

FEMININE "GENIUS" AND OBLATE CHARISM

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Thank you very much for the kind invitation to give a contribution to this Congress.

The purpose of my contribution is just to provide some elements for our reflection, without pretending to be exhaustive.

I would like to start with some general considerations.

We know that St. Eugene never established a feminine branch of the Oblate Congregation at his time (today we have it, fortunately!). I don't know if there is something in the archives about this topic, but I think that probably he never conceived a similar idea. The announcement of the Gospel, the preaching in the popular missions, the ministry of God's merciful in confessions and, generally speaking, the missionary lifestyle, were not suitable for women in the cultural context of that time. Or probably he was happy with the "affiliation" of the Sisters of Holy Family of Bordeaux, founded by abbe' Bienvenu Noailles who asked St. Eugene to consider them as his daughters. I don't know and I don't hazard any hypothesis about this topic.

Nevertheless, we know that many feminine religious congregations and secular institutes were established by Oblates: we might say that the root was St. Eugene, but the fruits came from his Oblates. They acted as canals, through which the spirit of evangelization proper of Oblate charism passed and was transmitted to other people for the benefit of the entire Church. Each of these institutions of consecrated life seems to have seized a reflection and developed a grain of the richness and fecundity of the Oblate charism. For example, in the case of COMI, the Church has recognized the derivation from Oblate charism and this is clearly and explicitly stated in our Constitutions which have received the Pontifical approval in 2001.

However, it is legitimate to wonder: what is "feminine" in the Oblate charism? How the Oblate charism can be expressed and lived by women? Which is the flavour, the colour, the key that can be given by the "feminine genius" to the Oblate charism?

In my opinion we might focus on two distinctive features that the Oblate charism and the feminine genius share. There are many others, but there is no time now to expand this subject and I restrict myself to two points.

The first one is the MISSION. Inside the Church, which is the prolongation of the presence of Christ into the history of mankind, the Oblates are the prolongation of the presence St. Eugene today. Therefore, the participation of women to the Oblate charism has to be regarded as part of the participation of the lays to the Oblate charism, which is provided for by the OMI Constitutions (art. 27).

Consequently, it is as an answer to the missionary exigencies and to the evangelization needs of our time. For example, not by chance, the secular Institute which I belong to, the COMI, was born

in 1952 from a "rib" of the lay Association AMMI, under the impulse of a Circular of the General Superior OMI, fr. Léo Deschatelets.

Here I am talking in an Oblate context, therefore it is unnecessary for me to evoke what is the mission of the Oblates; it is perhaps much more appropriate to recall what is the mission of women, as seen by the Church.

In the post-sinodal exhortation *Christifideles laici*, issued in 1987 by John Paul II we read:

In speaking about participation in the apostolic mission of the Church, there is no doubt that in virtue of Baptism and Confirmation, a woman-as well as a man-is made a sharer in the threefold mission of Jesus Christ, Priest, Prophet and King, and is thereby charged and given the ability to fulfill the fundamental apostolate of the Church: *evangelization*. However, a woman is called to put to work in this apostolate the "gifts" which are properly hers ... (CF, 51)

Which gifts are properly hers? The Church has paid attention to what St. John-Paul II has defined the "mystery of woman" (MD 15 and 31). In the apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), he said:

The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that *God entrusts the human being to her in a special way*. Of course, God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being. But this entrusting concerns women in a special way - precisely by reason of their femininity - and this in a particular way determines their vocation. [...] *A woman is strong because of her awareness of this entrusting*, strong because of the fact that God "entrusts the human being to her", always and in every way, even in the situations of social discrimination in which she may find herself. This awareness and this fundamental vocation speak to women of the dignity which they receive from God himself, and this makes them "strong" and strengthens their vocation. (MD, 30)

In the same document the Pope speaks about the risk of "a gradual *loss of sensitivity for man, that is, for what is essentially human*." He wrote: "In this sense, our time in particular *awaits the manifestation* of that "genius" which belongs to women, and which can ensure sensitivity for human beings in every circumstance." (MD, 31)

Now, how can this be applied to our case?

In his famous homily at the church of the Madeleine in 1813, St. Eugene addressed to the lower social classes, describing their conditions, helping them to become aware of who they are in front of God and in front of the world.

Let us listen, once more, his resounding words:

Workers, who are you in the eyes of the world? A class of people destined to spend their lives in the painful exercise of an obscure toil that places you in dependence on and submits you to the caprices of all those from whom you must wheedle a job.

Servants, who are you in the eyes of the world? A class of people slaves of those who pay your wages, exposed to contempt, injustice and often even ill-treatment at the hands of demanding and sometimes cruel employers who think they have bought the right to treat you with injustice with the paltry wage they pay you.

And you, tillers of the soil, peasants, who are you in the eyes of the world? However valuable your labours, you are valued only for the strength of your arms and if your sweat, distasteful as it is to them, gets any attention at all, it is only because it falls on and enriches the ground.

And what about you poor beggars, obliged by man's injustice or the harshness of fate to go cap in hand for your pitiful sustenance, to beg brazenly the bread you need for staying alive. The world sees you as the refuse of society, to be kept out of its sight and avoided so as not to be pained by your plight that they have no wish to relieve.

That is what the world thinks. That is what you are in its eyes! But all the same that is the master you have chosen, the one you have so far groveled to. What reward can you expect? Insult and contempt, that is the reward it sets aside for you; you will never have any other from that source.

And he says also:

Come now and learn from us what you are in the eyes of faith.

Poor of Jesus Christ, afflicted, wretched, suffering, sick, covered with sores, etc., all you whom misery oppresses, my brothers, dear brothers, respected brothers, listen to me.

You are God's children, the brothers of Jesus Christ, heirs to his eternal kingdom, chosen portion of his inheritance; you are, in the words of St. Peter, a holy nation, you are kings, you are priests, you are in some way gods

So lift up your spirits, [...] Lift yourselves towards heaven where your minds should be set [...] God alone was worthy of your soul. God alone could satisfy your heart.

Now, let us to try to translate these words into a current language: who are the poor we are sent to? To whom we have to address words of hope and, like St. Eugene, to say *You are God's children*, and quoting St. Leo, *recognize your dignity*?

Of course, this is an open question: we need to be continuously monitoring the changing reality of the world where we live, through our intelligence and our hearts, guided by the Holy Spirit, ready to seize the needs requiring a missionary announcement, a missionary presence.

However, I think that, being women, lay and consecrated, sharing the Oblate charism, we have some preferential fields of mission. For example, we are plunged in at least two contexts: the feminine world and the work world. In these contexts, we may render St. Eugene living today, by saying, with his words:

Women, who are you in the eyes of the world? A class of people commercialized, valued only for your sex, exposed often even to ill-treatment at the hands of demanding and sometimes cruel partners who think they have bought the right to treat you with humiliation and violence with the paltry love they give you. You are evaluated for your look, for your body: if you are attractive and sexually easy, you may hope to have a career or to gain money, otherwise you have to accept unrewarding and badly paid jobs. That is what the world thinks.

And you, temporary employees, occasional workers, who are you in the eyes of the world? A class of people unprotected, idlers unable to rise from the ranks, scrounging off their parents. You have no right to have a future, you are condemned to have no perspectives. Nobody cares to assure you a position, you are forced to: go abroad to search for a job.

Now, it is up to us to say also, with St. Eugene:

Come now and learn from us what you are in the eyes of faith.

Women, exploited women, all you who are deprived of dignity, my sisters, dear sisters, respected sisters, listen to me.

You are God's beloved daughters, His wonderful cooperators in defending life, in promoting humanity, in taking care of His creatures, in spreading His tenderness, in showing His beauty and His motherly love.

And you, brother and sisters who are looking for a job, you who have been fired, workers on redundancy payment, desperate and discouraged friends, you are God's beloved children, you are valuable persons, you are precious in the eyes of God, He gave you talents and plenty of human abilities, you have competences, you have the highest dignity.

God alone was worthy of your soul. God alone could satisfy your heart.

In other words, we, lay women sharing the Oblate charism, we are called to announce the high dignity of the human person in every situation, not by preaching (like the Oblates), but sharing the conditions of those whom we are sent to - being aware that Jesus Christ, the great Missionary, has done the same with mankind.

The feminine world and the work world are two contexts that the missionary action of the Oblates cannot reach directly. There are many others: broken families, diseased people ... we often have this kind of problems among our relatives, our friends, our colleagues. We are sometimes called to sustain, to comfort, to assist these persons, staying next to them, helping them to become aware of their dignity: who are you in the eyes of the world? Who are you in the eyes of faith? St. Eugene calls us to go there, to extend the range of the Oblate missionary action, being a presence rather than bringing an announcement.

This leads us to introduce to the second common distinctive feature: the VIRGIN MARY.

The Oblates have the name of Mary Immaculate in their Congregation's name. We know how important this choice was for St. Eugene. We know the meaning of the presence of Mary Immaculate in the life of the Oblates and their relationship with Her.

Now, what about the relationship between Mary Immaculate and women?

In the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), st. Jonh Paul II said:

[The] Marian dimension of Christian life takes on special importance in relation to women and their status. In fact, femininity has a unique relationship with the Mother of the Redeemer [...]the figure of Mary of Nazareth sheds light on womanhood as such by the very fact that God, in the sublime event of the Incarnation of his Son, entrusted himself to the ministry, the free and active ministry of a woman. [...] In the light of Mary, the Church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement (RM, 46).

Women sharing the Oblate charism, therefore, have Mary Immaculate as a model for their mission. She was a presence among the Apostles and a presence among the people of the first community. Therefore, they express the presence of Mary Immaculate, Her heart full of mercy and tenderness, Her motherly love. In relationship with the Oblates, they often keep and help to grow the fruits of their missionary action.

We may conclude by wondering: in the Oblate world, is it really necessary the "feminine genius", as it is in the Church and in the society? Oblates, of course, may choose to carry out their missionary work with or without women's cooperation, depending on the circumstances. Sometimes it is difficult, sometimes it is successful. In the best cases, they prove to be fruitfully allies - and I would say that today, in every context, it is important to announce the alliance man-woman that the world seems to have been lost and converted into competition, rivalry, sometimes even hate and contempt. Looking at the current secularization, the rise of the so-called "gender" ideology as well as some extremism in feminism and/or sexism, confirms that it is necessary to announce this alliance: men and women are not enemies fighting each other - in their diversity, they are partners, they are both cooperators between them and with God. Probably you know the Pontifical Council for Culture has recently (February 2015) organized a meeting on Women's cultures: this is a current topic in the Church. In our Oblate context, do we really witness this partnership, this cooperation? For example, in our COMI Constitutions, we do have the cooperation with Oblates as a rule. I wonder: are we faithful to this rule? Is it really necessary for our mission?

About the partnership man-woman, in *Christifideles laici*, we read:

"It is not good for man to be alone: let us make him a helper fit for him" (*Gen 2:18*). (CF 51): The fundamental reason that requires and explains the presence and the collaboration of both men and women is not only, as it was just emphasized, the major source of meaning and efficacy in the pastoral action of the Church, nor even less is it the simple sociological fact of sharing a life together as human beings, which is natural for man and woman. It is, rather, the original plan of the Creator who from the "beginning" willed the human being to be a "unity of the two", and willed man and woman to be the prime community of persons, source of every other community, and, at the same time, to be a "sign" of that interpersonal communion of love which constitutes the mystical, intimate life of God, One in Three. (CF, 52)

Concluding, women living the Oblate charism share with Oblates the mission of defending the human dignity, especially that of poor and voiceless. Moreover, they have the highest mission to be the face of Mary Immaculate among the Oblates. They may also significantly cooperate with the Oblates in their missionary action, keeping and making grow the fruits of their mission, on the model of the Virgin Mary among the Apostles. May Her love guide our steps to the service of the Church and to the reciprocity and the "unity of the two" wanted by God in His original plan for the true fulfillment of mankind.

P. S. Unfortunately I had no time to examine in depth St. Eugene's relationship with women, especially those who marked his early years of his life: his mother and his sister. We know that the young Eugene missed his mother's proximity and found a second mother in the Duchess of Cannizzaro, from his letters we know that he had female friends in Palermo, in spite of his shyness

and I would like to mention some letters to and from his sister, full of tenderness and affection. He called her *una graziosa piccola sorella un po' arrogante* ... Eugene experienced his sister's love, he esteemed her, he was anxious for her, he took care of her education and spiritual life, he never missed to give her his advices and recommendations while he was in Palermo. In one case, she also dared to give him a recommendation ... let you listen how daring and impertinent but tender her words are:

Don't you be afraid at all to lead a life too dissipated? Once you were very pious, you did not give your hand to the Ladies except to old ones. If you missed these good principles, would I be able to give you some advices: to you who give many to others, I would have much more glory. Would it not be the only one that I would have to give you, but yes I can hear you offended for the liberty I take. I stop now to ensure that nothing will be ever able to alter the good friendship that must reign between us, and to prevent you to reciprocate recommendation for recommendation, I get up on my toes to reach your mouth and cover it with a great caress.

(from his sister Eugenia, 26 October 1801)