

OMI JAPAN

WHAT WE HAVE BECOME: our past

- Looking at the present state of our Delegation, I would say that what we have become does not allow us to be an Oblate. Example: From the time, we started the mission in Japan, we have been concentrating only on two ministries, namely PARISH and KINDERGARTEN. We have got 5 Oblate mission parishes and 6 Oblate run kindergartens.

Parish ministry:

We have been involved in parish ministry from the time we came to Japan (70 years ago). But times have changed, and especially after the pandemic, other than the daily masses many activities have been stopped.

Do we still want to persevere with parishes? Yes, we may have to keep two or three parishes that have a bigger number of migrants because our priority in the Delegation is to serve them while keeping parish as a base, but not all the parishes.

Kindergarten ministry:

When we first started the kindergartens, it was to help children in need. Now most of our kindergartens are to help the rich. A few years ago, an orphanage wanted one of our kindergartens to take in their children. But the parents put an end to that. The parents said that if we were to bring in orphans, they would take their children out of our kindergarten, so we finally said NO to the orphans. The parents were stronger than the Oblates!

Yes, kindergarten is the only means of income we now have for the unit since we don't get aid from the USA or Europe anymore. But we could probably think of another way to make the money we need for our livelihoods rather than keep catering to the rich and leaving out the poor? Time to make a serious evaluation.

Present structures:

The structures created in the past for our men to fit into the parishes and kindergartens have made life comfortable. According to my observation this has made us remain **stagnant**.

I am reminded of a letter written by our Superior General Fr. Louis Lougen for the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (December 7th, 2014). This is how I see our unit in the light of that letter. Let me quote a few paragraphs: 『**Some Oblates and Units have entered into the second and easiest option, stagnation. It is a comfortable**

option which maintains the language of Oblate life without the missionary content, and it makes friends with the spirit of the world. This is the option of mediocrity at its worst and it attracts a trickle of half-hearted members to continue joining us looking for a comfortable refuge from real life.

The choice to stagnate is first of all identified in relation to mission. In his report to the 2010 Chapter, Father Steckling, Superior General, used a devastating word to describe this situation: “inertia.”^[vii] When a Unit no longer has a common commitment that is known, articulated and owned by its members it is stagnant.^[viii] There are several signs which are consequences of this lack of missionary thrust: the predominance of maintenance ministries, personal projects and strong individualism. Because there is no common missionary plan with priorities, individual interests, chosen without discernment and without reference to the charism, prevail. The lack of missionary identity in a stagnant Unit also has the negative effect that ministry is used for the advantages of personal financial remuneration and other personal properties that are not given to the Oblate community. Often, an Oblate seeks his own work in a diocese which provides these personal benefits, or, he takes on a profession such as teaching to establish a highly autonomous life. Careers are planned and the Congregation is used as a stepping stone to a materialistic life imbued with the spirit of the world.] .

『In stagnant Units, vows are professed but there is no prophetic witness and even at times a scandalous counter-witness is permitted; personal and community prayer disappears because of various ideological reasons or even from a lack of faith; community life is reduced to ‘hotel living’ or living alone in parish houses or in apartments. Stagnant members and Units either don’t understand consecrated life or have lost the appreciation of consecrated life, often the consequence of the crisis of faith among us since the 1970s』 .

『Personal success and gratification, centred on one’s own likes and preferences (“I feel good in this ministry”), are more important than a common missionary plan, apostolic community and obedience. The religious is self-referential, ^[xi] absorbed in himself and in pursuit of his personal projects』 .

『There are many other signs and consequences of stagnation. Oblate life in a stagnant Unit degenerates into a loose association of autonomous priests and brothers. Stagnation breeds indifference, and even hostility to vocations, because the Congregation and religious life are not esteemed or really loved. There is indifference to the vocation of Brothers because the vocation of Brothers, consecrated to God for mission, is not understood』 .^[xii]

『In his recent letter for the World Day of Missions, Pope Francis wrote some very challenging words which should provoke questions in us:

“Many parts of the world are experiencing a dearth of vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life. Often this is due to the absence of contagious apostolic fervour in communities which lack enthusiasm and thus fail to attract. The joy of the Gospel is born of the encounter with Christ and from sharing with the poor.”』 .[xiii]

<http://archive.omiworld.org/en/content/news/2922/letter-of-fr-general-for-the-feast-of-the-immaculate-conception-of-mary/>

WHAT WE ARE: our identity as Oblates

- Presently, we do not see what it is to be an Oblate because we are in “stagnant state”. If this situation continues, our presence in Japan will have no meaning. Therefore, we have to rethink about our identity in order to be reborn and get closer to the poor around us, example: migrants, single-mothers, homeless etc.

I think, we must ask some serious questions like:

- * What is Oblate identity for Japan in order to know “who I am” and “why I am here”?
- * Do we still make a relevant presence in Japan or are we just trying to survive?
(we need some serious soul-searching)
- * Do we allow the poor to evangelize us rather than live in **pretense** that we are evangelizing the poor?
- * If we are to make a difference in the society, are we ready to change from what we have become, to what we should be?
- * Are we ready for the challenge?

- As Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez said,
"If we do not respond to the demands of the present, we are simply refusing to hear the call of Jesus Christ."

- I believe that the Holy Spirit is always at work, but we are too busy doing our own “business as usual”. Thus, we refuse to listen what the Spirit is telling us to do right now. Therefore, my hope is that we seriously discern what our Oblate identity is in order to **“respond to the demands of the present”** by saying NO to our “comfort zones” so that our life and presence in Japan will have meaning.

Challenges

Vocations:

The present state and future of vocations in Japan, including the Oblates, is very bleak. Many religious groups are asking their foreign units to provide them with personnel. Some small religious groups have folded up and closed their mission in Japan due to ageing members and lack of vocations. We are lucky to have received manpower help from a few Asian units like India, Sri Lanka and the Philippines. However, we cannot always continue to rely on other Oblate units to help us with the lack of personnel.

For us, recruitment of local vocations is a major concern. But, before we talk about recruitment let's look at our lifestyle. There may be reasons for the lack of vocation in Japan, but I think we, as a group of religious, have failed in this area because of our way of living. If we do not let-go of our "comfort zones" we will never attract young people.

Financial and material wealth:

Life is comfortable and secure for us in Japan because compared to many Oblate units in Asia, we are financially stable. Having money and resources is good, but it can mislead the newcomers who join us. If they are not given proper orientation and accompaniment by their Superior/s, they can not only succumb to the temptations of financial and material wealth but also move farther away from the Oblate ideal. This we have already experienced both in Japan and in Korea.

Poor in the society:

Although Japan is an economic giant, it has also got social issues like for example single mothers, social withdrawal(hikikomori), children's cafeteria (kodomo-shokudo), mental illness, immigrants, abortion, bullying, homelessness etc. Also, the ageing society and the present pandemic continue to make elders live indoors, and this leads to loneliness and suicide. We know what is happening around us, but are we involved with those suffering and abandon in society? It's time to stop talking and to walk with the poor.

Asian/Intercultural living:

Our unit has become more Asian, but it does not mean that we have been formed from a single crystal. We come from different Asian regions while bringing with us different cultures, different formation programs, different theologies etc. This can be a source of strength, but can also be the source of many problems! I think, more than our strength,

we have experienced problems due to clash of different cultures and our thinking patterns.

Being mostly Asians, how do we create a common vision that will help us move forward, in spite of differences in our thinking, opinions etc.? Given our past experiences, it seems intercultural living is difficult, but possible, provided that we are open to accept, recognize one's culture, tradition, thinking patterns etc. How much do we appreciate each other's cultures and complement each other?

To the outside world, we are a bunch of foreigners living under one roof, but in reality, it is not so.

Ageing:

In any Oblate unit ageing is a reality, therefore, we are not an exception. We have a few men advancing in age, yet they continue to contribute to the mission in their own little ways. With limited personnel in the Delegation, taking care of the older men has been a concern and will continue to be. But in a country like Japan, we are blessed with good hospitals, a health care system and old-folks home facilities etc. Thus, there seem to be various possibilities that might help us decide our future. It all depends on the choice of each individual.

Recently, I see that there is a need for the older men to learn to 'let go' of the past so that the younger men will be freer to take up the responsibility and make decisions for the future of the Delegation. And, for the younger men to move forward, there is also a need for them to listen to the older men, and learn from their wisdom and experience.

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