

Congress of Lay Associates Aix-en-Provence - May 1996

The 'Aix Congress' was a decisive event in the history of the development of Oblate Associates. Held from May 21-26, 1996 at the Oblate Mission Centre in Aix, it was the first international congress of lay associates. 32 laity and 11 Oblates came from the Oblate regions to pray, discuss and consider association in the Congregation. The resulting document is recognized as foundational for understanding Oblate Association.

"IMPASSIONED FOR CHRIST, THE CHURCH AND THE MISSION"

The Lay Associate's Identity and Orientations

This text is a synthesis of the discussions and the propositions adopted by the Lay Associates and Oblates attending the Congress at Aix-en-Provence in May 1996.

Part One – IDENTITY of LAY ASSOCIATES

- In response to a call from Christ, Lay Associates live their baptism, enlightened as they are by the charism of Eugene de Mazenod. Animated by a family spirit, they share among themselves and with Oblates the same spirituality and missionary outlook.
- Lay Associates are impassioned for Jesus Christ. They are disciples of his in the footsteps of the Apostles. They give living witness to Christ the Saviour in the midst of the world. They deepen their relationship with Christ through their frequent contact with the Word of God, meditation, prayer and liturgy. The Eucharist and the Gospel are the wellspring and centre of their whole life. Their model is Mary who gives Christ to the world.
- Lay Associates are impassioned for Mission. Impassioned for humanity, they have faith in the dignity of every person before God. They see the reality of the world through the eyes of Christ the Saviour and Evangelizer. Fully involved in secular realities, they make the family one of the proprieties of their mission. They live this mission with daring, initiative, creativity and perseverance. They give value to proximity, to attention for and listening to persons. They reach out to them. They make a privileged option for the poor with many faces. They name, denounce and fight injustices, all the while making certain to take an active part in the history of their people.
- Like the Founder, they love the Church, the Body of Christ, the People of God – sign and instrument of Jesus Christ in today's world and its new calls. They wish to build as Church, to answer to the challenges of today's world and to new calls.
- Lay Associates have a living link with the Oblates, normally with a community. This link may vary in form according to situations, but it is basic.
- Oblates and Lay Associates acknowledge their need for each other. There is a living relationship of reciprocity in openness, trust and respect for every person's vocation. All deepen Eugene de Mazenod's charism according to their own specific vocation and enrich others with their discoveries and experiences. Oblates and Lay associates live and complement one another in mutual growth.

- Lay Associates and Oblates come together to renew their lives and their commitments in the world – in the light of the Word of God and of the Founder’s charism. The identity of Associates, however, is realised as well through their associating among themselves.
- To be Associates supposes a simple life-style, marked by togetherness, characterized by charity, fraternity and openness to others. They are persons of prayer. Conscious of their poverty before God and before others, they live in solidarity with the people of their area. Congress of Lay Associate
- Various modes of formal or informal commitment are possible, according to Regions and the will of the lay associates themselves.

Part Two – PRACTICAL PROPOSITIONS

1. General wishes expressed

- 1.1. That a report be prepared, giving an account of the variety of present experiences, in order to propose reference points to the Associates as a whole.
- 1.2. Acknowledge the originality of the lay people’s vocation and their complementarity in spiritual life and in mission.
- 1.3. That the different levels of government within the Congregation recognize and promote the existing varied forms of association with Oblates.
- 1.4. In the next General Chapter, that Lay Associates be invited to give an account of their lived experiences in the Regions.
- 1.5. Foresee the possibility of an international congress in the next five years.
- 1.6. That the creation and development of a youth ministry is a must for Oblates and Lay Associates – to express more fully the Founder’s charism.

2. Information

- 2.1. Participants at this Congress are responsible for informing all people concerned (local groups, Oblates, etc.) of the experience they lived here.
- 2.2. At the international level, a quarterly newsletter should be published to inform of any new experiences. It would contain, as well, inspired ingredients of Saint Eugene’s spirituality. A similar effort to network experiences of Associates at the international level should be considered.

3. Formation

- 3.1. The Congress sees the need for a formation program on Eugene De Mazenod’s charism and on Oblate spirituality; it would serve as a preparation for a possible commitment to the Association with the Oblates as well as for ongoing formation.

This should be adapted to circumstances and various cultures in different Regions. Such resources could be prepared by a joint team of Oblates and Associates who are competent in the matter. It should also be possible to make all existing Oblate literature available to Associates.

- 3.1.1. The Oblates should offer to all in relation with them the possibility of forming themselves and sharing their charism
- 3.1.2. A corresponding formation is also necessary for Oblates in regard to:

3.1.2.1. The theology of the laity, the priesthood of the faithful and its relation to apostolate, the ecclesiology of Vatican II,

3.1.2.2. Fostering openness and developing skills and competencies in collaborating.

4. Animation

We believe that animation must be done with lay persons and Oblates working together – with long term objectives. This could be done by using animation documents, but it could also be accomplished by Associates coming from other groups and with their own experience. Such animation should allow groups to grow in creativity and ability to take initiatives.

National and Regional Congresses as well as other meetings would be part of this process of animation and spiritual enrichment.

Implementing such animation would be entrusted to the local level.

5. Coordination

As stated for animation, coordination must be achieved jointly by laity and Oblates, beginning at the Province level. This presupposes that the persons in charge would be appointed at various instances.

Objectives of such coordination would be to allow circulation of information, to offer pedagogic work tools, even useful techniques employed in group practice, and to support new experiences.

Of particular concern would be collaboration between Provinces and between regions.

6. Structures

It is important that structures remain supple and flexible at all levels and that they always be at the service of life.

Structuring should take place as a priority at the level of Provinces or countries. There already exists in some countries a committee of Lay Associates; the formula they adopted could eventually be used elsewhere.

7. Finances

With regards to finances, it would be a good thing to start reflecting on how to cover needs at various levels – in a spirit of solidarity between Regions.

Aix-en-Provence,

May 21, 1996

Feast day of St. Eugene de Mazenod