

# JUSTICE

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Justice has become more evidently an Oblate virtue as the Church has come to perceive action for justice as essential to evangelization. Concern for the poor has always characterized Oblate life, as has concern for the rights of the Church; but more recently, recognizing when people are poor because of various forms of injustice (and discerning when they are poor for other reasons) and then evangelizing by helping those who are working to overcome injustice have made concern for social justice integral to Oblate spirituality.

## The Founder

In the Founder's day, justice in the Church was treated as one of the four cardinal virtues, and Church teaching on social justice as a way of relating to others evangelically was largely restricted to considerations of commutative and distributive justice. Nonetheless, De Mazenod's love for the poor led him to come often to their defense and to dedicate his life to their instruction in the riches of the faith. In his well-known inaugural sermon at the Church of the Madeleine in Aix during Lent, 1813, he preached: "truth must be known by all since all have an equal right to possess it" [1]. In the same sermon he denounced unjust attitudes towards the poor, contrasting the dignity of workers, servants, farmers, peasants and beggars with what an unjust world thinks of them. He encouraged them to recognise their dignity, to see themselves as Jesus revealed that God sees them. Throughout his life, he often mentioned their condition and other social questions in his letters. As Founder of a missionary Congregation, he instructed his sons in the foreign missions to teach their people crafts, farming techniques, mechanics. He told them to open schools in every mission, to attend to public health and to foster civil peace. He also warned Oblate missionaries against becoming directly involved in governing peoples they have converted [2]. At the end of his career, when he was a Senator of France because he was the dean of the French episcopacy, he defended the rights of the Church against government interference [3].

## The Superiors General

What came to be called "the social apostolate" in the 1950s and "ministry for justice" in the 1970s first appeared in Oblate discussions in the 1930s under the rubric "Catholic Action". Father Théodore Labouré, 7th Superior General, asked the Congregation in general and the members of the 1938 General Chapter in particular to make "this movement of Christian renewal" an Oblate missionary priority [4]. His concern for re-evangelization or renewal of the faith was classic, but his analyses and vocabulary were new. Oblates were to minister to workers in the suburbs of large

cities, because these were now more de-Christianized than were the rural poor of the Founder's time. The method of Catholic Action – observe, judge, act – introduced a form of social analysis into Oblate mission, even though most Oblates did not get directly involved with Jocist movements.

Father Léo Deschâtelets also spoke from the new social awareness of the Church in the 1950s and 60s. He encouraged the training of specialists in both the ecclesiastical and secular disciplines. Oblate sociologists, anthropologists and educationalists would help the Congregation understand the contemporary world and move Oblates to respond intelligently to its needs [5]. With the capitulars of the 1953 General Chapter, he encouraged Oblates everywhere to be more committed to “the apostolate of the masses most abandoned and most exposed to the danger of Marxist materialism” [6].

Father Richard Hanley, during his two and a half years as Superior General, based his animation largely on elements of the 1972 General Chapter's *Missionary Outlook* document (cf. section III, below). He saw Oblate mission as a form of action for justice in the world more than as a way of implanting the Church; he regarded the struggle for justice in the world as a sign of our times and of God's Kingdom among us. His homilies and letters encouraged the ministry for justice without stating clearly what evangelical justice means. Nevertheless, his term as Superior General prepared the creation of a consensus around justice as an Oblate virtue during the twelve years of Father Jetté's mandate as Superior General (1974-1986).

Father Jetté, when he wrote of justice in his letters and conferences, returned often to four basic points. First of all, he identified the “new poor” and signalled that their presence in the world demanded changes in Oblate ministry. Among these new poor, we find “the refugees, the emigrant..., the drug addict, the young delinquent..., the atheist..., the believers without religion or church...” [7]. Secondly, after identifying the new poor, Fr. Jetté examined what they expect of the priest and the Oblate: “They certainly expect us to show them much esteem, respect and love... They also expect the priest and the Oblate to bring God to them, to reveal to them their own greatness in the light of faith... And if they are Christians, they expect the priest to give them Jesus Christ by bringing them the Eucharist ... They also expect us to help them break out of their misery... this also means the promotion of justice...” [8].

Thirdly, Fr. Jetté spoke and wrote often of integrating justice into regular Oblate ministry for and with the poor: “... the promotion of justice as an integral part of evangelization... has come into our ministry and in our ministry it will henceforth remain. What is important now is that it be developed and really integrated into its true place in the Congregation's evangelizing work. In this regard, I repeat here what I said in May 1982 at Cap-de-la-Madeleine:

‘For an adequate discernment in this kind of commitment, two criteria seem important to me. The first one is this: our orientation should be clearly one of evangelization, that is to say, the purifying and transforming of structures according to the values of the Gospel and the Beatitudes. This excludes certain methods incompatible with the Gospel: for example, the promotion of hatred among people or class struggle. The second one is this: the concrete form of our activity should correspond to the vocation that is specifically ours in the Church, as religious and as priests... In

our activity, the formation of conscience, Christian education, the spiritual support of the committed laity and, at times, taking opportune public stands will normally take the first place’.” [9]

The third point leads naturally into a fourth, Fr. Jetté’s frequent insistence that the ministry for justice be rooted in faith. Fr. Jetté brought clarity around these points to meetings with Oblates around the world as well as to discussions in General Council [10].

## General Councils

The General Council first discussed ministry for justice at length during two Plenary Sessions in 1977. These discussions were part of a series of Council studies linking various forms of Oblate ministry with the Oblate charism. The question took the following form: ‘How does ministry for justice fit into the missionary action of the Congregation?’ Three different approaches gradually surfaced regarding the foundation of Oblate justice ministry: the ministerial approach, the charism approach and the Kingdom approach.

Beginning with ministry seen as the total activity of the Church, some members distinguished Oblate *ministry* by certain qualities, e.g., prophetic, evangelically critical, etc. This approach enables Oblates to start with the work of the Congregation as it exists today, rather than with an ‘ideal spirit’ or a merely historical model, and then move toward something even more recognizably Oblate, more effective in working for justice, without bringing into question the totality of our present commitments. Safeguarding institutional continuity, this mode of questioning enabled the Council to see ways in which Oblates could, in the context of their present ministry, place greater emphasis on justice issues.

A second approach started from a sense of the lived reality of the Church as a family with various religious Institutes, each contributing its special *charism*. Charism was seen as a kind of specific difference, helping Oblates to define their proper place in the Church because of their “spirit” (their values or what is most important to them) and their activity. Discussing about oblate ministry for justice using this approach helped the Council to deepen its understanding of what is meant by ‘evangelization’ and what is meant by “the poor”. This approach makes it possible to clarify major ministerial options in continuity with the Congregation’s history.

A third approach started with a vision of the Reign of God, the biblical *kingdom* of justice, peace and love proclaimed by Jesus and identified substantially but not completely with the Church. In this perspective, any action which promotes justice, fosters peace and increases love becomes a kind of ministry. It becomes an oblate ministry to the extent that Oblates identify themselves as men of the Kingdom of God, devoted to fostering in the world those values proper to this Kingdom. This approach safeguards some continuity with the values that have always been close to Oblate hearts, but institutional structures become problematic. The action of God in the world, even outside the Church, is explicitly recognized; liberated men are to become instruments of this action.

Each approach has its advantages, as indicated. Each also has its drawbacks: the first may not force the Congregation into an adequate questioning of its present commitments: the second can be confining; the third tends towards secularization, unless the distinction between using secular means and becoming secularized oneself is rigorously maintained.

The results of the Council discussions were published in two *COMMUNIQUÉS* [11] which pointed out, first, that the promotion of justice is intrinsically connected with the Congregation's mission to the poor, and, second, that even though this connection makes justice ministry the task of every Oblate, some Oblates will have specialized tasks in this area. The ways in which concern for justice might permeate Oblate lives and ministries were set forth in a program for the Congregation. The goal of this program was to foster "an enlightened and effective commitment of the Congregation to work for a more just and peaceful world". Among the means suggested are various forms of prayer, of dialogue, of study and specialization, and of direct activity. A word about each of these:

1. *Prayer* is at the heart of ministry for justice. Each morning Oblates pray that they may serve the Lord "in holiness and justice" all the days of their lives (Luke 1, 75). Their lives are consecrated to a God who is both holy and just. The source of their ministry is not an idea but a Person; its motivation is not self-righteousness in a cause but love, even of enemies.

2. *Dialogue*, between different groups and tendencies in the Congregation, between different levels of government, between specialists in justice ministry and other Oblates, is also requested in the program. Dialogue of any sort is itself an exercise in justice, since it presupposes a reciprocity or mutuality between partners in the dialogue. Dialogue lives in a climate of participation rather than domination, of trust rather than control. The General Council asked for dialogue among Oblates because they recognized that no one has all the answers in a field as complex as justice ministry in the world today.

3. *Specialization* and study are also part of the program, because the field is vast and the problems perplexing. If the Congregation as a whole is to commit itself to justice ministry, all Oblates need to be conversant with the Church's teaching in this area; and the Congregation needs at least a few Oblate economists and political scientists, community organizers and development specialists. Above all, Oblates should be able to help the laity become leaders in these fields.

4. *Direct activity* of some sort is called for, because, finally, justice is known by doing it. There is need of a unity of action and reflection, of projects and prayer.

In 1978 an issue of *Oblate Documentation* [12] contained a series of questions for community evaluation of Oblate works, published with the hope of fostering the kind of discussion at the base which the General Council's program had called for. The following questions were put forward as useful in helping Oblates form opinions about the relative injustice of current economic, political and social situations:

1. What is the degree of actual *suffering* inflicted on people: starvation, individual or group discrimination, reliance on imprisonment to subdue people? Who or what is being sacrificed in order to maintain the social system? What are the complaints of the poor themselves? What do they feel most strongly about?
2. What is the extent of *reliance upon* hatred of another nation, race or class which is institutionalized in order to maintain the political system in which the Oblate finds himself? Is suspicion of others systematically inculcated?
3. What is the *moral quality of leadership*? Is it possible for honest people to become leaders? How is power obtained, maintained and exercised? Do all people have a voice in the choice of their leaders?
4. What is the degree of *manipulation* employed to maintain the present system? To what extent do people really participate in the making of decisions which control their future?
5. What are the *possibilities of renewal* within the system? Is life arranged in such a way that opposition is systematically eliminated?

After the General Chapter of 1980, the newly elected General Council continued discussing ministry for justice in the Congregation, but their point of departure was now C 9 and R 9 [R 9a in CCRR 2000] in the *Constitutions and Rules* approved by the Chapter [13]. During Council sessions in 1982 and 1983, differences surfaced around methods of doing social analysis and, even more fundamentally, around the vision of how priests and religious should minister in the Church and the world. These differences had a history in previous editions of the *Constitutions and Rules* and in discussions in General Chapters.

## **The Constitutions and Rules and the General Chapters**

While Catholic Action was chosen as a form of Oblate apostolate in the Chapter of 1938, the social apostolate in its more global form was first discussed in the Oblate Chapter of 1947. The Chapter Commission dealing with the works of the Congregation considered the question: “How might we render our apostolate effective with the masses which are beyond reach of our ministry” [14]. Speaking of mission to those “beyond reach” raised the question in continuity with Oblate history; mentioning “the masses” put the question in a new context. The Chapter of 1953 also spoke of “the masses” and mentioned the communist movement, while adding a new consciousness about a world much more interconnected than in the past. It called for research on mission and also indicated its disquiet about the value of religious life as witness to the poor, without however questioning religious life as primarily a personal consecration to God [15].

The Chapter of 1966 had as its goal the revision of the *Constitutions and Rules* in the light of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. It gave the Oblates *Constitutions and Rules* which enlarged

the sense of “ministry” and “poor”. In the Founder’s Rule (*Constitutions* of 1826, 1853 and 1928), ministry to the poor meant primarily strengthening the faith of those lost to the Church, although neither oblate theory nor Oblate practice excluded other kinds of service, and those to whom we went were most often people materially in need or in very modest circumstances. The *Constitutions* of 1966, however, made explicit reference to this fuller signification of “ministry” and “poor”: “The Missionary Oblate will cherish with a special affection those who are poor, those who are harassed by hunger or by fear of insecurity” (C 4). These materially poor people are later further specified: “the human groups with which the Church has practically lost all contact ... slum areas in large industrial cities, abandoned rural areas, certain racial minorities, immigrants, migrant workers, the young workers, students..” (R 13).

The 1966 *Constitutions* also added the concept of social justice to Oblate discourse about ministry to the poor: “In the spirit of the social teaching of the Church, they will seek to inspire and support those who endeavor to provide a more equitable distribution of this world’s wealth” (C 32). “... Under the direction of Superiors, the members will take part in social organizations, and even strive to improve the condition of the underprivileged masses by working for social justice” (C 58).

In 1971, the Roman Synod of bishops treated ministry for social justice as integral to full evangelization; in 1972, the Oblate General Chapter drew up a re-statement of Oblate missionary outlook, in which the poor were defined in sociological terms as “marginalized” and ministry for justice was described in terms of movements for development and liberation. The third section of this Chapter document presents lines of action for Oblates under three general headings: preference for the poor (*Missionary Outlook*, 15), solidarity with the men of our times (*Missionary Outlook*, 16), and greater creativity (*Missionary Outlook*, 17).

Perhaps more novel than *Missionary Outlook*’s deion of the poor was its ecclesiology. Implied in the document is the distinction, then new to Oblate documents, between the Kingdom of God and the Church. While this distinction had entered Protestant ecclesiologies over one hundred years earlier, it became part of official Catholic teachings only through paragraphs in the Vatican II documents on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) and the Missions (*Ad Gentes*) and the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*). This distinction shifts the focus of mission from Church to secular society. The purpose of mission is to establish the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice, peace, love and other Gospel values. Oblate mission henceforth was to cover concerns and works which were outside of ecclesiastical institutions and influence.

The *Missionary Outlook* document therefore called for a Congregation-wide review of our present commitments to see if they really advanced Kingdom values in the society or merely maintained Church structures. The document did not define the connection between Church and Kingdom and therefore left the Congregation’s ministry open to being secularized if “Kingdom values” were to be conceived in terms of secular ideologies rather than the Gospel.

In the reports submitted to the 1980 Chapter, practically every Oblate Province mentioned ministry for justice, problems associated with it, groups which merit Oblate attention because they are victims of injustice. The discussions in Chapter after the presentation of the reports from the Regions indicated that the Congregation must further clarify and intensify its mission to the poor

and determine how to integrate ministry for justice into its ordinary works; the verbal commitment to this emphasis in Oblate evangelization was clear. It was also clearly expressed in the *Constitutions and Rules* approved by this same Chapter. Rule 9 quotes the 1971 Synod of Bishops: ‘Action on behalf of justice is an integral part of evangelization’ and then continues:

“Responding to the call of the Spirit, some feel the need to identify themselves with the poor, sharing their life and commitment to justice; still others feel they should be present where decisions affecting the future of the poor are being made.

“Whatever their work, however, Oblates will collaborate, by every means compatible with the Gospel, in changing all that is a cause of oppression and poverty; they thereby help to create a society based on the dignity of the human person created in the image of God”.

Before approving this text, in 1982, the Congregation for Religious added two ideas to it: 1. Not only the Gospel but also the demands of their specific vocation in the Church must be a criterion for discerning what Oblates should do in this area; 2. Oblates will receive their mission for this ministry from their Superiors.

Elsewhere in the 1982 *Constitutions and Rules*, justice is described as an attribute of God (C 9) and a characteristic of the reign of Christ (C 11). It is not only the goal of Oblate evangelizing but also describes their way of life, the relations of Oblates among themselves (cf. C 81, 84 and 44) [C 82, 89, 44 in CCRR 2000].

## **Oblate practice**

Oblates are involved in social works and justice ministry, in announcing Christ and denouncing injustice, according to the needs of the poor they serve in various circumstances around the world. Details of this ministry can be found in reports from Province Congresses since 1972 and in reports to recent Chapters.

At the level of the General Administration, an office for Justice and Peace was set up in 1977, and a Congregation-wide network of Oblates most directly involved in this ministry was organized. This network communicates through an *Oblate Justice and Peace network Bulletin*, published in Rome two or three times a year. The back issues of this Bulletin contain many details of Oblate practice and thinking about justice issues. The General Administration Justice and Peace office maintains contacts with similar groups, from the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace to local development organizations. Many projects, especially justice education and small development projects designed to directly help the poor, are funded by the Oblate Sharing Fund. In 1982, the General Administration discussed ethical guidelines for making ordinary investments and set up a special fund for alternative investments (investment for special purposes) [16]. Depending on advice from local Oblates, the General Administration has occasionally advocated certain causes or defended human rights.

## Justice and Oblate Spirituality

Justice is an Oblate virtue. It touches Oblate sensibilities, first of all, because it is an evangelical virtue and Oblates are men of the Gospel; secondly, it speaks to the situation of the poor and Oblates are dedicated to their evangelization; thirdly, its promotion is desired by the Church, and Oblates are Churchmen. Justice therefore shapes Oblate life and spirituality with a certain natural affinity.

Justice can shape Oblate life, however, only if it is evangelical justice. Contemporary notions of justice often start with contrasting ideal economic equality with actual economic differences among peoples. This entails a kind of religious dilemma: if a person finds himself on the side of those who have less, then justice seems to demand that he call for revindication, even if this involves violence. If, on the other hand, a person is obliged to confess that he is on the side of those who have much, justice would seem to demand that he recognize himself as unjust, even though he believes he is putting to good use the gifts he acknowledges to have received from God.

The biblical notion of justice, on the contrary, seems to be less concerned about the distribution of goods than about the relations between people and their relation to God. In the Old Testament, the guarantor of this relationship of justice was the judge. It was his task to restore peace when just relationships had broken down. He was an unjust judge if he took account of people's economic situation, of their being rich or poor, when he rendered judgment. His judgment was a restitution of right relationships, a proclamation of salvation. It is the judge who creates justice in judging. Judging is therefore first of all the work of a merciful God who, in his judgments, renders just the unjust.

Christian justice depends upon the restoration of our relation to God through Christ. The sign of this restored relationship is justice among men. Our relation to God determines our relations with others. Only to the extent that we have received pardon and salvation through Christ are we able to establish true justice, even in its material expression, among ourselves. In the work of establishing such justice, the Christian is free to choose his means, but these must be consistent with the nature of the justice he has been given by God (cf. Rule 9, 2nd and 3rd paragraphs). The Church's social doctrine recalls the difference between the biblical notion of justice and that proposed by any contemporary ideology. This ecclesial teaching provides a properly religious base for justice ministry and anchors such ministry in Catholic spirituality.

For the oblate doing justice ministry, the spiritual life makes him sensitive to the possibility of his being instrumentalized, to the need for religious community for sustained action for justice, to a purification of motives and emotions, to an adequate New Testament theology of "prophecy" which keeps him in communion with the Church and aware of the need to combine holiness and justice in his own life. Combining contemplation and commitment to justice supposes loving and sustained personal attention to God who, in Jesus, is one with his people.

The hope and love born and sustained in prayer are, finally, what move Oblates to get involved with justice ministry: hope for a better future and love for those who suffer now. If, at times, Oblates



have acted more from anger than from deeply spiritual values, the results are mixed. Some have found themselves unable to sustain their commitments – to their people, to the Gospel, to their religious community and to the Church – when social activism brings difficulties into their life. In other cases, however, the consequences for men who have suffered through great difficulties have been an increased understanding of the sacrificial life of the religious and a deepened commitment to the poor.

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This short bibliography excludes the voluminous literature on Catholic social teaching, some of it written by Oblates. It also excludes the addresses given by Fr. Fernand Jetté mentioned in the text or the footnotes of the article.

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## **Notes**

[1] Quoted in CHARBONNEAU, Hermengilde, *Mon nom est Eugène de Mazenod*, Montreal, 1975, p. 43.

[2] Cf. the 1851 *Instructio de exteris missionibus*, in CC and RR, Rome, 1910, p. 211-212.

[3] Cf. BOUDENS, R, *Mgr de Mazenod et la politique*, Lyon, Editions du Chalet, 1951.

- [4] LABOURE, Theodore, O.M.I., Circular no. 64, March 19, 1939, p. 1-9, 11-13, 57-58, published in *Circulaires Administratives*, vol. 4, 1922-1946, p. 319-379.
- [5] DESCHATELETS, Leo, O.M.I., Circular no. 203, December 8, 1953 on the deliberations of the 1953 General Chapter, par. 47, p. 29-30, published in *Circulaires Administratives*, vol. 6, 1953-1960, p. 135-136.
- [6] *Ibidem*, par. 56, p. 35, vol. 6, p. 141-142. Compare *Circular 247*, vol. 8, 1967-1972, p. 426-429 where Fr. Deschâtelets used the language of the 1971 Roman Synod on Justice in the World and encouraged the members of the 1972 Chapter to become "witnesses to justice".
- [7] JETTÉ, Fernand, O.M.I., "The Oblate an apostolic man and a religious", given in Belleville, Ill., July 1978, published in *The Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate: Addresses and written texts, 1975-1985*, Rome, 1985, p. 77-78. Cf. in the same volume, "The Congregation, present and future", p. 329-333 and also talks about ministry to retreatants, to parishioners, to university students.
- [8] JETTÉ, Fernand, O.M.I., "The Oblate and the Poor", given in Cotabato, Philippines on December 10, 1982 and published in *Letters to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate*; Rome, 1984, p. 133-134.
- [9] Cf. JETTÉ, Fernand, o..m.i., "The Congregation: Present and Future" in *The Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate*, Rome, 1985, p. 342-343. Cf. similar comments in *Letters to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate*, when Fr. Jetté wrote to the Oblates of Latin America, Canada and South Africa.
- [10] Cf. JETTÉ, Fernand, O.M.I., "Action for Justice", work document prepared for the Plenary Session of the General Council in *The Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate*, Rome, 1985, p. 173-178.
- [11] *Acta Administrationis Generalis OMI*, vol. III, Secunda pars, Rome, 1977, p. 254-259 (Plenary Session, January 24-February 11), 320-326 (Plenary Session, September 19-October 7).
- [12] *Oblate Documentation*, no. 79/78, February 1, 1978.
- [13] *Acta Administrationis Generalis OMI*, vol. VI, Prima pars, p. 117-118 (Plenary Session, May

31-June 25, 1982), and vol. VI, Secunda pars, p. 262-264 (Plenary Session, April 11 - May 6, 1983).

[14] Leo Deschâtelets, O.M.I., *Circulaires Administratives*, Circular 181, November 1, 1947 on the 1947 Chapter, vol. 5, 1947-1952, p. 174-175.

[15] Leo Deschâtelets, O.M.I., Circular 203, December 8, 1953 on the 1953 Chapter, par. 58, p. 36, in *Circulaires Administratives*, vol. 6, 1953-1960, p. 142.

[16] Cf. Acta Administrationis Generalis OMI, vol. VI, Secunda pars, Rome, 1983, p. 291-292, "Justice and Investment Policy" and COMMUNIQUE for Plenary Session of May 20-June 7, 1985, no. 39/85, p. 4 and COMMUNIQUE for Plenary Session of September 23- October 13, 1985, no. 40/85, Appendix II, "Charter for the Social Investment Fund".