

*Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate*

**Evangelizing the Poor at the Dawn  
of the Third Millennium**

*Letter of the 1998 General Chapter to the Oblates*

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## **Presentation**

*The Letter of the 1998 General Chapter to the Oblates* which was written and voted during the Chapter, received many amendments at the time of the final vote. For this reason the Chapter authorized the Superior General in Council to complete the work of editing this *Letter*. The Council set up an editing committee that reviewed the text taking into account the amendments made. It submitted the present text which the Council has approved.

It is the Chapter's wish that this *Letter* be read in the light of the Chapter's two working papers, *Instrumentum Laboris* and *Young Oblates in Ministry and in Formation*. This last document has already been published in *OMI Documentation* (Nov. 1998).

The Chapter also prepared a *Letter to those Persons who share with us the Oblate Charism*. This has been published in the OMI Lay Associates newsletter, *The Link* (N°5), and was attached to the December 1998 *OMI Information*.

Brothers,

1. This Chapter is drawing to a close. It is the first since the canonization of our Founder, Eugene de Mazenod, a man committed to the Church, who brought new energy to the work of evangelization. Now, at the dawn of the third millennium we in turn are sent to bring the Gospel to our world. The intent of this letter is to share with you key elements from the main theme which marked us, and the points which require our attention in the coming years.

We will do this around three major themes:

- I. Our world, a world loved by God**
- II. Our response - to evangelize**
- III. The challenges to us, as Oblates**

## **I. OUR WORLD, A WORLD LOVED BY GOD**

2. Looking at the world within which we live and work, our perspective as Oblates is far from neutral. Rather, as our Constitutions state: *Through the eyes of our crucified Saviour we see the world which he redeemed with his blood.* (C.4) We wish to look at the Church and the world from the perspective of the poor. (Cf. MTW, 16) It is with the eyes of Christ that the missionary looks upon the poor whose life he shares. Ultimately we wish to see the world as God sees it.

3. God loves the world (Cf. Jn 3:16); Christ saves it; the Holy Spirit lives in it. In the heart of the world the presence of the Kingdom of



God becomes a reality through the Church. The Spirit of God teaches us to love this world. So how could it be an alien place for us?

4. At the same time, we see that our world is a mixed reality.

On the one hand, we find in it rich springs of generosity, sincerity, creativity, and imagination. A positive and growing interdependence pushes us to break down age-old divisions and invites us to live in a new solidarity with people all over the world. Daily we are witnessing progress in knowledge and technology. News is accessible immediately all over the world; modern media is making education available to millions of people; and men and women from all parts of the earth are able to meet, speaking with each other, and getting to know each other. This, as we so often mentioned at the Chapter, is the positive side of globalization,

5. On the other hand, we see that the world is also full of infidelity, injustice, and individualism. The image that spontaneously comes to mind is that of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem that he loved. Globalization, when driven by a neo-liberalism able to ignore virtually all frontiers, moral rules and spiritual values, results in more and more people being marginalised. New forms of poverty are arising and with them the disastrous consequences of wars and massive migration.

We can no longer celebrate the dignity of the human person without being conscious of a deep tear within our communal fabric; we can no longer offer incense to the unlimited progress of science without thinking about the sub-human conditions within which the majority of the world's people lives. We can no longer benefit from technological progress without denouncing its negative underside, namely,

**the loss of interiority, the degradation of women, the exploitation of children, the ever-growing opposition between rich and poor, and the explosion of violence in our world.**

**Moreover, the problems of countless young people need to receive special attention. Many sink deeper into poverty and become alienated. They are jobless, and seeing no meaning to life they are without hope for the future.**

**6. Faced with thousands and thousands of women and men who, for whatever reason, do not know Jesus Christ, nor even the ways of God – seeming to live without God – we experience a certain impotence and weakness. We recognize our limits, our poverty, and vulnerability and can be tempted to give up. Just like our confused sisters and brothers, we too are waiting, we too are searching for salvation. However, the cross of Christ is planted at the centre of the world just as it stands in the centre of our lives. The cross reveals to us the unceasing love of God for us, whose confidence in us never runs out. God's plan for us humans is, indeed, ambitious.**

**7. This vision of the world is a reminder for us: our charism drives us to present the cross of Christ to the world, to proclaim that the one who is rejected – the crucified, poor, unnoticed, insignificant – is the cornerstone of the final triumph.**

**As Oblates, guided by the Spirit, mindful of both the goodness and sin in our world, we stand with the poor and the abandoned. We provide a voice for the wisdom of the poor in dialogues and forums where our world takes shape according to the plan of God.**

**8. If God continues to believe in women and men, how can we despair of them? Humanity, stands tall, alive, free, at peace within**

itself, at peace with creation, and somehow at rights with God. These are the people in our neighbourhoods, cities, and towns; everywhere giving us evidence that God still believes in us.

As witnesses to, and prophets of, God's love, we want to be men of hope, reflecting the attitude of a God who never abandons his people. As our Constitutions so aptly put it: *Members of a prophetic Church ... we announce the liberating presence of Jesus Christ and the new world born of his resurrection.* (C. 9)

Hence the challenge is to work with thousands of women and men towards something that might well be called solidarity on a global scale. This Chapter, even as it asks us to take stock of both the real pain that so often marks humanity today and of our limits, also brings to life in us an immense hope.

## II. OUR RESPONSE – TO EVANGELIZE

### 9. *Woe to me if I do not evangelize!* (1 Cor. 9, 16)

Through his Word, Jesus Christ, God wishes to reveal himself to the world as its Saviour. We are called to cooperate with Him in this endeavour of love. We have heard this call and are sent to announce the Good News to the most abandoned. How do we do this? How do we creatively respond to today's situations and emerging cultures?

10. Experience and missionary practice in different contexts, convince us that in order to evangelize others we must, first of all, be evangelized through the word of God and contact with the poor. Simply put, we must first experience in our own lives the salvation we announce to others. A decision to evangelize, as servants of the

Gospel, requires attention to our own conversion.

11. In speaking of evangelization, a word that comes urgently to the fore is **dialogue**.

Dialogue means listening and speaking with attention to and respect for the other. It also means welcoming and accepting the other in his and her history and truth. Beyond this, dialogue leads us on ways of self-disclosure, going to the heart of who we are. To dialogue is to tell each other what we most cherish, what is most precious to us, and what inspires us. To dialogue, as Scripture puts it, is to be ready to give an accounting for our hope to anyone who asks it of us. (1 Peter 3, 15).

In this dialogue, Christians are led to eventually name Jesus Christ whom they love and who gives meaning to life. At the same time, however, they recognize and welcome that which is giving life to the other.

To enter into genuine dialogue presupposes being close, with a certain sharing of life, and the acceptance of the insights and questions of one's contemporaries. This supposes a common language, in more than one sense of the word common. Thus, for example, the need for precisely such a common language is what led our Founder, Eugene de Mazenod, to choose to preach in the dialect, the *patois*, of the poor. He understood that, if one wants to preach in a manner that is understood, one must have a language in common with the people. That challenge remains with us.

*It is the community, the Church, that evangelizes*

12. The Oblates work as a community, and in common with many



others who proclaim the Gospel.

The first place where dialogue is necessary is among ourselves, in our own community, where we evangelize one another. A word is only true if it in fact reflects a truth within our own lives. Our conviction that evangelization is not the work of lone rangers, but is a community effort, of the Oblates and the entire Christian community, is grounded in the Gospel and our missionary practice.

It is the Church who evangelizes, and sends us forth on mission. We enter the ongoing dialogue between Church and world. We want that dialogue to be open and confident, knowing full well that our word is less credible when the wider ecclesial community and our own are perceived in a negative way.

In the Church, true dialogue finds its culmination in the Eucharist which is the summit of evangelization. For in the Eucharist, the marvellous exchange between God and humanity attains its plenitude.

13. The Church who evangelizes is the people of God including all its members – laity, priests, and religious. It is urgent that we accord to the laity their full responsibilities. It is equally urgent that we help form them for the mission. This must be a priority.

Everyone who is baptized is called to be an evangelizer. Today we realize ever more clearly how the laity are evangelizing us, how they are helping us to better understand the life of the poor and abandoned, since they often are closer to the poor. Moreover, by their vocation, the laity stand in the front line of the struggle for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation, even as they are found in the new Areopagi of the mission such as the mass media. Within

the mission of the laity, youth have a special role to play, particularly in ministering to each other.

14. Ecumenism is also an important element in evangelization. We must continue journeying down the road of ecumenism sparing no effort to foster Christian unity. In the new millennium, may our mission to evangelize fulfil the desire of Jesus: *That they all may be one.* (Jn 17:21).

15. *He has sent me to evangelize the poor.* (Luke 4, 18). To evangelize is to announce the Good News of God's reign, a reign of justice, love, and peace. Our experience in mission teaches us that our evangelizing, must be integral: that is, that we proclaim explicitly Jesus Christ, that our lives witness to what we preach, that we be really involved in the transformation of the world. (Cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 22,31,42) Our evangelizing flows from all that we are, and what we say and do. Evangelization is as much a question of being the Good News as of speaking the Good News.

16. Rule 9 of our Constitutions and Rules states that *Action on behalf of justice is an integral part of evangelization.* Hence, being engaged in the struggle for justice and peace is a non-negotiable part of the ministry of every Oblate. Granted that charitable deeds are always necessary, we know full well that commitment to justice, which is another expression of Christian charity, requires that we tackle the causes of poverty, injustice and suffering in the fabric and structure of society. This goes beyond a reductionist interpretation of the Good Samaritan parable, to clearing the roads of the world of all bandits. Evangelizing the poor requires not only our presence in hospital caring for the injured but also tackling the causes of suffering at their very source.

## ***Daring for the Gospel***

17. The urgency of the mission should make us daring in opening new ways of evangelization. In the Preface of our Rules, our Founder states: *We must spare no effort to extend the Saviour's empire. Let neither faint hearts nor fear hold us back. Let us have no fear to find new means to answer new needs.*

We need to have confidence both in the One who calls us and in our Oblate vocation. The Oblate charism is still alive.

18. Sensitive to the demands of our charism, as Oblates, our first priority in mission is to be attentive to those on the margins of society and to those for whom the Church is most distant. (cf. C.5) Pope Paul VI recognized that religious are often precisely "the avant-garde" as regards the movement towards the marginalized. (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 69) Religious stand at the edges of society and the Church and, from there challenge the centre on behalf of those on the periphery. They make the cause of those on the periphery the concern of the heart and centre.

19. To evangelize requires a constant re-evaluation of our missionary practices. Hence our plea is this: at every level - personal, community, and congregation - let us take the time needed to evaluate and discern as to whether our evangelization is in step with the reality of today's world and with God's specific call to us through our charism. Unhealthy shifts and bad habits can imperceptibly seep into our missionary practices.

## ***Interreligious Dialogue***

20. In our mission, more and more we are in contact with the other

religions of the world. Interreligious dialogue has become part of our evangelization. What is involved in interreligious dialogue? It is a meeting among believing persons so that, eventually, we all may be more profoundly converted in the truth. It is a journey of mutual discovery. In no way is it a capitulation of one's beliefs nor a false irenicism; rather it is a reciprocal witness meant to overcome prejudices, intolerance, and misunderstandings.

21. In the end, interreligious dialogue is a privileged opportunity to participate in God's respect for human freedom and in God's patience towards creation where, all people in their own way are searching for truth and salvation. Such dialogue calls each of us to open ourselves to other ways of thinking and acting. It requires an attitude of humility.

Interreligious dialogue occurs at different levels: in the give and take of daily life and action in common; on the level of religious experience; and among specialists in the work of theological research.

22. Today interreligious dialogue must become a way of life. Irrespective of where we live and work, those who believe in other religions are becoming ever more numerous in our environment. Hence, interreligious dialogue is not just an activity for trained theological specialists, but a matter for all of us.

### **III. THE CHALLENGE TO US, AS OBLATES**

23. Such is the missionary task that faces us as we stand on the threshold of a new millennium. It is a task that calls us to our senses, to reflect on who we really are. To preach the Gospel de-

fines us as religious. "If only we could understand who we are," wrote Eugene de Mazenod.

### ***Religious Life***

24. Given the requirements of mission in today's world, it is opportune for us, both priests and brothers, to reexamine who we are as religious. It is clear that the world is changing. To keep in step, we need to seek renewal, as the post-synodal exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, invites us to do.

Simply put, if we wish to live as apostolic religious so as to be a readable sign to our world, it is urgent that we honestly discern what forms religious life should take today so as precisely to be a credible sign to the world. This implies that we be open to new perspectives. This is especially true regarding the prophetic dimension of religious life, which points to the Reign of God present in the heart of the world. We assume our prophetic mission, both brothers and priests, when in community we live, witness to, proclaim and celebrate Gospel values.

25. The Chapter gave special attention to the situation of Oblate brothers. Lived out in a great variety of services throughout the congregation, the vocation of the brother recalls us all to our consecration as religious. In the light of what we said about evangelization, we can see how the brother's vocation is both real and relevant. Through a life of apostolic activity, he evokes the primacy of mission. Through a life of professional activity, he is clearly involved in the world. He participates fully in evangelization which leads to and finds fulfilment in the Church's celebration of the sacraments. The Chapter understands that the brother has a special identity and stands on his own two feet as a religious; he is not de-

financed in function of the priest's ministry. Moreover, the presence of brothers enriches the life of our communities keeping us all close to the daily life of the people.

26. Given the truth and importance of all of this, we recommend that the theological, spiritual, and professional formation of the brothers be as serious and as ongoing as that of the priests. Also the Chapter thinks it is important to conduct a probing theological reflection on the place of brothers within a clerical congregation.

### ***Community Life***

27. Both *Witnessing in Apostolic Community* and our mission today invite us to continue deepening our community life. Community is God's gift to us, and through us, a gift to all people. Among other things, it signifies the communal life to which all of humanity is called. (cf. *Fraternal Life in Community*, 1994) Community is good news for the Church and for the world and it is in this sense that community is itself already a form of mission. (cf. MTW 109)

28. This conviction is further reinforced by our experience of vulnerability and fragility, as spoken of in the *Instrumentum Laboris*. We truly believe that community is a great value and we invite you to make it both a source of, and place for, integral growth. And it will be that, a place for real growth, if it is built around Christ; if prayer permeates its life; if the sharing of faith and life is its normal practice; if we, its members, have the courage to live a healthy transparency; if our lifestyles are simple and conformed to the vows that we profess; if pardon and reconciliation are embraced as gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of discernment; if the ministry of each of us is shared and reviewed with the others; if each person takes an interest in the work of the others; and if it is full of compassion, sensitive to

the trials of those around it, and actively engaged in trying to relieve their needs.

29. Understood in this sense, community embraces the full span of missionary life. For the young Oblates, it will be the place, the family, that welcomes their generosity and creativity; for the aged Oblates it will be the setting for their contemplation and their ministry of simple presence; for those Oblates living and ministering in the strength and health of their middle years, it will be what keeps them from falling into sterile activism; and for those passing through those crises that inevitably attack our lives, it will provide a support and a safeguard for fidelity tempered by trial.

30. Community life lived this way is a prophetic statement. By our living in fraternal community we give witness to the world that a communion of life is possible. God is Trinity of persons, God is Love: The Gospel we proclaim is credible. Our lives of sharing, graciousness, and our discernment in community contest the ways of individualism, of arbitrary power, of domination, and gives this world a reason to hope.

31. We encourage you therefore to esteem and cultivate the great gift of community. In it, we are given a foretaste of the life of heaven, God's life. With our eyes fixed on this ideal, we can seek ways to embody it ever more faithfully in all areas of our lives, well aware that our local community holds possibilities for sharing and witnessing that should not be sacrificed at just any cost.

32. The quality of a community depends very much on the qualities of its members and particularly on the superior who is called to animate it: *For this reason, the Chapter considers the formation of local superiors to be a priority and it asks Provincials and the enti-*

*re Congregation to develop appropriate instruments to render such formation effective. (WAC 23,6)*

### ***Internationality***

33. Internationality emerged as one of the new themes of this Chapter. In effect, it was felt that in a world that is becoming more and more international, and despite the resistance of isolationist tendencies, the fact that we are an international congregation is a real grace.

We are already living internationality in various ways: through financial sharing, through promoting meetings of Oblates in formation, and by being available for the mission everywhere in the world. A worldwide body such as ourselves can also be a powerful force to help protect and shield our confreres who are most exposed when they defend human rights and work for justice.

34. Admittedly, however, we have not yet taken full stock of the promise of internationality. We are far from having exhausted its rich potential. Deeper awareness of our internationality could lead us:

- to boldly face up to all the consequences of our demographic growth in the southern hemisphere.
- to live a true conversion in this regard; avoiding being stuck in such terms as *my region, my province, my country* so as to become more Oblates for the whole congregation, the Church, and for the world.



- to be more adaptable, generous, and open to other cultures, in giving and exchanging personnel in function of the worldwide needs of the mission.
- to learn at the level of formation, to love our own culture, without making it exclusive, and at the same time to open ourselves to other cultures and languages. This goal is well served by apprenticeship, through experiences such as time spent in another culture, especially where one can learn in real contact with the poor, or through the establishment of international houses of formation.

### ***The lay associates***

35. A high point at the Chapter occurred at its beginning when a group of lay associates met and shared with us, entrusting to us a message. What hope was instilled in us as we heard these lay persons tell us: *Your charism makes us live!*

This sharing between lay persons and ourselves was an outcome of the Chapter of 1992 and is a testimony to the road that both, they and we, have travelled since. Aware of what a gift it is to have lay persons help show us the depth and fecundity of our own charism, we re-commit ourselves to continue the journey with them.

36. It will take time for us to fully digest what this experience signifies. Among other things, it will take time to overcome the resistance and the fears that can easily arise in us in the face of this new reality; it will take time to support and sustain those Oblates more directly engaged in the common journey and to learn from their experience; to cultivate the dialogue and reciprocity needed between the laity and ourselves in order to share with each other

how the charism of Eugene de Mazenod gives us life. It will take time to work out ways of being in step together in mission, associates and Oblates, meeting the great challenge of evangelization at the dawn of the new millennium.

### **Formation**

37. In his mercy, the Lord continues to call new men to join us for his mission. Our task is to collaborate with his action, both actively helping to call persons to our way of life and accompanying them in the process of their formation.

In his address to the Chapter, Pope John Paul II explicitly invited the Oblates to *redouble their efforts in proposing their ideal to youth everywhere in the world, given that many young people are generous and have the desire to serve Christ and his Church.* (No. 4)

When young men come to us, they arrive with the cultural baggage of our age, with all its peculiar mix of richness and fragility. We wish, however, to recognize in them the great generosity which motivates them to follow the Lord even when it means going against the dominant values of the time.

38. Many things surfaced during our discussions on formation. Clearly, we recognized the fundamental importance in formation of focussing on the central task of preparing persons for an apostolic, vowed life. Nonetheless, we would like to highlight some particular points for special consideration:

— *The necessity of discernment:* The motivation of those entering religious life is often mixed – frequently including less posi-

ve elements, namely, the desire for security, prestige, and power. A lasting conversion requires spiritual direction, at the service of the Holy Spirit who purifies both heart and action.

- *Towards true missionary involvement:* Sometimes the lifestyle in our houses of formation is more comfortable than among the people we serve. The Chapter recommends that every effort be made to ensure that real involvement among the poor be part of formation. Two practical matters stand out in this search for missionary involvement: a responsible use of community goods, and accountability for personal expenses.
- *An effort at inculturation:* Formation should initiate (in the fullest sense of the word) candidates in the Christian tradition and surrounding cultures. If we fail to do this, we run the risk of forming young Oblates who are, in effect, strangers in their own land.
- *Acquiring competence – pastoral and professional:* Today's world frowns on mediocrity. Moreover, the Gospel merits being served with the same level of effort and professionalism that is at the service of most everything else in our world. In this regard, the Chapter asks that the various provinces re-examine their formation programs, in respect to the training both of brothers and priests. We need to ask ourselves these questions: Are we sufficiently demanding as to the level of education and training we ask of our people? Do we evaluate and develop sufficiently the gifts and talents of the members of our province? Do we have any kind of policy in this regard or is this left to individual whim, luck, and circumstance?
- *Formation for Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation:*

Since our charism directs us towards the poor we must, in the area of formation, give particular attention to this component. Thus, our houses of formation should challenge those in them to have a respectful attitude towards all human beings and a love for the poor. (cf. *Vade Mecum on Justice and Peace*, chapter 4). Moreover, they should give our young Oblates a thorough knowledge of the social doctrine of the Church. They should give them an initiation to the workings of economic systems, and to ways of empowering the poor to take a hand in changing their own lot.

- *Proper use of media*: The power of the media in our world cannot be overestimated. Therefore the Chapter recommends that, in first formation, we familiarize young Oblates with the technologies and techniques of the mass media. This for a double reason: First of all, to insure that they are at ease with this new form of literacy; second, in the hope that they can in fact positively utilize some of the possibilities that these powerful instruments offer for evangelization. As *Redemptoris Missio* puts the challenge: A contemporary missionary must learn to integrate the message into a new culture that is created largely by the means of modern communication. (37c)
- *Pastoral internships for those in first formation*: During the course of first formation, we recommend some pastoral internships as an important component within a missionary formation. These periods help reveal different aspects of a candidate's personality; they give a taste of both the joys and difficulties of ministry; they allow the young man to live within a community that is engaged full-time in other forms of missionary work; and help open up the young Oblate to the international dimension of the congregation. The quality of

these pastoral experiences depends very much upon proper preparation, evaluation, and supervision by those concerned with his training.

- *The importance of ongoing formation:* Formation must continue during the entire Oblate life. Ongoing formation must be a non-negotiable priority for us as Oblates. Its quality very much determines the quality of our community life and apostolate.
- *The importance of the early years of one's ministry:* We must pay particular attention to the early years of an Oblate's ministry. The passage from the house of formation to an active life in the ministry is a very critical time in a person's life. The Chapter recommends that each province study this issue, namely, what special things should be done for a young Oblate during that critical period, namely, the first five years of his ministry? Special help should be given to young Oblates to help them evaluate pastoral experiences, adapt themselves positively to this new way of life, and ensure that they become sufficiently self-directed as regards their own continuing formation.

39. The Chapter wishes to thank all those Oblates who are engaged in the ministry of formation. This includes everyone involved, right from those engaged in the difficult task of trying to foster vocations down to those responsible for continuing formation. In addressing the Chapter, Father General emphasized that the selection of formators and their preparation, both remote and proximate, for this ministry must be a priority for provinces.

## CONCLUSION

40. As we come to the end of our conversation with you, we would like to highlight one last point: During the course of the Chapter, the idea of the Jubilee year frequently arose. As it is revealed in Scripture, the Jubilee year is *the proclamation of a year of favour from the Lord*. (Luke 4, 19) As Oblates, we want to appropriate as fully as we can this special grace, namely, this opportunity for conversion, for penance, for universal reconciliation, for a deeper living of justice and peace. To offer just one suggestion: During the Chapter, many times it was suggested that we, as Oblates, should be doing something to help work towards convincing the financially richer nations of this world to remit the debt that is owed them by many of the financially poorer nations. It is through involvements such as these that we invite all Oblates to prepare and celebrate the approaching Jubilee.

41. At this Chapter, we examined again our need of renewal. In that light we pledge ourselves:

- To refocus on the essentials, namely, on Christ and his Church, and to do this through a renewed community life which is animated by an ever-inventive missionary zeal.
- To review all of our missionary commitments in the light of our charism.
- To pursue a fuller partnership with the laity and encourage their association with us.
- To commit ourselves wholeheartedly to ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue and to be well-informed so as to be compe-

tent in the dialogue.

- To intensify our work for vocations and in the area of formation, giving these demands their required attention.
- To live more consciously and explicitly the internationality of our congregation with all the riches and challenges that this brings us.
- In the face of a virtual explosion of poverty, we commit ourselves to a more radical way of living working for, justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

42. Finally, as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate we want to recognize our Mother and Patron. Mary's total transparency within God's work, her human existence perfectly pure and without compromise, *prefigures the final victory of God over evil* (C. 10). She is truly *the glory of Jerusalem and the honour of our people*. She embodies our hope and sustains our missionary activity. As we approach the millennium, we recognize and honour her as the door of our salvation and the dawn of our deliverance, even as we rejoice in the knowledge that she is like us, a daughter of the common people and a humble disciple of God's son.

The capitulars of the 33rd General Chapter  
Rome, October 1, 1998.



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