



ASSOCIATION OF OBLATE INSTITUTES OF HIGHER LEARNING

Elements of a Vision for an Oblate Catholic Institution of Higher Learning

Introduction:

Two centuries of Missionary Oblate history teach us that higher education is one of several paths of evangelizing the poor taken by our Congregation. However, institutions of higher learning are not our primary means of *awakening or reawakening the faith of the people to whom we are sent (C 7). ... There is no ministry, however, which is foreign to us, provided we never lose sight of the Congregation's primary purpose: to evangelize the most abandoned. (R 7b)*. When the needs of the poor and most abandoned are at stake, Oblates are ready to give of their best, embracing full human development as integral to redemption. The missionary quality of their service in higher education depends on commitment to:

1. Academic Excellence

Oblate higher education excels when we learn from the best practices of the academic and professional community, submitting to public standards and peer review of research, teaching, programs, and professors; since our mission focusses on the practical interest we seek to educate people who are both competent and professional. In every field of learning we promote the standards of professional ethics, as well as administrative best practices, from a Christian perspective.

2. Dialogue with Human Sciences

In the spirit of *Gaudium et Spes*, we are missionaries who love the world. As part of the world, we serve it by sharing the Gospel, and at the same time we learn from the world. We welcome every academic discipline that helps to transform the conditions of the poor; we dialogue with everyone we meet on the road of critical quest for knowledge - seeking always to understand better and develop people, culture, society and history. Hence, we give our attention to the human and social sciences. Experience has taught us that the poor, the abandoned, the homeless, and the stranger are irreplaceable partners in the Oblate search for truth and knowledge; they give access to dimensions of reality often hidden to

others.

3. Listening ... signs of the times

Beyond what is formally analysed from texts, studies, and research of all kinds, education is all about what is encountered through the senses. The Gospel is all about hearing and seeing: *Go and tell John what you have seen and heard.* (Luke 7:22) *Taste and see that the Lord is good* (Psalm 34:8), The sciences stretch and refine the reach of our senses; scientific discipline grounds knowledge of what is within and beyond our grasp. All education, formal and informal, happens in some place and time, has a geography and a history. Hence, we give the commitment of Oblate education to contextual learning, to reading the signs of the times, to reverencing the integrity of creations, and the responsible stewardship of the earth. Oblate learning cherishes a theology which is incarnate in messiness, where epiphanies and revelation occur, a theology which is open to constant dialogue with the academy, the people of God, and all people of good will.

4. Internationality/Interculturality

The global village has overtaken us. Oblates are missionaries in more than 60 countries and among even more peoples and nations. In practically every country we are marked by cultures of colonizers or colonized. We all need to change our ways of seeing and hearing: the imperative of the moment is dialogue, dialogue, dialogue. This requires a full commitment to the mix of cultures, and to communion within the family of nations. In the virtual village of the daily televised news, the option is clear - a new order of Pentecost, or an anarchy of Babel. In Oblate higher education, a new seeing, a new listening, a new and ongoing critical reflection are fostered to enable the rich and the poor to cross frontiers of peace and sharing.

5. Social Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation

Oblate higher education leads to action and transformation, with a dream that all who share the earth will enjoy its bounty. *Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.* (Gen1: 28). Rule 9a directs: *Action on behalf of justice, peace and the integrity of creation is an integral part of evangelization* (R. 9a). Oblate higher education lives from the hope that the face of the earth can be renewed, when the wisdom of the poor, the good will of ordinary people, join hands with the research and teaching of educators. Joining hands creates solidarity, and the warmth of human community.

6. Formation of Christian Disciples and Leaders

Saint Eugene de Mazenod is known as *a passionné du Christ et un inconditionnel de l'Église*. Expressions such as *an ardent love of the Church, the good of the Church, and the service of the Church* (e.g. in the Preface to the Rule) are frequent in his thought. Experience soon taught him that for the good of the Church he needed to attend to the education of its leaders. That conviction is stronger than ever today. Oblate higher education takes from the best practices of modern studies in human, social, and religious fields to prepare both disciples and leaders to become life-long learners, for the good both of society and the Church.

7. Commitment to the Church as Communion

Saint Eugene's unconditional love of the Church had a clear goal for education as integral to evangelizing the poor. In the Preface to the Oblate Constitutions and Rules he writes: *We must lead men to act like human beings, first of all, and then like Christians, and finally we must help them to become saints*. Saint Eugene's thought reflects the images, symbols, words and ideas of his time - often royal and even imperial; in a global village, today's Oblate is also a child of his time, educating for co-responsibility, team-work, consultation, collaboration, freedom, democracy, weaving the fabric of community in sharing and service. A Christian school puts communion in action.

8. Community Life - Source and Goal of Oblate Higher Education

Experience quickly convinced Saint Eugene that little is accomplished as individuals. Hence he gathered a missionary community, and inspired by the Rules of the great religious orders, he laid down common paths for life and teamwork. Modern higher education is more and more convinced that the best ways of learning are in community, through community, and for community. Knowledge grows through shared experience, collaborative research, and the symposium of critical reflection. Individuals end up burying their talent, in their own ground, for their own use, and it never yields a harvest. Absolute individual efforts do not reveal Trinitarian life.

9. Global Solidarity among Oblate Institutions of Higher Learning

To borrow an old imperial image, the sun never sets on the Oblate world. Oblate resources are spread thin. Through organic links their efforts are rich and resilient. Since Oblate institutes of higher learning are few in number, it behooves Oblates to network their own resources, and partner with other orders, churches and secular institutions. Forming consortia is

a privileged way of promoting stronger ecclesiastical studies. Sharing thus allows Oblate higher learning to benefit from the public standards of professional associations, while remaining accountable to stakeholders - the poor and most abandoned, church and civil leaders and professionals.

10. Training for Dialogue with Other Religions and Cultures.

Dialogue is the imperative of the future, if peace is to prevail in the global village where many religions and spiritual movements are long established. Dialogue is the condition of learning from one another. Shared critical reflection is needed to overcome age-old animosity, prejudices, crass ignorance, fear and distrust. Discernment is the only route to determine eventually what is good and bad in the mix of collective memory, and emerging trends. Wisdom and critical thinking are the twin servants of liberating dialogue.

Conclusion:

These categories provide a sketch of Oblate higher education. Far from closing discussion, they invite ongoing conversation and debate among all who work in Oblate institutes of higher learning. They call for a style of leadership that exists to serve and not to be served, that is welcoming and open, that trusts reason, and befriends faith. They seek confirmation in the flow of history, and from the collaboration of fellow pilgrims. Speaking of ongoing formation/education, the Oblate Rule notes:

God is ever at work in the world; his life-giving Word seeks to transform humankind, to build his People. We are instruments of that Word. We have thus to be open and flexible, learning how to respond better to new needs, how to find answers to new questions, discerning all the while the movement of the Spirit who renews the face of the earth (cf. Ps 104: 30).

***Approved by the executive of the Association of Oblate Institutes of Higher Learning,
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St. Eugene Institute, Kinshasa, DR Congo
Notre Dame University, Cotobato, Philippines
Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, TX, USA
Oblate Scholasticate, Obra, Poland/University of Warsaw-Faculty of Missiology
St. Joseph Theological Institute, Cedara, South Africa
University of Saint Paul, Ottawa, Canada

