are in

Today, corruption at the highest echelons is prevalent: it’s in the Vatican Curia, it’s among the bankers, it’s among the political leaders, it’s even in sports, the FIFA scandals. They have lost awareness, and living under illusions, and unfortunately illusions are more livable than reality. Even many religious and priests are living under an illusion and not reality. Ministering with many religious and priests across many cultures and varied religious congregations, I can say that individualism, materialism, consumerism and secularism have crept into religious and priestly life. Strange, but true, secularism has got in even into our ministry. Promiscuity is becoming common. Some bishops and provincials are still covering up. In many countries, covering up is considered an equal crime. We have become what Parker Palmer called, “functional atheists.”

Hence, the call to awareness, call to consciousness, call to contemplation. Vaclav Havel, the president of Czechoslovak visited USA in 1982, and he was given the honor

to address the Congress and the Senate together. He made a powerful speech, and I am quoting a para that is relevant here. *“Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the **better, and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed, be it ecological, social, demographic or general breakdown of civilization will be unavoidable.**”* (Emphasis added).

His prophetic words are coming true today in the world at large, and certainly in Sri Lanka. If I may translate Havel’s words to our situation, I would say ‘without a congregational revolution in the sphere of consciousness -or in the sphere of contemplation - nothing will change for the better. A breakdown in religious and priestly life will be unavoidable. If you look into our congregations, religions, and the political systems without denial, you will see that the breakdown has already begun.

Contemplative Experience Leads to Mission and Ministry

When one experiences inner freedom, one is connected to oneself from one’s dividedness within. I call this an intra-personal connectedness. This intra-personal connectedness will lead us to interpersonal connectedness, where we can see our brothers and sisters in bondage of different types. My contemplative experience will call me to reach out to them in compassion and love. I will bring God’s love to these people; I will give voice to the voiceless so that they can liberate themselves. The prophetic form of religious life got lost over the centuries. An Oblate who is called to be a contemplative is also called to be a prophet, yes, a contemplative prophet. His prophetic character flows from his contemplative experience. I used to say, **‘delve into contemplation, and surface in compassion.’**

*“Without that radical rooting in the experience of God, we have nothing to say to our contemporaries and we shall be **impotent** before the challenges of our time. Again and again, I have found that the contemporary theologians who are most perceptive of the political, economic, and ecological crisis of this moment are also those who are most deeply rooted in the mystical tradition”* wrote Timothy Radcliff in his preface to Albert Nolan’s *Jesus Today*, 2006.

The quality of life of the Oblate will be more witnessing, attractive and will draw people to Christ than his empty words. His personality as a contemplative prophet matters more than anything he could say. This came out clearly in the survey of the Tablet (London, May 16, 2015). Linda Woodhead writes concluding her article on Where Character Counts, *“The biggest challenge facing Francis (referring to Pope Francis) and the Catholic Church is to make the man and the message a seamless whole”* p.8.

Challenges

Although it may be challenging to ask, we need to have the courage to ask: Why should a young man of today join the Oblates? What is it in us that will inspire him, and even motivate him to join us? What are the challenges we are offering him? What is so unique about us except to say that the Oblates are ‘nice guys’?

Are our Oblate communities witnessing contemplative prophetic communities? Is our life-style countercultural to the post-modern individualistic and self-centered life-style? Are we speaking the language of the people of today or are we embedded in the medieval Scholastic theology which is totally irrelevant for the times (Bernard Lonergan)? Are we part of an emerging contemporary spirituality that brings the West and the East together (Bede Griffiths)? Pope John Paul

II in his apostolic letter *Orientale Lumen* (1950) speaks of the urgent need for East-West dialogue. Long before the Pope's call, Bede Griffiths ventured on this dialogue. Bede spoke of the Marriage of the East and the West. Are we evolving with the evolving Universe? Are we building relationships among ourselves and others, and extending to the environment and the Universe?

"A contemplative approach," said Rowan Williams (the former Archbishop of Canterbury) at the Synod of bishops in Rome *"is what helps people grow and become fully human. It is the key to prayer, liturgy, art, and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and the other subjects in the world with freedom- freedom from self-oriented acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, **contemplation is the only ultimate answer** to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourages to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It's a deep revolutionary matter."* (Times, London). This revolution, I am convinced, is the call of the hour.

In the parable of Martha and Mary, Jesus clearly says that there is only **'one thing that is necessary'** and that is contemplation, and not worry about too many trivial things. Let us **place our priorities** in order. *"Structural changes alone are not sufficient,"* wrote Cardinal Basil Hume (a Benedictine), *"what is called for is spiritual renewal."* Thus, for example, before talking about structural changes in formation and ongoing formation, let us talk about the content of formation, emphasizing spiritual growth and contemplative prayer of the Oblate as a priority.

I used to say that Marthas should flow from Marys, meaning our mission will flow from our contemplative experience and not out of some training alone. “*Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar*” said Jesus to the Pharisees and the Herodians, “- *and to God what belongs to God*” Mk. 12:17. We belong to God first.

‘Consecrated life,’ then, exists, **not primarily to do something** but to **being-in-love, mysticism**. “*There is a danger that,*” said Joseph W. Tubin, C.Ss R, secretary of the Congregation for Institute of Consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic life, “*because of their dedication to pastoral activity or works of service, consecrated persons inordinately sacrifice their witness to a radically Christian life, that is, to the efforts towards being, **first and foremost, seekers of God** and without such an effort, there cannot be true consecrated life.*” (See Edi. Gemma Simmonds, A Future Built on Faith: Religious Life and the Legacy of Vat. II, and the article by the Cardinal on ‘How did we get here? The Renewal of Religious life in the Church since Vat.II., Columba Press, 2014, p.30).

Just before leaving the disciples for the second time, the Risen Christ asks Peter: “*do you love me?*” When Peter responded in the affirmative, Christ called him to mission. The one, anyone, who encounters Christ will be a missionary.

*We need heralds of the Gospel who are experts in humanity, who have penetrated the depths of the human heart, who have shared to the full the joy and hopes, the anguish and the sadness of the human heart and who are at the same time **contemplatives** in love with God”* John Paul II.

The Oblate of the future, if he misses this call, religious life for him will increasingly become meaningless, and he will become irrelevant to himself and to the society. That is how, lethargy enters into our lives.

The Oblate of the future is called to convert himself from being a believer to become a seeker. A seeker is on a journey into uncertainty. *“Only by venturing into the unknown,”* Margaret Wheatley writes, *“do we enable new ideas to take shape, and those shapes are different for each voyager”*, Leadership and New Science, 1999, p. xiv.

The Mission of the Future

In an increasingly globalizing world, we need to discover a global or universal spirituality that will **transcend** the institutionalized religions - to unite the world. This is the way forward. This is the great prophetic mission of the Oblate of the future.

*“Sometimes we are overcome with the desire that seems to come from the **depths of our being**, a desire whose **object** we find hard to pinpoint, a desire that **cannot be satisfied** by anything created that we know”* William Barry, *What Do I Want In Prayer*, 1994, p. 27

What is this desire? Is it a desire for relationship? Love. Why are we not satisfied with human relationships? Human love? **What comes from the depth can be met only by Depth.**

*“Longing mind,
Dwell within the depth
Of your own pure nature.
Do not seek your home elsewhere...
Your naked awareness alone, O mind,
Is the inexhaustible abundance
For which you long so desperately.”* Sri Ramakrishna

Because of our radical rootedness, connectedness and because we have radically freed us from all inner

slaveries, and with that **secure base**, the Oblate of the future will sail in any stormy waters, be it the Irish sea, or the Atlantic Ocean, not to overlook the Indian and the Pacific! Yes, we can, because Oblates are pioneers, specialists in difficult missions, men of Advent, and because we can expand our vision to meet the needs of the time, and not get stuck with the 19th century vision, which was created in that milieu, and now outdated.

200 years of the Approval of the Oblate Constitutions and Rules (from now on CC & RR).

What are we actually celebrating? Are we celebrating the approval of just our CC & RR? They are means to an end. If so, are we celebrating the means forgetting or ignoring the end? I don't think so. I think we are celebrating the approval of the OMI congregation by the Holy Sea as a religious congregation in the Catholic Church. Then, are we celebrating 200 years of existence, or the quality of our lives? Are we looking backward, and celebrating a past event, or are we taking this opportunity to look forward? Then, we need to ask, will these CC & RR of 1982 help us as we **re-vision (expansion of vision)** the Oblate life for the future - to be a mystic in the market place? Or will they be an obstacle to walk into the uncertainty of the future? If they are an obstacle, are we not called to change these CC & RR to help us as we envisage a new way of life that will enhance a quality of life than the quantity of years or quantity of members. There is a need to re-write a new CC & RR to incorporate the emerging spirituality and mysticism for the 21st century. I am particularly looking at the CC & RR of the Novitiate, initial and ongoing formation. We need to move out of compartmentalization of life (dualism) to see the spiritual journey as one long process.

I am painfully aware that many religious congregations are more concerned about their numbers than the quality of life of its members. The results are scandalous. Writing about religious life today, the Vatican document *New Wine in New Wineskins* says: *“the rhythm had slowed down and the dynamism had become little tired.”* (2017). Actually, the system (religious life has become a closed system) is sick. *“Are the realities,”* asks Diarmuid O’ Murchu, *“experienced in religious life today signs of impending death or pangs of new birth?”* I would say that in some countries it is dead. In others, it is dying. In small circles, ‘the pangs for a new birth’ are seen. Something positive is waiting to birth, but too many are not allowing that birth to take place.

The missionary model (in the history of religious life is the sixth phase 1800-?) of religious life has outlived its time. As Bernard Lonergan said that the *“Scholastic theology was a monumental achievement. ... Yet **today by and large it is abandoned**, partly because of the inadequacy of medieval aims, and partly because of the short comings of the Aristotelian corpus.”* (Method in Theology, 1972, p. 279). The missionary model of religious life is based on this scholastic theology. We need a new model for the religious of the future based on an **emerging** spirituality that embraces the New Universe story, Advaita (non-duality), quantum physics (especially the revolutionary contribution of Albert Einstein, David Bohm, Heisenberg and others), and depth psychology. **Emergence** occurs when something new is birthed that is not totally unexpected. That model is what I am proposing as the contemplative prophetic evangelizer. Karl Rahner, Timothy Radcliff, John Pail II, Rowen Willimas, Václav Havel have already pointed the direction for us. (I have quoted them all in the earlier part of this article).

Conclusion

Interiorizing all these, and the writings of mystics of the major faith traditions, and with my own insights, I am proposing a new model for this 21st century. Can the Oblates pioneer into the future, and create this new model for religious life, or something similar? Can the Oblates expand their vision for the future, a future that is uncertain, remembering that spirituality is in the uncertainty of the future? Can the Oblates be the **“men of Advent”** as Pope Francis challenged us? The founder of the Oblates, **“a man of advent, a man of the coming”** as John Paul II described De Mazenod, did venture into the future, into the unknown territories with deep trust in God, and that is how the Oblates of today are celebrating the baptism (approval) of the Oblate congregation.

The world at large (this includes many priests and religious too) is living in utter poverty of spirituality, often covered and compensated by shallow religiosity. We have gone astray from Christ and his message. Can the Oblates of the future speak a new language – the language of Consciousness, the language of contemplation, the need of the times? Can the Oblate of the future call people to consciousness/contemplation? Can the Oblate of the future call people to a Universal spirituality that will embrace all people in the world irrespective of caste, creed, culture, color, race, different religious affiliations, and nationalism, based on the Gospels? Can the Oblates be the modern pioneers and specialists in difficult missions and dare venture to build bridges over the walls that men and women of today are building? The wealthy West has lost humanness, embedded in dualism, and increasingly becoming arrogant, justifying genocide in Gaza, quoting the Scriptures to wage war with Iran, and Lebanon. Where is the prophetic voice of the Oblates?

These are the new poor which is worse than the economically poor. Are we not called to evangelize the 'evangelized'?

The Oblate of the future is called to be a Contemplative Prophetic Evangelizer.

N.B.: all the emphases within the quotations are added.

I am aware that some of us don't want to be challenged. I am also convincingly aware that without challenge, there is no human growth (conversion), personally and collectively. This what I learned, teach and do in counseling psychology, and to myself. Let us be open to challenge, and even self-challenge.

References

Bede Griffiths, *The Golden String*, 1979

Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 1972, p. 279).

Karl Rahner, *Theological studies*, XX, N.Y.: Cross Road, 1998, p.149.

Michael J. Cunningham, *Treasures Within*, 2011, p.11.

Linda Woodhead, *the Tablet*, London, May 16, 2015. p.8.

Edi. Gemma Simmonds, *A Future Built on Faith: Religious Life and the Legacy of Vat. II*, and the article by the Cardinal on 'How did we get here? The Renewal of Religious life in the Church since Vat.II.', Columba Press, 2014, p.30.

Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and New Science*, 1999, p. xiv.

New wine in New Wine Skins, 2017

Rowen Williams, at the Synod of Bishops in Rome, Oct.10, 2012

Timothy Radcliff in his preface to Albert Nolan's *Jesus Today*, 2006.

William Barry, *What Do I Want in Prayer*, 1994, p. 27

Vaclav Havel, the president of Czechoslovak visited USA in 1982,
His address to the USA Congress