

MISSIONARY OBLATE PARTNERSHIP 2011 De Mazenod Conference



**Middle-aged Catholics:
Missing in Action?**



2011 De Mazenod Conference

March 4-6, Oblate Renewal Center at Oblate School Theology
San Antonio, Texas

"Established by the Missionary Oblate Partnership, the De Mazenod Conference is dedicated to promoting dialogue on contemporary issues related to the Oblate charisms of evangelization and human development."



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* Conference Coordinator

Committed But Otherwise Prevented From Attending:
Greg Erlandson
Sally Gomez-Jung
Fr. Billy Morell, OMI
Steve Saldana
Mark Watson, Jr.



Dear Reader,

The 2011 De Mazenod Conference Journal is designed to communicate more than a collection of essays and insights upon a very important issue. This journal, and our sharing it with you, reflects a commitment by the Missionary Oblate Partnership to one of the most important things that Jesus offered those He encountered: conversation.

Since its founding nearly seven years ago the Partnership has believed that what is often missing in philanthropy is also a primary focus in the Gospel and in the identity of the Missionary Oblates. Conversation implies a true listening to each other. It is clear that Jesus listened to those he encountered. It is also clear that those who truly listened to Him experienced hope, inspiration, healing.

This journal is a continuation and broadening of the "conversation" that began two months ago in San Antonio. Thank you for taking the time to listen to those who share their thoughts and feelings around this year's topic, **"Middle-Aged Catholics: Missing In Action?"** It is our goal to keep the conversation alive in our reflections, in our families and in our pastoral work.

Arthur A. Pingolt, Jr.

President
Missionary Oblate Partnership



Recently I was surprised by a phone call from a church executive I had never met. He had heard about our De Mazenod Conference, and, in a not so subtle way, was asking to be invited to next year's conference. Reports had gotten

back to him about the outstanding people we had gathered in San Antonio around a very timely topic. He was convinced, he explained, that, whenever people like those we invited get together over a weekend, good things happen, and that's how he likes to spend his time.

We were truly blessed in so many ways during our Conference – besides articulate and dedicated people, we enjoyed beautiful weather, wonderful hospitality, along with an inspirational liturgy led by Fathers Paul Waldie and Allen Maes.

Admittedly, we can't replicate all these blessings, but we hope to share some of them through this modest journal. Besides reading about our Conference, maybe some of you will go on to welcome, encourage, and enrich others. That's what we heard many people are looking and longing for in a Church they want to call their own.

Father Tom Singer, O.M.I.

Spiritual Director
Missionary Oblate Partnership

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MIA Conference Schedule



Friday, March 4

3-5 PM Check-in
 5:00 Social
 6:00 Dinner
 7:00 Welcome & Introduction
 Artie Pingolt
 7:15 Joining Exercise
 7:30 Conference Keynote
 Ron Rolheiser, OMI
 9:00 Shuttle Available To Hotel

1:00 Group Photo at Grotto
 1:15 Small Group Discussions
 Alicia von Stamwitz & Mary Gautier
 (4-5 groups, tasked to identify opportunities/issues)
 Review of responses
 3:00 Break
 4:15 Bus picks up at Oblate Renewal Center
 4:30 Bus picks up at Aloft Hotel
 5:15 Arrival at Diamond K Ranch – Tour
 Liturgy – Paul Waldie, OMI
 Texas BBQ
 8:00 Bus Departs Diamond K Ranch

Saturday, March 5

8:00 AM Informal Breakfast
 9:00 Review of the Day
 Artie Pingolt
 9:15 Survey Review
 Alicia von Stamwitz
 10:00 Break
 10:15 Panel Presentations
 Interlocutor: Tom Singer, OMI
Mary Gautier: View from 50,000 feet
Charlie Camosy: Theology & Culture
Bill McGarvey: Catholic (Dis)connectivity
Ed Murray: Reviving The Parish
Tom & Mary Jane Fox: MIA, Door To Door
 11:30 Q&A
 NOON Lunch

Sunday, March 6

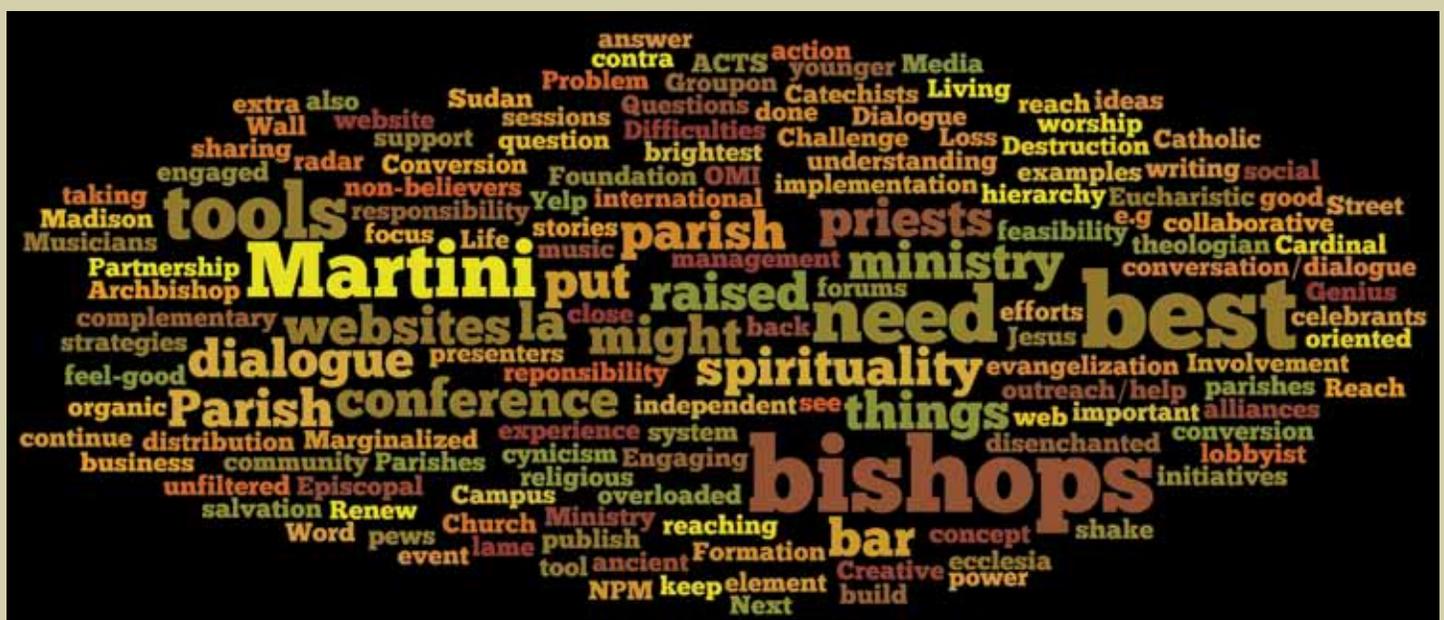
8:00 AM Informal Breakfast
 9:00 Morning Prayer
 9:15 Open Forum
 "What Have We Learned? Are There Signs Of Hope?"
 Alicia von Stamwitz/Tom Singer, OMI
 11:00 Conclusion & Conference Journal
 Artie Pingolt/Tom Singer, OMI
 11:30 Closing Prayer
 Allen Maes, OMI
 Noon Lunch
 DEPARTURES

Some contextualizing comments about the Pre-conference survey:

- The group of about 30 was composed primarily of “middle-aged” Catholics: three in four were age 50 or above and the most common age group was in their fifties. Males outnumbered females by two to one, which is somewhat atypical for lay gatherings. Six in ten were married, most often to a Catholic spouse, and very few had children in the home.
- Eight in ten report attending Mass at least weekly, and all report attending at least monthly. Their open-ended comments about why they attend Mass speak to the attachment that they feel to the community, the Eucharist, and the liturgy. Many express the sentiment that going to Mass keeps them engaged in their faith.
- The survey also asked respondents to describe the persons/groups/activities in addition to Mass that nourish their spiritual life. Many mentioned a spouse or other family members. Others described spiritual, scriptural, or prayer groups they belong to. Several mentioned involvement in ministries (either paid or volunteer) with a religious community, a diocese, or a Catholic organization. A number also mentioned spiritual reading, private prayer, spiritual direction, and retreats.
- When asked what attracts them to this person/group/activity, most mention individual characteristics, such as integrity, joy, faithfulness, goodness, inspiring example, and witness through action. Others talk about fellowship, support, sense of the nearness of Christ, and Gospel vision.
- Respondents were next asked to describe how this person/group/activity differs from their experience of the Catholic Church. Many were somewhat confused by this question because the persons/groups/activities they described are also in the Church. Several commented, however, that their relationships to these persons/groups/activities are broader, more experiential, more intimate and personal than what they experience in the Church.
- The groups that appear to be missing from the Church, according to respondents, include youth and young adults, the divorced and separated, gays and lesbians, and women in leadership. Youth and young adults were cited more often than any other group.
- Activities or practices of other, non-Catholic faith groups that these respondents find attractive include other Christian practices such as Taize or Quaker meditation as well as Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu practices. Respondents typically describe the community building, meditative, mission-oriented, or evangelical practices of these and other groups.

Compiled by Dr. Mary Gautier, Senior Research Fellow at CARA - Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate - at Georgetown University.

The graphic below is called a **Wordle**, created by a software program that allows for the visual prioritization of several themes, topics, and related words based on the frequency of their use in a given setting. The De Mazenod Conference Wordle allows those who did not attend the conference to see which issues came up frequently and with most emphasis by the group. Note: The “Martini” most visible refers to the Jesuit Archbishop of Milan, who is widely acclaimed for his efforts to promote discussions around Catholic identity.



Oblate Ron Rolheiser, a well-known spiritual writer, is the president of Oblate School of Theology, host institution for the 2011 De Mazenod Conference.

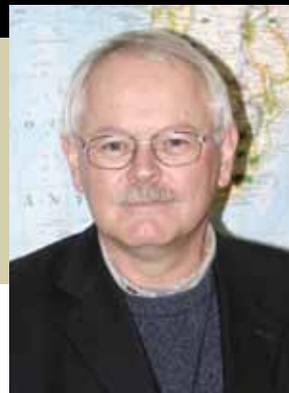
Father Rolheiser has also done extensive research and reflection in the areas of mid-life and contemporary spirituality. As keynote speaker for the conference he delivered a "field guide" for conferees as they spent the weekend discussing the conference topic from various points of view- cultural, spiritual, sociological. The outline below is one that he shared with conferees as part of his one-hour address.

Middle-Aged Catholics – Missing in Action

Ronald Rolheiser OMI

President, Oblate School of Theology

San Antonio, Texas



Part one - Missing in Action – The Situation – “Our emptying and graying churches”

The concept of “Missing” is characterized by six things:

- i. “Believing but not belonging”
 - In Western Culture
 - More than 90% of the people believe in God.
 - More than 85% claim some kind of religious affiliation and still want the basic rites of passage and want their churches to be there for them selectively. (Of the 15% of Americans who claim no church affiliation, the vast majority of this group is between the ages of 18-35.)
 - But fewer people are going to church regularly. i.e., USA = 40-43%; Canada 20-25%; Western Europe 10-15%.
- ii. Spirituality, without ecclesiology – “*I am spiritual but not religious!*”
- iii. Reductionist perception on both sides of the ideological spectrum
 - Conservative perception that the church is basically healthy and is meant to morph into a “lean, mean, and orthodoxly pure” community - and the culture is “post-Christian,” morally corrupt, and the enemy of this kind of church.
 - Liberal perception that anger at abuse and patriarchy is the *major* root of the problem - and the culture, at many places, is more moral than the church.
- iv. More indifference than anger
- v. Middle-aged Catholics turning in huge numbers to other churches, other faiths, or privatized spirituality
- vi. By a culture that is more “post-ecclesial” than post-Christian

Part two - Why? Why are middle-aged Catholics “missing in action”?

- A. *The Ten Top Reasons Being Given by Conservatives and Liberals for Why Middle-Aged Catholics are no longer gracing our churches regularly:*

Conservative intuitions ...

1. The church has lost its salt – the diluting of “classical Roman Catholicism” in the wake of Vatican II and the social changes of the past two generations.
2. The ravages of secularity and moral relativism – a “post-Christian” culture – seen particularly in the loss of a sense of reverence, the loss of clear dogmatic boundaries and symbols, and the loss of proper sexual ethos.
3. The loss of the fear of God and of eternal punishment.
4. The loss of the sense of “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*” (*outside the church no salvation*).
5. The loss of the capacity for genuine self-sacrifice and self-donation of one’s life for another.

Liberal intuitions ...

6. The patriarchal nature of the Roman Catholic church, as seen most clearly in the sexual abuse crisis – the church as too compromised.
7. The triumph of fear in the church.
8. The triumph of clericalism in the church.
9. The loss of the sense of “extra mundum nulla salus” (outside the world no salvation) and a misreading of secularity as our enemy rather than as our child
10. The church as too narrow, too exclusive, too self-righteous, too “un-Catholic,” and too immature to be worthy of Jesus. The failure of the church to offer a model of human maturity.

B. Other perspectives

1. **The Reginald Bibby – Parker Palmer thesis** – “The breakdown of public life” ... “People are treating their churches in basically the same way as they are treating their families and neighbors.”
2. **The Karl Rahner – Fredrich Nietzsche thesis** – The receding of transcendence, faith and church as no longer carried by the culture, the “death of God” in the consciousness of the market place. The need to be a mystic or a non-believer.
3. **The Philip Rieff – Allan Bloom thesis** – The closing of the human mind through the reduction of our language and symbols. The triumph of the therapeutic. The triumph and globalization of superficiality. The loss of enchantment and chastity.
4. **Charles Taylor – A Secular Age** – the historical emergence of a “buffered” and disenchanting personality.

Part Three - The Road Forward – A better Diagnosis and a better Prescription

- A. Diagnostic - Gleaning the truth inherent in each perspective: Each of the perspectives examined above contains some truth:
1. The conservative critiques
 2. The liberal critiques
 3. Bibby and Palmer
 4. Rahner and Nietzsche
 5. Rieff and Bloom
 6. Taylor

B. Prescriptive – Ten Commandments for the Long Haul:

1. Strive to incarnate a new maturity
2. Become more “mystic” – inner-directed, accept and deal with “moral loneliness.”
3. Continue to hold your own moral and religious ground and your particular “incarnation”, but hold it in charity and graciousness.
4. Be in the world, but not of the world.
5. Bear down on the essentials: love, respect, forgiveness, graciousness.
6. Don't be a liberal and don't be a conservative, be a woman or man of faith and charity and go where that takes you!
7. Embrace truth and charity, wherever you meet them, in whatever guise you meet them, remembering that God is the author of all that is good.
8. Remember: Nobody gets to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor!
9. Be faithful unto “death.”
10. Keep your sense of humor, recognizing always that a lack of a sense of humor is an infallible sign of pompousness and grandiosity.

A streaming webcast of Father Rolheiser's complete address is available via the following websites:

www.oblatepartnership.org • www.omiusa.org .

JOURNAL SUBMISSIONS

Why Roman Catholics Should Have an Energetic, Vigorous Confidence

By Charles C. Camosy, PhD

Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics

Fordham University

A major concern for anyone who studies and teaches ethics (especially insofar as it informs and otherwise affects public policy) is dealing with liberal/conservative polarization. It is a devastating force which keeps people from even being in each other's presence, much less actually listening to what 'the other' has to say. I have made overcoming this polarization a major goal of my career as a Christian ethicist, and have organized the 'Fordham Conversation Project'— a group of young Roman Catholic theologians who want respect for persons and careful examination of arguments to trump the polarized nonsense which passes for discourse in our culture today.

Partly on the basis of this effort, I was invited to speak at a recent Missionary Oblate Partnership conference entitled 'Middle-Aged Catholics: Missing in Action?' Considering that my home institution, Fordham University, recently put on a conference entitled 'Lost? 20-Somethings and the Church', one might get the impression that it should be all hands on deck for American Roman Catholicism. But in my talk I argued that this would be a mistake. I think there are several reasons for an energetic, vigorous confidence as we plow forward into the second decade of the 21st Century.

The first reason acknowledges the real problems we have: and in particular an ongoing, horrific sex abuse crisis and a leadership badly in need of a basic communications course. Our Church also has demands which are 'hard sayings' in today's culture. . . .to say the least. No contraception? Homosexual inclinations are intrinsically disordered? No sex outside of marriage? Not even masturbation? Direct abortions are always wrong? Divorce is prohibited? No women can be in ordained positions of leadership?

Come on now. What organization could even survive with all of this on its shoulders? But, incredibly, we are losing members at the lowest rate of all the rest of the Christian de-

nominations. This is remarkable. . . and evidence that something is going very, very right in the Church for this to be the case.

A second reason is that one of our most basic problems in the Church is straight-up, no-chaser ignorance. Many of those who have left the Church, though certainly not all, often give uninformed (and even mistaken) reasons for doing so. They simply were never catechized and don't even know that which they are rejecting. The more confident 'conservative' group was never catechized either, but many have had a selective re-catechesis that ignores whole aspects of our complex tradition (especially those involving concerns for social justice) and is largely unaware of the Church's role in history.

"But incredibly, we are losing members at the lowest rate of all the rest of the Christian denominations. This is remarkable and evidence that something is going very, very right in the Church for this to be the case."

But this problem is easily correctable. If we make a simple effort to get a baseline of theological and historical knowledge out there (especially in our seminaries), then the arguments we have can actually be productive ones. And my suspicion is that many of the arguments would simply go away before getting to that point.

The third reason to be optimistic comes from several trends that are going to come to pass no matter what we do. One comes from inside the Church: due to a shortage of vocations, we are going to have de facto lay leadership and ministry as never before. Educated, confident Catholic folk, including many women, will be running parishes in much the same way that priests always have. This will change the Church in profoundly positive ways. I wonder if it will change our way of thinking about what a pastor should be and do even at a fundamental level. It might free up priests to actually be priests instead of parish administrators.

But there are even more powerful trends to consider going on outside the Church. The previously-mentioned liberal/conservative binary in this country will soon come crashing down. Already 40% don't identify or consistently side with either political party. Gen X and especially Gen Y don't fit into liberal/conservative binaries. The Roman Catholic Church has a moral tradition (especially articulated by a consistent ethic of life) that should be ready not only to give it the final push it needs to finally go away, but also should serve as an important player in what replaces this old and tired way of thinking.

Also, several of the Church's positions on ethics are going to start looking better and better. Its positions on, and efforts with regard to, social justice and eradication of poverty could have monumental effects in particular. Studies show that, done well, our efforts (partnered with non-Catholic organizations, of course) could actually make absolute (as opposed to relative) poverty disappear in the next generation or two. What a remarkable thing this would be.

But what about the 'hard' views of the Church on ethical issues? Won't they continue to be stumbling blocks for our Church? Maybe not as much as one might think. More and more young people describe themselves as pro-life and don't see access to abortion rights as connected with women's equality. We are also learning that more and more young people are delaying sex — and why wouldn't they? Especially given the hook-up culture and the saturation of sex in our society, couldn't we have guessed that young

people would eventually rebel and push back against this attitude being forced onto them? And there is the fact that, despite contraception's wide availability, STD rates continue to skyrocket. The use of women's (and men's) bodies as sex objects — both on the micro-level of individual relationships and on the macro-level of the porn industry and the wider media—has wrought horrible consequences for our culture. And then there is the coming collapse of the family unit and of other social structures in general—coupled with a sense that children are merely tools of our will and can be created in a lab per our specifications and desires. (The first embryo with one father and two mothers was recently created in the UK.) Don't forget the disastrous and rapid depopulation of the developed West that, according to UN figures, is soon to be joined by the entire world before the end of this century.

If these trends continue, and there is almost no reason to think that they will not, some of the most unpopular parts of the Church's teaching will be looking pretty darn good. And the Church's arguments will actually get a fair hearing as a possible corrective to these destructive trends.

For all these reasons, therefore, let us be confident that (however flawed) the gift of our Church is one that is sorely, sorely needed in our time.



JOURNAL SUBMISSIONS

Six Articulate Catholic Women – An Interview

By Arthur Pingolt

According to United States Census 2010, women are a little over half the population (143 million females and 138 million males). Let's assume in the Catholic Church that women are at least half of our faith community. This "electronic interview," conducted via email, is an attempt to get a sense of how some of these women feel about today's Catholic Church and what it means for them. What does the "other half" think and feel?

The women sharing their reflections below are highly educated and all remain deeply committed, in their time, talent and treasure, to this Church. Their ages range from early 40s to the 60s. Professions for them include media and public relations, business leadership, health care, Church ministry, government, philanthropy, and education. Several are published authors and most have children. All are women that I am fortunate to be personally acquainted with. A note: one woman chooses to remain anonymous because, while she is not uncomfortable with the strong feelings and opinions she shares, she works for a religious congregation and does not want to risk her views being misconstrued as those of the congregation.

For the Catholic/former-Catholic women that you know to be "missing in action" at some level, what are the reasons they give?

Gee Gee *"Two women I know - one divorced, one widowed - left because of a lack of support within the Catholic Church environment to help them deal with the grief and pain of loss they felt. Interestingly enough, both ladies found help at the same Baptist church."*

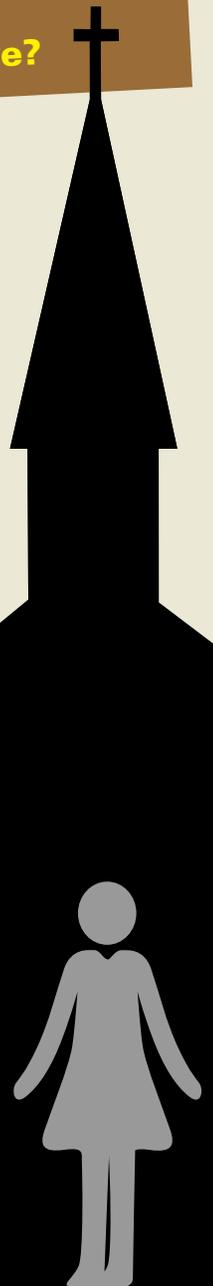
Mary Ellen *"Several things: Failure of accountability of leadership, especially with regard to sexual abuse; a sense that the gifts or perspectives of women are neither welcomed nor valued; they have no energy for Church if they are not getting fed by their experience of it."*

Anonymous *"For my friends, their "missing" is because of what they feel is clear gender discrimination against women based on rationale they feel is not supported by Scripture, early Christian practices, much less by Jesus Himself."*

Alicia *"The women I know who have left the Church feel it is woefully out of step with today's culture. Most are fed up with the "Old Boys' Club" and say the Church has become irrelevant and lost credibility."*

Dianne *"There's been too much cover-up in the Church and it's just too clerical- the old men who run it will not even discuss the issues of married clergy or women's ordination."*

Kerry *"The reasons for MIA women are diverse but all have the following in common: the perception and experience of being marginalized, of having 'second class status' by virtue of their gender, with limited opportunity for meaningful leadership in the Church."*



Are there any life-giving practices you have experienced or know/ hear about in other churches that you wish the Catholic Church would incorporate?

Dianne "The issue of hospitality is a huge one. The mega-Churches are really good at this."

Gee Gee "Many other churches seem to be very hospitable to newcomers."

Alicia "The interdenominational Emerging Church movement, particularly new 'urban monks' like Shane Claiborne who model the monastic virtues of simplicity, discipline and outreach to the poor. The movement has attracted thousand of followers and creatively bridges the gap between institutional religious practice and the 'radical personal response' demanded by the Gospels."

Kerry "I am struck by how often I am invited to preach or deliver a sermon at other Christian churches during their services. It always makes me feel appreciated, valued and worthy of being heard."

Anonymous "I hear from folks who have left for other Christian churches say they involve people more in all church activities. I myself have attended only one other church and it did feel much more inclusive."

Mary Ellen "Other traditions benefit greatly from providing opportunities for members to bear witness to their faith. In the Catholic Church this is generally reserved to liturgical preaching by ordained men."

What do you find most spiritually nurturing in your experience of the Catholic Church?

Anonymous "I am continually renewed by the 'missionary church,' men and women, lay and vowed, who are working in 'the field' humbly and without fanfare, but with deep commitment to Christ."

Dianne "Well executed liturgies with homilies that have been thoughtfully prepared; retreats and parish days of reflection."

Kerry "At the top of the list are the holy women and men- religious, ordained and lay- who live out their baptismal call in profoundly effective service to others."

Mary Ellen "The connection to community, the rich traditions, celebration of the sacraments, and the opportunity to participate in ministries are all nurturing."

Gee Gee "For me, the most spiritually nurturing experience in the Catholic Church has been and is spiritual direction."

Alicia "I'm lucky: I'm in a vibrant, young parish of new immigrants. Their celebrations of family and faith are a multi-sensory feast and have revitalized my own spiritual practices."

What about your personal experience of the Church would you like its leadership to better understand or be aware of?

Mary Ellen "I would want decision-makers to know that there is tremendous life and inspiration happening in all sorts of ministries in the Church. These stories seem seldom told but would bring life and encouragement to all of us."

Gee Gee "Good catechesis for a firm foundation is needed, but also the awareness that we come to our God by way of the heart."

Anonymous "I would like them to know that when I see the Pope, the 'Vicar of Christ' in his shiny robes, riding in the bullet-proof Pope-mobile, I imagine how different Jesus would be: wearing simple clothes, mingling and talking to the people, with the people."

Kerry "Our Church must appreciate that failure to provide meaningful opportunities of leadership to women comes with the increased risk that the Church will become less and less relevant to women, and by extension, to their children, girls and boys."

Alicia "Today's laity can no longer be treated like children. If Church leaders begin a new and genuine dialogue with faithful, educated laity, it will re-engage many of us and rekindle the Holy Spirit's fire and call."

Dianne "Let's re-read the Second Vatican Council documents and continue the work of implementing them instead of trying to go back to the 1950s."

JOURNAL SUBMISSIONS

Our Sunday Visitor and its publisher, Greg Erlandson, were among the first voices to recommend and support a conference effort to reflect on Middle-aged Catholics. While an unforeseen event prevented his conference presentation, Greg wanted to provide a reflection and endorsement from Our Sunday Visitor and himself.

A Letter from a Conference Sponsor

Greg Erlandson

President, Our Sunday Visitor Publishing

March 4, 2011

I would like to thank Artie and Alicia for the opportunity to speak to you, even if in absentia. On behalf of Our Sunday Visitor and the Our Sunday Visitor Institute, I would also like to say how honored we are to help sponsor the 2011 De Mazenod Conference. Several friends and colleagues are in attendance, and I regret that I will not be able to spend the weekend with you. I know that there are others of you that I have not yet met, and I regret that I am missing the opportunity to do so this weekend.

The theme of this gathering, “Middle-Aged Catholics: Missing in Action?” may have raised a few eyebrows. After all, the churches seem full of them. Some of my 30-something co-workers might even suggest that this topic is typical of baby boomers, since we boomers know that it is all about us all the time anyway.

But while the Church has worried a lot about the younger Catholics who are not darkening its doorways, it can sometimes be misled by the number of middle-aged Catholics who do. It can make the mistake of thinking that since they are out there in the pews, it must not be a problem.

But I don't think that is true. First, we know that only about a third of Catholics in this country regularly attend Mass. A lot of those missing Catholics are boomers. Second, we know that the next largest “denominational group” in this country after Catholics is lapsed Catholics, and a lot of those are boomers. Third, we know that in most of the mega-churches – from Saddleback to Willow Creek to your home town – a good one-third of their members are Catholics, and a large percentage of them are middle-aged too.

This may be somewhat politically incorrect on both sides of the nave to say, but I don't think that boomers are missing in action primarily because of doctrinal or ideological issues, though I'm sure some are. I don't think it's because of the abuse scandals either, though I'm sure that's true for some as well.

I think that boomers are often missing in action for three reasons:

First, for so many of us, our faith formation, whether we were raised in the Baltimore Catechism era or the confusion that followed it, stopped well short of adulthood. A rudimentary education in the faith might have been sufficient once upon a time, but in modern secular society,



“With our wealth and our mobility comes a rootlessness, however, that typifies much of modern life. We often feel disconnected. Our communities are transient, our marriages are fragile, and our jobs are both.”

this is the equivalent of sending sheep among wolves. We might still remember that we were made to “know, love and serve God in this world,” but if we don’t have a lived understanding of that memorized phrase, it won’t explain much at all. If we don’t know Jesus, in fact, this pat answer just leaves us feeling empty.

Second, we Catholics as a whole are above average in education and wealth, and we live in a highly mobile society. With our wealth and mobility comes a rootlessness, however, that typifies much of modern life. We often feel disconnected. Our communities are transient, our marriages are fragile, and our jobs are both. “Only connect,” said E.M. Forster. In fact we most easily disconnect. Our Catholic identity and our understanding of our Catholic faith and culture is too often shallow, and the allure of a mega-church’s activities and fellowship, or for that matter the allure of watching football rather than going to Mass, becomes irresistible.

And third, boomers may be missing in action because nobody’s ever asked them to stay. Without parishes focusing on their adults and engaging them as critical members of the parish community, and without boomers easily establishing the roots that entwine them in real community, the lack of an “ask” can mean they slip away silently – unnoticed and therefore unmissed.

Of course there are many good and dedicated middle-aged Catholics who give their parishes their all in time and talent and resources. But so many challenges we face as a Church – reaching our youth, encouraging vocations, evangelizing our communities – are made worse by the fact that we don’t recognize the challenges we face with some of our middle-aged members. Indeed, the penetrating analysis of Catholic teen religiosity in the book “Soul Searching” concluded that when the teens check out, it is most likely due to the fact that their parents have checked out first.

Or to put it more boldly, if we want to set the hearts of youth aflame with the love of the Lord, the necessary kindling must be the burning hearts of their parents, and grandparents: of middle-aged Catholics with a passionate sense of identity and community. Perhaps this weekend will provide some kindling of its own. Our Sunday Visitor’s support of this conference will be more than worthwhile if we not only take back some insights to our local parishes and communities, but some fire as well.

Thank you.

A Healing Touch in the Catholic Fold

By J. Michael Parker

I grew up as the fourth of nine children. We were a Marine Corps family, moving from one duty station to the next every two years or so throughout my formative years. I attended eight schools in five states between grades 1-12.

As if life weren't already confusing enough, each move meant having to make a new set of friends and trying to fit in among strangers in a strange environment. During those nomadic formative years, when everything else about my life was in constant upheaval, the Catholic Church was the one thing that remained the same, always and everywhere.

In 1963, Dad retired and we moved from Quantico, Virginia, to Austin, Texas. My two oldest siblings were about to begin college, and another older brother was in a minor seminary in North Carolina. I was in ninth grade and my five younger siblings in a Catholic elementary school. We looked forward to having more stability and less change in our lives, but our move to Austin provided only one kind of stability. In most ways, it proved to be merely the opening round of a new lifetime with different kinds of change for all of us.

There was a lot of excitement around the Second Vatican Council and the changes it would bring in our experience of church, but nobody had a clue about the extent of these changes or exactly how they would impact us personally. I loved the Church and was grateful for its influence in my life, but at 14, I had lots of questions. My oldest brother was my favorite source for wisdom on matters of faith and morals, and his answers would have made a priest or a bishop or the nuns very proud indeed.

By the time I graduated from the University of Texas in 1974, my inherited faith had become quite arid. I'd attended Mass regularly, but little else. Even Sunday Mass was becoming less and less a meaningful experience. For the first four years after college, I attended Mass only sporadically, yet I could never see myself as anything but a Catholic. I seldom prayed during those years, but when I did, I prayed to find a woman to marry who was not only an authentic Catholic but a happy and intentional Catholic. In 1978, God answered my prayers, and with her influence, my Catholicism became mine, not my parents'.

Over time, five of my siblings left the Catholic Church for good. My oldest brother decided that the Catholic Church wasn't feeding his need for good Scripture study, and by 1980 was attending an Assemblies of God church in northern Virginia. My brother in the minor seminary was entertaining thoughts that priestly ministry wasn't for him as he prepared to graduate in 1966. It seems that the rapid changes wrought by the Council, without adequate opportunity for ordinary Catholics to adjust to them, was the critical factor in his departure. Soon

he wasn't attending Mass anymore and didn't want to discuss it. One of my younger sisters came away from her Catholic school experiences with considerable emotional pain wrought by angry nuns. She finally joined a Unitarian Universalist church because "nobody judges you there or tells you what you have to believe." Three other younger sisters were married in the Catholic Church but didn't find much to keep them active. One, in the midst of the annulment process regarding her first marriage, decided it was nobody else's business and dropped the whole procedure. Aware that divorced Catholics were expected to refrain from receiving communion, she went to an Episcopal church. The rector warmly invited her to receive communion there, and she did.

I don't judge my siblings. I love them all, and I wish they all could see the value I see in remaining Catholic and practicing this faith; however, each is living a personal faith journey, adjusting to changing personal circumstances and trying to live their lives and relate to God in ways that make sense to them. Would I have made the same adjustments? Maybe, maybe not. But I realize that, for whatever reasons, they do not consider themselves to have lost anything meaningful. I believe that, at least for some of them, the Catholic Church has fallen well short of what one would expect of the Bride of Christ and has lost its relevance for them. If they need anything from me, it's love, acceptance and openness, not self-righteous judgment.

Four of us have either remained Catholic or returned to Catholicism, with various degrees of comfort with the institutional church. I have friends who are bishops, priests and nuns, and I feel comfortable talking with them about conditions in the Church. Two of my sisters who remain in the church value the good they see in it, but they are not impressed with the high-handed ways some bishops appear to exercise their authority. They see too many bishops as legalistic and rigid rather than gentle and pastoral, even while acknowledging that my friends in the episcopacy are gentle and pastoral. Both having post-graduate university degrees, they resent any implication that (a) they must check their brains at the door of the church to be a "good Catholic" or (b) voting Republican in presidential elections equals being a good Catholic and voting Democratic equals being a "bad Catholic." In fact, along with many other Catholics, they perceive the Democratic Party as "Catholic" in more ways, and perhaps in more meaningful ways, than the Republican Party. For them, it is too much of a jump from saying abortion is sinful to concluding that every Catholic automatically must vote against any candidate who favors a right to abortion. Bottom line? They want to be Catholic, but with their minds engaged. They are not naïve little children in a

catechism class to be talked down to.

I can see in my siblings' journeys a microcosm of what's happened with middle-aged Catholics. Yet I also see an enormous amount of life and spiritual vitality among committed Catholics, and it reminds me of one of the most meaningful comments made by Pope Benedict XVI shortly after his election in 2005. As I remember his words, he said that we don't necessarily need more Catholics; what we need are authentic and happy Catholics who, by the way their faith animates their lives, can prompt others to want what they have.

I do not interpret his comments as meaning that "authentic" Catholics are those who assent to the correct doctrinal beliefs even if they are bitter and vindictive like the elder brother of the Prodigal Son. I believe and hope that he meant that they should "live the virtues of love, respect, forgiveness and graciousness and be women and men of faith and charity, going wherever those virtues take them" (two of the "commandments" Father Ron Rolheiser, OMI, articulated in his prescription for coping with the turmoil in the Catholic Church today during the 2011 De Mazenod Conference in San Antonio).

Several conference participants emphasized the impact of stories and the need to circulate more stories of faith and conversion that could move lapsed Catholics to return to the active practice of their faith. They reminded me that hurtful experiences in the church too often speak more loudly to some people than happy experiences, and yet grace and authenticity are all around us if we only have the eyes to look for them and to see them.

For example, my mother, who grew up on a farm in northeastern Ohio, understood very well the admonition often attributed to St. Francis, "Preach the gospel; if necessary, use words." Mother has modeled a gentle yet persistent faith very authentically without ever making a habit of beating us over the head with it. She also understood the basic role of every mother, to love and nurture her offspring unconditionally, using her gentle touch to explain things when necessary and to model goodness and faith at all times.

Some years ago, I learned that Dad's onetime college roommate and his wife, had left the Baptist fold and been received into full communion with the Catholic Church. They said it was because they'd watched my parents over many years, admiring the way Mother and Dad had always lived their faith, and they wanted what Mother and Dad had.

At a time when many Catholics choose to spend a great deal of energy bemoaning various conditions in the Church and arguing over what's wrong with different ways of being Catholic, we need to share stories of positive witness not only

by individuals but by ecclesial movements, and the Focolare Movement – officially titled "The Work of Mary" – has an awe-inspiring legacy of nearly 70 years of witness to building mutual love throughout the world by living the Gospel.

Now celebrating the 50th anniversary of its arrival in the United States, Focolare anticipated the Second Vatican Council's promotion of the role of the laity by more than 20 years. Founded in Trent, Italy, in 1943, by Chiara Lubich, it has grown to more than two million adherents in 182 countries, yet it remains one of the best-kept secrets in the American

Catholic community. Its charism is to live the ideal that "God is love," enjoining each member to strive to be the first to love in each and every situation. The Focolare Movement promotes many international initiatives to promote mutual love, unity and reconciliation between persons, ethnic groups, nations and religions all over the world.

Focolare members don't criticize the ways others choose to be Catholic; they don't discuss church politics, let alone argue it; they simply live their charism, striving to keep Jesus in their midst while loving him in each person, especially if that person is suffering in any way. In their annual summer family retreats, the emphasis is at all times on practicing mutual love and then taking it back and living it in their daily lives back home, at work, at church and at play.

Striving for mutual love – and persisting even when love is not immediately reciprocated – is precisely what seems to be missing in situations that prompt many middle-aged Catholics to leave the church, and equally in ideological struggles within the Catholic community. So much time and energy is wasted fighting these battles rather than being light and salt and bringing about the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth.

While it offers no magic solution to the MIA (missing-in-action) crisis facing the Church, the Focolare Movement's many successful initiatives to build unity through mutual love – even in the midst of war, violence, poverty and natural disasters – has a great deal of positive wisdom to offer today's Catholics who wonder how to live their faith and invite their lapsed friends back. In fact, it could open a dialogue with lapsed Catholics that could heal many wounds and attract many alienated Catholics back into the Church.

Every pope since Pius XII, especially John Paul II and Benedict XVI, has approved and warmly encouraged the Focolare's work. Its members have many inspiring stories of building unity even in many apparently hopeless conflicts facing the modern world. For more information about the Focolare Movement, visit www.focolare.us.

"...we don't necessarily need more Catholics; what we need are authentic and happy Catholics, who, by the way their faith animates their lives, can prompt others to want what they have."

JOURNAL SUBMISSIONS

A Personal Letter from Anonymous

I write this letter to offer a personal response to the questions and issues posed by the 2011 De Mazenod Conference, "Middle-aged Catholics: Missing In Action?"

It is my hope to write, not as an OpEd piece, but in the spirit with which Paul wrote to the various Christian communities he dialogued with: not to rant or complain, but to inspire, remind, remember, request and to console.

I write anonymously not so much to hide behind my anonymity, which would be a rather small way to proceed, but rather, for the largeness that it offers. My thoughts and feelings will be shared in an old format of telling the story: who, what, when, where, why.

WHO

As a disaffected, alienated or lonely Catholic I could be any number of people.

Perhaps I am one of the millions of divorced Catholics who have since remarried but have been told that I cannot receive communion, even though eucharist is central to our worship as Catholics. By the way, my sadness is probably shared by my committed Catholic parents, who suggest I just go to Mass where the pastor doesn't know me.

Maybe I'm a gay man or woman who has been in a committed relationship for longer than the average length of heterosexual marriage (8 years) and I struggle to view my identity as the Church defines it: "intrinsically disordered."

I might be a parent who keeps hearing about all the family-related options of my friends' evangelical churches and feel the need to offer similar experiences for my children.

I could be a parishioner who is being asked to sacrificially commit to a fundraising campaign but yet cannot get my own pastor to share the financial statement of our parish.

Finally, I might just be showing up out of habit but none of it seems to speak to me and where I am in my life.

The point is I could be one of many groups of folks in today's Church.

WHAT

What is it, honestly, that leaves me feeling distant or disconnected from the Church I grew up in?

To be fair, I have to admit I myself might be at least half of the problem. I'm more mobile, easily moving from city to city. I'm more distracted by all this technology which is supposed to make my life more efficient. And maybe I just know too much, because I seem more disillusioned by all the big institutions I know: banks, Wall Street, government, Church.

Still, there is a general but persistent, nagging concern I have about my Church that I just can't seem to shake. It is this: the Church just seems to be lacking a sense of warmth and welcome.

It is not that I'm reluctant to debate doctrine or theology. We Catholics of today are more educated than ever before. In fact, I'm told there are now more lay men and women than priests who are theologians. But my concerns are not just theoretical.

The experience of being valued, wanted and welcomed is wonderful and powerful. Many of today's Catholics, folks like me, just don't feel it.

If we did, however, I believe we would respond positively, knowing there would still be differences, but that these differences would be respected where at all possible.

WHEN

When did this disconnect happen? How long has it been?

For many of us, it has been going on for awhile, for years, and we just limp along. Some of us draw a line in the sand but more often we just drift and then, eventually, drift away. Still, I heard a little story that tells how long "too long" can be.

A woman was going through a period of great sadness in her life and decided to take her sadness to her church. Three weekends she went to Mass and at the end of each service, she was crying and in obvious grief. Not once did anyone- pastor or parishioners- reach out. The fourth weekend she went to the evangelical church down the street and was given comfort...and found a faith community she could call home. For someone suffering, 3 weeks can be a very long time.

"If it is true that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, then we must not only seek Jesus in our faith community but also find Him within ourselves..."

WHERE

Where is the Church? It's a funny kind of question, but if we think about it, we will probably recognize our first instinct to place it in a local building, our parish, or a symbolic one, like the Vatican or a cathedral.

If we believed and acted as if the Church "happens" in every encounter we have with each other I believe it could change everything. When we have a treasured guest in our home, we don't welcome them one moment and not the next. We then stay mindful that we want them to feel welcome.

WHY

Why did this happen to our Church? I know there has been a great deal of research done based on demographics, mobility, and attitudes and in fact, I'm very tempted to roll around in all the intelligent analysis. But for purposes of a "personal letter" I want to be much simpler. I just think from time to time we- an individual or a Church- lose our way.

I recall something I heard last year, from an old priest whose work was promoting healing related to specific sexual abuse cases. He put it simply: "As I think about it, it seems that we have spent a lot of time worrying about the Church and have forgotten Jesus."

I will end my letter with this quote, but not because it puts the burden on the priests and bishops and the Pope, but because it puts the burden on all of us. If it is true that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, then we must not only seek Jesus in our faith community but also find Him within ourselves and make that a gift we can bring to our Church too.



With Hope and Care,
-Anonymous



LEAVING A Reflection on Adults Leaving the Church

Ed Murray, HOMI

Why does anyone leave anything, any place, any group, any job, any person to whom he or she has had a deep bond, a personal commitment, a cultural identification, a kinship? We've all done it. We leave behind our neighborhoods, our families, even our bad habits.

Leaving is often unpleasant, even wrenching. It is not, however, at all strange to us.

We live in a nation of "people who left" . . . home, family, culture, language, food, fortune or famine, customs, religions, values, stories. Indeed, there was a time when belonging to a family, tribe, clan, race, nation was simply a matter of life or death. Stay and live, or leave and die.

No longer! In the West, leaving is just part of living.

Given the last couple hundred years of people leaving, maybe we ought to be a little less surprised that so many folks now leave their church. The recent Pew Study indicates that, across the religious landscape, the number of departures is staggering. And the reasons for leaving are almost as numerous as the people leaving. Often, they just don't feel "fed," "valued," or "understood." That most-favored of all motivations for people leaving anything these days is for *"whatever."*

Perhaps, the fact that today people are leaving a faith tradition, even Roman Catholicism, ought not to cause quite so much hand wringing. First, our tradition has become quite clear about the fact that *"outside the Church there is no salvation"* is now a heresy. Leaving the Church is not the equivalent of "losing one's soul." Some might even venture to say that, sometimes, "leaving" is the only way to "save one's soul" – depending on the reasons and the individual's "informed conscience."

So: why do people leave? From my own observations, the reasons "leavers" give for their departure might be reduced to two categories.

Category #1 – In keeping with much of the U.S. cultural climate, many leave simply out of carelessness. They say it

themselves: "I couldn't *care less!*" Or "it just doesn't speak to me." Not exactly profound statements betokening a rigorous, religious struggle. It's more likely that this group is made up of some combination of bored, lazy, distracted, preoccupied, uncomfortable folks rather than people in the throes of a profound "dark night." Leaving the church is not, in these cases, the "sin." The sin (if that's what it is) is more likely one of the classics like "sloth," "tepidity," or just plain self-absorption. These may be real problems, even moral problems, but leaving a church is simply not the heart of the matter here. These folks need one kind of "ministry" – one that might combine compassion with a bit of honest challenge.

Category #2 – But then there are also those (women, married men and gays, among others) whose disquiet is more profound. Perhaps they have come to find an all-male, celibate clergy (read – "power-structure") to be an unrelenting sign of the Church's lack of respect for over half the human population. They see the Church as an intolerable sign of ecclesial dishonesty, fear, and cultural discontinuity. They also distance themselves because they reject any definition of a Christian church which projects an image that is more "celestial" than "incarnational."

The first category of "leavers" certainly has a moral dilemma but it is one for which the leavers themselves must accept some moral "culpability." It is often the case that their alienation may have been partially induced by poor pastoral practice or questionable behavior by fellow lay folks or simply sloppy conduct by church people anywhere along the hierarchical trail. Certainly their ecclesial ennui is still something the church must have genuine pastoral concern for. After all they're really just sinners like the rest of us. The Church must continue to minister to them – if by no other means than by prayer and patient waiting in the manner of the Prodigal son's father. It is unthinkable that Jesus would just say "good riddance" to them! These folks may need to be sensitively challenged on their real motivations. Ultimately, they will need to be "loved back" into Jesus' community of faith, rather than rounded up and enticed back to the fold like wayward "dogies."

In the cases of the Category #2 leavers, there is a factor that common sense tells us places a clear challenge at Church leadership's own doorstep: i.e., the decline in Church affiliation/attendance seems to be a phenomenon reaching a "critical mass" in affluent democracies where Catholic numbers are rapidly churning – obvious examples being Poland, Ireland, Canada, and, to a much lesser extent, the U.S. Many of these people are "leavers" with very credible, even conscience-driven motives for their decision.

Sadly, however, too many in church leadership seem to be entertaining a kind of morbid glee over this phenomenon, characterizing it as a cleansing of the "fallen" from Catholic ranks. Catholicism will become "leaner and cleaner" for their departure, they seem to imply.

A couple of observations about this attitude. The first is rather crass: no business person worth his/her salt would ever blame a dwindling customer base on former customers. If they stop "buying," the only thing you can do is find out why and quickly address that reason. The Category #2 "leaver" has real, serious, conscience-based motives for his/her departure. It is quite possible that their departure contains, somewhere within it, the voice of the Holy Spirit ringing, in albeit muffled tones, outside the cathedral gates, in a relentless cadence: *exaudi nos, exaudi nos* – "hear us, hear us..."

Most people who have left, are usually a mix of Categories #1 and #2. So the point here is that this is a complex, human situation and we in the Church have a responsibility not simply to cut people off and/or allow them to drift away carelessly into the night. These are our brothers and sisters; they are our children; and, even occasionally, our parents.

Conscientious church leadership is certainly concerned about this "exodus phenomenon." So perhaps it might be helpful if these observations are turned into "guidelines" to consider when developing both personal attitudes and parish-based programs to minister to those who are leaving, threatening to leave, or who have, in fact, already departed.

"...the point here is that this is a complex, human situation and we in the Church have a responsibility to not simply cut people off and/or allow them to drift away carelessly into the night."

1. Remember all reconciliation is relational. Programs themselves don't reconcile; only relationships do.
2. Leaving has many motives; avoid a one-size-fits-all program.
3. Leaving is a common human response to a variety of situations. Don't presume you know either someone's reason or their "way back." In all such situations, accept people's motives as genuine – even if you might disagree with them.
4. Plain old, genuine hospitality (in large and varying doses) goes a long way.
5. When in conversation with someone who's "left the church" (in whole or in part), LISTEN FIRST AND LISTEN LONG. Don't assume you know why they left or that you can show them their way back.
6. Don't try to "fix" people. Instead, pray with them and for them.
7. Try to avoid responding to questions with pat answers. KEEP THE DIALOG OPEN.
8. Admit to your own problems with the church. We ALL have them. Don't, however, turn the dialog into a conversation *about* your problems.
9. As a community, do regular, honest self-evaluations. Do you lack diversity? In what ways might you come off as needlessly exclusive? Do you take adult faith formation seriously, allowing for the expression of doubt and even anger?
10. Develop, through whatever programs and experiences your community offers to folks, an ever-growing list of reasons why people are absenting themselves from your Catholic community. Brainstorm ways to address these actual situations.



A LINK TO DE MAZENOD

Fr. John Staak, OMI

Some of the insights I heard at our recent conference link to the person and charism of St. Eugene, whose name our annual conference carries, as we celebrate this year of the 150th anniversary of his death.

After reviewing two examples from his ministry as Bishop of Marseilles we shall review the challenge expressed at the conference of overcoming a functional imagination and mindset. The dynamic needed to overcome that mindset entails rediscovering a relationship of love with God, something that comes through attentive listening. As one's own life narrative is explored, confidence in oneself, in others and in God becomes renewed. The reflection closes with some thoughts on metaphor and the shift in imagination that can transform us from MIA to an engaged, quality missionary presence at the heart of the Church.

Two Examples from St. Eugene's Ministry

From St. Eugene's days as Bishop of Marseilles, during which time he continued as the Superior General of the Oblates, we find two examples from his life that give us insight into the man himself and offer us styles of approach that could prove useful for our responding to the needs of disaffected middle-aged Catholics today. Both have to do with his availability to people. He was especially fond of visiting the city markets, where the hustle and bustle of the street merchants kept him in touch with the plight, concerns and wisdom of the working classes of the city. His frequent visits there and his willingness to speak with the people in the informal patois of the local Provençal dialect endeared him to them. He was willing to enter into playful banter with them and did not allow his position as bishop to create a barrier between himself and even the poorest, most dissolute of the city; he related as one of them and was accepted as one with them.

St. Eugene had another practice which endeared him to the common people. During weekdays he made himself available every morning to any and all in his office from 10-12, on a first-come, first-serve basis. It was a privileged time for him to receive those who otherwise would have no access to him; he listened to their needs or concerns and responded in any way he could. This contact kept him in touch with the heart of the people. These two simple pastoral practices tell us something of the hospitality and generosity of the heart of St. Eugene. His availability centered around authentic listening, a key characteristic of the simple quality of his personal presence.

The Challenge: Overcome a Merely Functional Imagination

During the recent conference Ron Rolheiser and others spoke of the changes that have occurred in civic life, which

has resulted in our feeling disconnected or insulated from one another in our immediate community. When a more functional approach to relationships weds itself to the predominant emphasis of accessing and obtaining information, our relationships suffer on the level of the heart, where the emotions and our worlds of meaning struggle for healthy life. Our imaginations become dulled by this concern for functionality and efficiency in our social settings. The challenge of the functional impoverishment of the imagination, then, exists on two levels: in the various barriers in the hearts of those who are MIA or disaffected, and also in the minds and hearts of those of us struggling to have the Gospel reach them.

The Dynamic: Rediscovering the Relationship of Love with God

Taking into account many of the remarks made at the conference and the insights from St. Eugene's own life as related above, we can identify certain characteristics that have the potential to create a fruitful dynamic that could overcome the challenge of the functional sense of relationship so pervasive today. The dynamic we are seeking is one in which people seize the opportunity to enter into their own internal dialectic, by which they review their history of experience and reassess their interpretation of events. Sometimes this unfolds naturally in an encounter; sometimes it may need some stimulation, a sharing of one's own personal experience to stimulate their reflection. By reviewing their own lived experience and history they can see how they interpreted certain moments in the past and shift their interpretation for today. Questions arise naturally in most of us if we find the time and space to allow the internal dialectic underway in our hearts to come to consciousness. As we saw reflected in St. Eugene's ministry, the fruitful measure of how well we act as catalysts to this dynamic depends on the degree of our own availability and the quality of our personal presence as we accompany others in their journey of bringing their own dialectic to consciousness. And here the consciousness is not so much about knowledge as it is one's personal, secret relationship of love with God. Two areas related to this which are worth exploring in more detail are: 1) attentive listening; and 2) confidence in the human person and in God.

Attentive Listening

In one of the small group discussions it was observed just how radically different an interaction occurs when the subjects move beyond the simply functional level to listen genuinely and to be present to one another. Reflecting on our own internal dialectic cannot occur until we have listened to the movements within ourselves, and this usually needs the attentive ear of another to grant us that permission or stimulate that internal

journey in freedom. If we feel that our freedom is somehow threatened, we generally shut down and move away from the threat. Attempting, then, to force the dynamic of reflection as others come to grow in truth and love through reviewing their history of experience would only serve to end it. In the telling and untelling of our story, values are reassessed, our imaginations are stretched far beyond the merely functional, and our interpretation horizon grows to take in the broader senses of reality and meaning.

Confidence in the Human Person and in God

Allowing people to explore their lives in freedom and without judgment requires us to rediscover the gift that each person is, so that our confidence in the human person as gift and God as gift-giver might be restored. Too often we let our confidence in humanity and God become shaken, either through our own weakness or through the wounds and injustices we may suffer at the hands of others. In the unfolding of our own dialectic and search, God reveals the love, truth and meaning we crave, and the paschal mystery of Christ manifests itself at the heart of our life journey. Until someone has listened to us and our story so that we can truly hear it all for ourselves in the telling, we will struggle to gain the confidence that would make us truly available to listen to others as they wind their way through their own narratives. St. Eugene gained that confidence from listening to his own narrative. The mystery of his narrative gave him a reckless confidence in people, even in the most hopeless, and reinforced his own confidence in God, from whom he experienced a great grace of transforming mercy that never left him. The quality of his presence in listening to others has become one of the central characteristics defining the charisma of us Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate as 'always close to the people'.



From MIA to Engaged Presence: Union of Mixed Metaphors

Another interesting experience was shared at one of the small table discussions. At the end of a sharing of personal stories in a meeting of some MIA Catholics, the common question arose at the end: "Where do we go from here?" Instead of laying out possible plans for the participants, an invitation was extended to them to initiate how they would plan their own reintegration and that of others who might be MIA. Instead of seeing them as objects of concern for the Church, they were embraced as vital subjects to help in the solution. They were no longer viewed as MIA, but as an engaged missionary presence at the heart of the Church.

That little story reminded me of something very important that some of us Oblates discovered in our own experience in setting up a seeker center dedicated to listening to those who were searching: after the one-to-one listening of personal

narratives, a communal follow-up, a gathering for a common thanksgiving, takes us out of an isolated retelling into an ecclesial embrace. This common thanksgiving need only begin as a shared meal, a shared concert, even just a short get-together over a beer or a cup of tea. A shared Eucharist can follow later when the time is right.

Communal gatherings for sharing and thanksgiving work on many levels, but they always engage us in something greater than ourselves and manifest the presence of God, even if that presence remains mostly unrecognized. I've recently been reading a book, *Religion and Imagination*, written thirty years ago by John Coulson. In it he explores the priority of the imagination for both literature and theology, calling on such figures as J. H. Newman, Shakespeare, S.T. Coleridge, F.D. Maurice, and T.S. Eliot, among others. Coulson differentiates between dense metaphors and translucent metaphors. Dense metaphors are heavily loaded and invite to be embraced; they cannot be effectively explained through analysis and over-rationalization, since an attempted explanation would only serve to destroy the metaphor and come up empty. Translucent metaphors need no explanation since they are shallow, efficient, and functional, acting usually as simple modifiers. While translucent metaphors can be understood standing alone as modifiers, dense metaphors, because of their complexity, are best apprehended when grouped together, built upon and linked by a common referent. In the grouping, one discovers that the union of the whole is much, much more than the sum of its individual parts. Poets deal in dense metaphors. They can mix various dense metaphors to great effect and without confusion, because the common referent behind each metaphor is the real subject of the poet's art.

The Holy Spirit is the greatest of all poets, weaving together the dense metaphors of human existence in a messy, mixed-up sort of way. We humans are not translucent, functionally efficient modifiers. Perhaps St. Eugene's confidence in people came from his recognition of the deep and sacred mystery each person is, especially when seen as united in the person of Jesus Christ. Each person invites embrace as a living, deeply rich metaphor, whose meaning and existence cannot be over-explained, but takes on dramatic significance when viewed in reference to Christ. If, however, the metaphor remains isolated, floating by itself in a vast sea, its deepest referent will never be fully recognized or accepted. Together, we are much more than the sum of our parts, more than a mere grouping of individuals. When we discover this truth, the door of our imagination opens anew to transcendence, and the way we see and interpret the world changes. Our communal gatherings may appear at first glance to be a cacophony of mixed metaphors, but God, acting as both common referent and skilled composer or poet, links and unites us mixed metaphors into a harmonious symphony or poem, the subject of which is love.

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 Rev. Allen Maes, OMI Belleville, IL
 Burton J. McGlynn Captiva Island, FL
 Rev. Kevin McDonough Saint Paul, MN
 Michael J. McNamara Eagan, MN
 Vince Miller Saint Louis, MO
 Dianne & Edward Murray, HOMI

Charlottesville, VA
 Marian & Bill Nasgovitz Santa Barbara, CA
 Rev. Art Obin, OMI West Palm Beach, FL
 Joseph I. O'Neill, III Midland, TX
 Eileen Ramaekers Singer Island, FL
 Thomas Riesenbergh Philadelphia, PA
 Bill & Jeannie Ritter Denver, CO
 Rev. Ron Rolheiser, OMI San Antonio, TX
 Steve Saldana San Antonio, TX
 Sr. Theresa Sandok, OSM Milwaukee, WI
 Dr. Alexander A. Schirger, MD

Rochester, MN
 Richard & Linda Scott Dayton, OH
 Archbishop Roger Schwietz, OMI

Anchorage, AK
 Rev. Tom Singer, OMI Belleville, IL
 Rev. Barnabas Simatende, OMI

Lusaka, Zambia
 Rev. Andrew Small, OMI New York, NY
 Daniel & Sue Smytka Shanghai, China
 Rev. John Staak, OMI San Antonio, TX
 Rev. Louis Studer, OMI Buffalo, MN
 Billy Ulm Athens, GA

Saint Paul, MN
 Rosemary B. Walsh
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 Raye G. White Houston, TX
 John & Gee Gee Whitehurst

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MISSIONARY OBLATE PARTNERSHIP MISSION STATEMENT

The Missionary Oblate Partnership is a voluntary association of Oblates of Mary Immaculate and men and women working together to support the Oblate charism of serving the world's poor. Rooted in the Body of Christ, the Partnership believes that each of us, even though our lives may be miles or worlds apart, are called to be one with each other. Individually and together we are called to be one - with Christ.

The Partnership's objectives are twofold. First, to facilitate an understanding by Partners of the world's poor that stimulates greater personal and spiritual solidarity with these poor as our brothers and sisters. Second, to experience this solidarity as a call to action, which seeks to further this connection between Partners and these "least" through prayerful, emotional and financial support of Oblates and those who share their ideals, in the United States and around the world.

It is our belief that in meeting these two objectives both Partners and those we serve become more deeply identified with the truth most central to our faith: that we are all one in the Body of Christ.

Adopted May, 2005
Chicago, Illinois

If you would like to know more about the Missionary Oblate Partnership or next year's De Mazenod Conference, please contact one of us!

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