

Letter of the Superior General, Fr. Louis Lougen, OMI

YEAR OF OBLATE VOCATIONS

December 8, 2017 – January 25, 2019

The Joy and Generosity of Oblate Life!

L.J.C. et M.I.

Happy Feast Day to all those who live the Oblate charism! We begin the **Year of Oblate Vocations** on the solemnity of our patroness, Mary Immaculate. The grace of her immaculate conception fills us with great joy, love and gratitude for all that God has done in her. This is a missionary feast. Mary's immaculate conception prepared her for the call and the mission which God would entrust to her: to be a worthy dwelling place for the Son of the Most High. Mary's faith-filled response inspires us to live faithfully our oblation as missionaries of the Kingdom of Jesus. We entrust this special year, the Year of Oblate Vocations, to the care of Our Lady, firmly believing that she will intercede so that God's grace, in God's own time and in God's own way, will bless our efforts.

Why this year?

I wrote to you on December 8, 2013 and August 15, 2017, that many Oblates asked me to call the Congregation to get serious about the ministry of vocational discernment. At each World Youth Day in which I have participated, Oblates and young people challenged me to support Oblate vocational ministry as an essential element of the missionary project of every Oblate Unit. The insistence of other Oblates from around the world, particularly from the Regions of Latin America and Europe, reinforced the need to address our commitment to invite new members to join us. These calls of the Spirit led to the first Congress on Oblate Vocations in Aix-en-Provence in July 2016. At this Congress and then at the General Chapter 2016, the Superior General in Council was called to proclaim a "Year of Oblate Vocations."

This year is indeed a response to the call of Oblates moved by the Spirit. With the same passion as the words of Pope Francis to us at the General Chapter (Oct 7 2017), these Oblates are convinced of our future, both as vowed Oblates, and in many other forms of living the charism by lay and consecrated women and men. They believe we must continue to serve the Church in the most difficult missions. In the Vocations Congress last year, three participants really challenged the assembly, saying that it appears we have lost faith in God and in young people: we doubt that God calls and we don't believe that young people can respond to God's call or can be generous.

The theme of this Year

A beautiful theme, chosen from the Oblate Region of Latin America for its first Vocational Congress, expresses the focus of the Year of Oblate Vocations: "*The Joy and Generosity of Oblate Life.*" This theme offers us much to consider and should question and strengthen us. I invite us to keep these two words in our thoughts and near our hearts throughout this year, deepening them in our silent prayer, pondering over them in our communities and sharing about them in gatherings of the Oblate Family and with the poor in our ministries.

The experience of joy and generosity in my Oblate life

Perhaps the first step for each one of us is to focus on our own experience of Joy and Generosity in our vocation. The Year of Oblate Vocations should begin by helping us discover the sense that our vocation involves a deepening relationship with God, a journey of mystery, an ongoing dialogue,

listening and responding to God throughout life. During this year we are invited to rediscover the dynamism of growing into our oblation and becoming more fully Oblate throughout our lives.

I invite us to reflect:

- Do I experience joy and generosity in living my Oblate vocation?
- Is my vocation lived with prayer and accompanied by a spiritual director so that it is deepened, lived more fully and faithfully?
- Please read our beautiful Constitution number 29, regarding the vow of Perseverance. Has my Oblate life imitated Jesus' love for us until the end?
- What can I do to become more fully Oblate?

The experience of joy coming from mission, community and friendship with God

The joy of our vocation is rooted in the **mission**. Whenever I ask Oblates, "What brings joy to your life?" the first answer is always that it is our closeness to the poor that brings great joy. This special relationship we have with the poor comes from our charism and reflects the heart of Saint Eugene. Actually, we often discover in the lives of the poor a surprising joy and this is a gift of God. We are touched by their capacity to be joyful even in oppressive situations. The poor teach us about joy. We discover over and over: we went to bring Good News to the poor, and we did. But we also discovered very Good News among the poor and that called us to conversion. The poor evangelize us!

The joy of Oblate life is present in our **apostolic communities**. It is true that our relationships can get a little tense now and again! But, we know how to laugh at ourselves and to enjoy each other, together. I believe that our closeness to the poor gives us a perspective that helps us appreciate the gift that we are to one another and to recognize our own poverty. This generates joy. We touch the wounds and suffering of the poor and we are able to be gentle and compassionate toward one another. This too comes from the heart of Saint Eugene; ours is a special charism to live this charity. Charity begets joy.

Whenever Oblates come together for meetings, retreats and study days, these events are joyful gatherings. After the funeral of an Oblate, a lay person told me she was a little shocked by all the laughing and joking before, during and after the funeral rites! Then, she said, "Well, I guess it expressed the affection you all have for him and the belief that life is not over, the best is yet to come." We may not even be aware of how the people we serve notice the joy among us.

The joy of Oblate life is also present in our way of **relating to God**. Our relationship is real and we know God as full of compassion and mercy. The experience of God's love manifested in the cross of Jesus marked the life of St. Eugene and it marks the life of every Oblate. We come before the Trinity with the suffering of humanity in our hearts. Although society has exploited, rejected and ignored the poor, we know God has preferential love for the poor. This motivates us to preach the Gospel with compassion and mercy. We are drawn to God's presence to contemplate this love which fills us with so much joy.

The Founder often wrote of the joy he experienced in prayer and in the liturgy and this is surely part of our charism and a grace open to all of us.

Let us reflect personally and share among us:

- What joy have you experienced in mission; with your brothers in community; in your relationship with God?
- Pray that we might all live more deeply the gift of joy.
- Does the joy of our Oblate life speak to young men today as a vocational call? How can we make it an invitation to them to consider our way of life?

The generosity of the Oblate vocation lived in prayer, mission and community

Qualities like joy and generosity seem to accompany each other. Generosity is closely aligned with joy and is something very akin to God. Living the Oblate charism requires great generosity. The more we give ourselves to our vocation, the more open-hearted we become.

In our **life of prayer**, we deepen our friendship with the Trinity, three mutually generous self-giving Persons Whose love and life overflow to creation. God graciously offers the gift of Himself over and over to us without limits. As we encounter such a magnanimous God, we become more generous and grow in freedom. God is simply and entirely generous toward us. Oblate spirituality calls us to daily periods of silent prayer to rest in the Mystery of God. This experience makes us more generous in our vocational journey, in the way we relate to the poor and in apostolic community.

In the **mission**, it is often through the interaction with the poor that we are evangelized and become more generous. Our vocation draws us to be close to the poor and we witness the generosity of the poor. Those who have little or nothing at all are often our mentors in becoming generous. In another perspective it is true that we give ourselves entirely to the mission and at times this takes away from our health, our life of prayer and our life in apostolic community. Perhaps this too comes from the heart of Saint Eugene, who became ill because he over-worked! We need to strive for a healthy practice of generosity and a balanced way of giving ourselves to mission, to our relationship with God and to meaningful community life. These three dimensions are not meant to compete with each other, but to enrich, strengthen and deepen one another.

Life in **apostolic community** is characterized by generosity. We readily help one another, make sacrifices for each other and give our time to aid another brother. Sometimes we have interpersonal difficulties among us, but when there is a need to give assistance to another Oblate, we are there for each other. This is done with the spirit of gratuitousness and joy. Some Oblates carry deep wounds because they feel there was a time when they were forgotten by their community. We can grow in being more generous and thoughtful to one another outside of crisis-times and seek to live this generous presence on a day-to-day basis.

I invite you to reflect on these questions and share with other members of your community:

- Share a time you witnessed the generosity of the poor in your missionary life. How did that affect you?
- Tell others about a time you felt the generosity of a brother Oblate.
- How have you experienced God's generosity?
- Is the generosity of Oblate life an attractive dimension to young people today?

The witness of our lives

I would like to invite all of us to consider that the witness of joy and generosity in our lives can awaken a vocational interest in young people. The witness of our lives is the first step for all Oblates to own the ministry of vocations: the quality of our lives together will be a sign that is as old as the first Christians: see those Oblates, how they love one another, how they are close to the poor, how they are men of God! In this way the Year of Oblate Vocations will become a year to review the joy and generosity of our lives and to commit ourselves anew to Oblate values.

- The Constitutions and Rules are a prayerful guide to renew our vocation. Why not reflect on one article each day, allowing it to call you to a more authentic style of Oblate life?

The call to every Oblate

In light of the Church's call to us to write new pages of evangelization, with confidence in Jesus' mandate to pray for laborers for the harvest, and in recognition of the overwhelming needs of God's people, this year commits us to encourage the discernment of vocation as a gift of God that arises in a community of faith. We must make known our charism and invite young men as part of the mystery of God's grace to join our life. We have a responsibility to go out to young people and call them by name, to invite them in among us to know us and to make a proposal to them to consider our way of life.

I invite every community to review the material sent out by Father Cornelius Ngoka on October 11, 2017, and to plan how you could implement some practical ways of stimulating a culture of vocations in your Unit and community.

A final word

In a very special way, I would like to thank all of you who have dedicated prayer, time and much effort to the ministry of vocations. It is a very challenging ministry! Many of you have labored much in this field and have had no results or at times some results, but then great disappointments and heartbreaking losses. Thank you for your commitment! We ask God to help every Oblate assume responsibility for vocations and to keep up the efforts or to start anew to act in this area. Our vow of perseverance enables us to continue with loving faithfulness and great patience to trust in the Lord. "The Spirit at work among us will do infinitely more than we can hope or imagine (Eph. 3:19-20). Let us continue on the journey with much joy and generosity to live the Oblate charism. Mary Immaculate continues to smile upon the Congregation and to pray for us.

Your brother Oblate in Jesus Christ and Mary Immaculate,

Fr. Louis Lougen, OMI
Superior General