

Vocations and formation in the Oblate Region of Africa and Madagascar and the challenge of demographic change

by

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For over 40 years, statistics have shown a constant increase in the number of young people in initial formation for the missionary religious life in the Oblate Africa-Madagascar Region. At the time of the General Chapter in 1974, Africa had 39 Scholastics. There were 112 in 1984, and 186 in 1994. Since 1992, the Region has more *formandi* than any other of the Congregation's Regions. The recent figures in 2014 bring the number of post-novices in the Congregation up to 558, of whom 238 are in Africa-Madagascar. In other words more than 42% of the young Oblates in initial formation come from that Region. What do these figures mean for the Congregation in general and for the Region in particular? How should one interpret the *numerical* growth of the Congregation with regard to the spreading of the Oblate charism in the Church and in the world today? What are the consequences and the needs?

To understand the causes and the consequences of this growth properly, I should like to cast a rapid glance at the ecclesial context of Africa-Madagascar during and after the Second Vatican Council to see how the events of that period shaped the priorities and the choices of the Young Churches on the continent. I shall then present a short review of the Congregation's context and how the Oblates in Africa-Madagascar responded to God's new summons in the last three decades. Lastly, I shall suggest several forms of approach for reflection on the current initial formation in the Africa-Madagascar Region in light of the call to conversion the last General Chapter addressed to the whole Congregation.

1. The Church in Africa called to be responsible

In 1964, in the middle of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI celebrated the Canonization of the Martyrs of Uganda, in Saint Peter's Basilica.¹ Three years later in 1967, he promulgated the Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Terrarum*, in which he invited the Churches in Africa to promote vocations to the priesthood and religious life and assured them of a sound formation to promote missionary work.² In 1969 the Pope made his very first Visit to Africa to inaugurate the Symposium of the Bishops of Africa-Madagascar.

In his Homily for the Conclusion of the Symposium of the Bishops of Africa, 31 July 1969, Paul VI made this well-known declaration: "By now you Africans are missionaries to yourselves. The Church of Christ is well and truly planted in this blessed soil"³ (*cf. Ad Gentes*, n. 6). To this statement was added an invitation to accept the immense responsibility to form pastoral agents. "An immense task awaits your pastoral efforts, in particular the work of evangelizing those called to the apostolate: the Clergy, the Men and Women Religious, the Catechists, the active Lay Men and Women".⁴

All these events, that were part of the celebration and reception of the Council such as, the Canonization of Charles Lwanga and his Companions, the promulgation of *Africae Terrarum* and the Pope's visit to Africa, made a deep impression on the life of the Church in Africa-Madagascar. They brought a breath of fresh air and a deeper awareness of Africa's missionary responsibility which set it on a new course of missionary fervour, despite the instability which followed the gaining of political Independence more or less everywhere in Africa.

At the level of the Congregation, the drastic fall in the number of vocations which the post-Conciliar Church experienced did not spare it. To cite an example, the number of young people in initial formation dropped from 980 in 1966 to 300 in 1976. In the face of this situation, the General Chapter of 1974 voted to set up a Permanent Formation Committee with the mandate to “study the current problems regarding the vocations apostolate and formation in order to propose an appropriate approach of reflection and action to those in charge of Formation”.⁵ The following year, in 1975, the Founder was Beatified. Then, the very first Congress on the Founder and the Oblate Charism was held in 1976. These events favoured the deepening and spread of the Oblate Charism. The Congregation then felt new, confident enthusiasm both in the recruitment of vocations and formation. Some of the Units freed and trained some Oblates for the vocations apostolate and for formation. The rise in vocations in Africa-Madagascar was not an isolated case and it should be viewed in the context the renewal and commitment in favour of vocations and of formation to the Oblate Charism.

2. Vocations in Africa-Madagascar

The Oblates in Africa-Madagascar took the need for a good pastoral of vocations very seriously. Almost throughout the Region the Oblates felt responsible and involved in the promotion and follow-up of the recruitment of vocations. Some leaders were appointed to promote and accompany these vocations. Some Units managed to free one or two Oblates to enable them to study and train for this ministry. And the results were not slow in coming. Nevertheless, to provide a sound training for full-time formators is still one of the main challenges.

We cannot list here all the factors that helped promote the recruitment programme. However, one cannot fail to mention the positive impact the Oblate missionary presence has had in these countries. A good pastoral accompaniment of the young prepares them to ask themselves about a vocation. The active presence and visibility of religious witnesses in the Oblate communities, as well as the fall in vocations in the northern hemisphere, which had formerly provided almost the total number of missionaries, presented a situation which urged the Units to consider recruitment a necessity in order to ensure the continuation of the Oblate presence in the countries. Thus, interest in recruitment and the accompaniment of vocations was a real fact. In his Report⁶ to the General Chapter in 1980, the Superior General Fernand Jetté spoke of a re-awakening of the Ministry of Vocations which had taken place in the Congregation including in the youngest Units. He mentioned Zaire⁷ and Lesotho as among the Units with the most vocations.

At the level of the Region, the Units undertook to welcome the young candidates who applied and to provide them with a good accompaniment. To the two Noviciates and Scholasticates, already in existence in South Africa and Lesotho, other Formation Houses were soon added: two pre-Novitiates in South Africa, a Novitiate and a Scholasticate in Congo. In 1980, Africa had eight Formation Houses of which three were Scholasticates with a total of 70 scholastics. Vocations began to increase steadily in number which called for the setting-up of good formation structures in the Region. How did the Major Superiors of Africa-Madagascar react to this new challenge for formation?

3. Formation, a challenge for the Major Superiors

Since each Unit organized its own recruitment and programme of accompaniment for the candidates, the questions linked to the formation structures had been the object of a policy of cooperation from the start at the level of the French and English speaking Sub-Regions. The Units that already had a Novitiate or Scholasticate received young Oblates from other Units for formation. Steadily the Units of the two Sub-

regions improved their co-operation, for the planning and exchange of formators and of the candidates/*formandi* in formation.

The common preparation for perpetual oblation has for several years taken place at the level of the two Sub-regions. This co-operation has favoured inculturality in the Formation Houses both for the formators and for the *formandi*. Even though cooperation at the level of initial formation has been strengthened over the years in the two Sub-Regions, the English-speaking Sub-region set up some permanent structures for reflection and accompaniment in the Houses and some Formation Programmes: meetings and sessions for formators are organized regularly, with the selection and qualification of formators for the Formation Houses, the exchange of scholastics for the pastoral courses, etc. These exchanges are not confined to the two Sub-regions internally. More exchanges and cooperation between the different Units of the Region is noticeable. The idea of a Regional Committee for Formation, which has been mooted for a number of years, is at last about to become reality.

As Marcello Zago reminded us in a letter to the Congregation: "Vocations are certainly a gift of God; they are also the result of the commitment of the Oblates.... We have to take into account the past commitment to vocations and their formation, as well as to plan the future. Our missionary future depends on these vocations".⁸

What are the foreseeable consequences of this steady increase in vocations in Africa-Madagascar over the last thirty years and what lessons can we draw from it for our Congregation today?

4. The lesson of statistics

In my opinion, the first consequence is the duty to provide young Oblates with an in-depth missionary formation in-line with the Oblate spirituality and charism. In 2010 the General Chapter called for this.⁹ In order to achieve this: one must ensure that the candidates/*formandi* years in formation help them to deepen their knowledge of Jesus Christ, of the Church, of the Congregation and of themselves. The option for Jesus Christ, generous but superficial at the start, must become firm and enlightened at the time of taking the perpetual vows.¹⁰ Formation must prepare them to be open both to the missionary needs and duties of the Congregation and attentive to the pleas of the poor and to the socio-ecclesial contexts of the different countries in which the Oblates work in Africa. In other words, the Oblate missionary identity and formation must take place with both feet firmly on the ground.

Formation for a deep missionary spirituality can only take place thanks to a well-planned formation project and to teams of qualified formators who are entirely dedicated to their ministry. The new edition of the *General Norms for Oblate Formation* gives a very sound basis for drawing up a formation project at the level of the Units and of the Regions.

The recruitment of many young candidates to the Oblate missionary life necessarily implies the availability of material means and of personnel in order to ensure that they receive a sound formation. In many cases, funding presents a great challenge to the good accompaniment of the young. Solidarity between the Units and at the level of the Congregation constitutes an important contribution.

I should like to lay stress on the question of well-qualified formators who are totally dedicated to their ministry of formation. Although it is true that the candidates/*formandi* themselves are the principal agent of formation, the role of the formators remains crucial. The last General Chapter invited the Congregation to ensure that formators receive a sound full time formation.¹¹ In fact the formators "are not simple witnesses or assistants who observe the progress of the candidates. They must encourage, help and

support them in their integral growth".¹² Good planning and co-operation in this area will ensure that the Region has at its disposal an adequate number of well-qualified Formators to staff the various Formation Houses in Africa-Madagascar and throughout the Congregation.

5. Demographic change seen from Africa-Madagascar

The sharing of qualified staff throughout the Congregation as a consequence of demographic change implies not only a formation open to the needs of the Congregation but also an enrichment of the Oblate Charism starting with theological and missiological reflection based on the practical experience of Africa-Madagascar.

In a presentation based on the Report of the 35th General Chapter, concerning the section on Formation, Bernard Keradec¹³ asked himself whether greater attention should not be paid to the demographic change that the Congregation has experienced in the hermeneutic of its Oblate Charism and of its missionary spirituality? He suggested that in view of the Congregation's 200th anniversary, one could write and promote a renewed expression of the Oblate spirituality in which the emerging Oblate Regions would play a greater role, especially the Oblates in initial formation with their formators. I think that this is a very topical question because it obliges us to seriously question the quality and depth of the Oblate missionary formation that our current formation syllabus offers the candidates/*formandi*. This question certainly deserves special attention in view of the drawing-up of an appropriate formation programme and the training of formators. Only a good quality formation can transform this numerical advantage into an overall enrichment for the Oblate mission in Africa and in the world. What role might the Oblate Higher Institutes play in fulfilling this responsibility?

6.A Challenge for the Higher Institutes

Two of the seven Oblate Higher Institutes are in the Africa-Madagascar Region: Saint Joseph's Theological Institute in Cedara in South Africa and the Saint Egène de Mazenod Institute in Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo. According to the Apostolic Exhortations *Ecclesia in Africa*¹⁴ and *Africae Munus*:¹⁵ "The Catholic Universities and Higher Institutes in Africa have a prominent role to play in the proclamation of the salvific Word of God.... They serve the Church by providing trained personnel, by studying important theological and social questions", the promotion of dialogue, etc. The Institutes in Cedara and Kinshasa have an enormous responsibility and potential in theological, anthropological, and missionary reflection based on the African context marked by *joie de vivre*, suffering and the quest for reconciliation and on the Oblate Charism born of Saint Egène de Mazenod's experience in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

The question of suffering and of poverty could constitute a point of departure for theological reflection on the Oblate Charism lived by different generations of missionaries, — in the over 150 years of the Oblate presence in Africa-Madagascar. The formation of qualified staff at the service of the Congregation plays a key role in these institutes. Although this is already happening in the academic preparation of the young and the deepening of the Oblate Charism through research and university teaching, more dynamism is needed and greater visible cooperation in order to realize this responsibility. These Institutes could help the whole Congregation to review its missiology and its charism after 200 years of history.

7. Conclusion

Demographic change is a reality in the Congregation, and the Units where vocations are increasing have the duty to furnish the Congregation with well-qualified personnel ready to face the missionary challenges of the present time. The Africa-Madagascar Region cannot evade this responsibility. In order to meet this new

situation, as Wilhelm Steckling stressed in his Report to the General Chapter in 2010,¹⁶ a sound missionary formation and international outlook is necessary. We cannot respond adequately to the missionary expectations of today without a strong, joyful community witness.

The increase in the number of young people in Initial Formation in Africa-Madagascar is certainly good news, but it also implies a great responsibility for the Units of the Region and for the whole Congregation. It is necessary to invest much more in the formation of the young candidates and in the training and the appointment of good, qualified formators who are totally dedicated to this ministry. The Formation Programme must take into account the Oblate mission and identity, besides the missionary needs of the Church in the world at present. In order to do this, a good pedagogy adapted to, and in contact with the lived experience of the young in their generous and convinced response to God's call, must be followed up. The celebration of the Bicentenary of the Founding of the Congregation is for the Africa-Madagascar Region a privileged time (a *kairos*) to give thanks to the Master of the Harvest for the abundant harvest of vocations received. And the best way to give thanks would be to ensure that the candidates receive a sound formation centred on Christ, who enables them to respond to the missionary needs of this time, would it not?

FOOTNOTES:

1. Paul VI, Canonization Homily, 18 October 1964.
2. Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Terrarum*, Rome, 1967.
3. Paul VI Homily at Eucharistic Celebration at the end of the Symposium of the Bishops of Africa-Madagascar, Kampala, Uganda, 31 July 1969.
4. (Kampala, Uganda, 31 July 1969).
5. Cf. Acts of the General Chapter 1974, Rome, p. 69. The committee started work in 1976.
6. See *Acta Administrationis Generalis*, vol. 5, 1980, Rome, Superior General's Report to the 30th General Chapter, pp. 18-25.
7. Democratic Republic of Congo.
8. Cf. Marcello Zago, letter to the Congregation for the Feast of 21 May 1993, in *Information OMI*, n. 312, May 1993.
9. See Acts of the 35th General Chapter, *La Conversion*, section on *Formation*, #2.
10. Fernand Jetté, "Ce que j'attends de la formation" (what I expect from Formation), in *Documentation OMI*, n. 100/81, May 1981.
11. See Acts of the 35th General Chapter *La Conversion*, section of *Formation*, #5.
12. Cf. Marcello Zago, *Sur les traces de St Eugène: Lettres et textes sur la formation*, Rome, 1997, p. 217.
13. Cf. Bernard Keradec, Notes and suggestions based on the 35th General Chapter's demands regarding formation in the perspective of the 200th anniversary of the Foundation of the Congregation, addressed to the Governing Body, Rome, January 2012.
14. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, 14 September 1995, n. 103. "The Catholic and Higher Institutes in Africa have a prominent role to play in the proclamation of the salvific Word of God. They are a sign of the growth of the Church in so far as their research integrates the truths and experiences of the faith and helps to internalize them. They serve the Church by providing trained personnel, by studying important theological and social questions for the benefit of the Church, by developing an African theology..."
15. Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus*, 19 November 2011, nn. 135-138. "Catholic universities and academic institutions play an essential role in the patient, rigorous and humble search for the Light which comes from Truth..." (n. 136).
16. Cf. Fr. Wilhelm Steckling, *State of the Congregation* in Superior General's Report to the General Chapter of 2010, p. 17.