25 YEARS OF OBLATES IN NIGERIA: Achievements, Challenges and Prospects[1]

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Introduction

"Carignano, Cradle of the Congregation: From the apostolic zeal of Fr. John Baptist Reynaudi, Fr. Anthony Biancotti, Fr. Agostino Golzio and the support of Fr Bruno Lanteri the idea of the Congregation of the Oblates of Virgin Mary takes shape." These words are boldly written on a vast, beautiful poster displayed in a corridor near the chapel of the General House of the Congregation of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary in Rome. The Oblates of the Virgin Mary[2] was founded in Carignano, Italy, in 1816 as a response to the challenges of the French Revolution. Subsequently, after a five-year hiatus, it received papal approval from Pope Leo XII on 1 September 1826. They established groups and fraternities to promote a profound spiritual life and impact society positively. The Congregation celebrates the silver jubilee anniversary of its presence in Nigeria (1998-2023). This article intends to briefly recall the Congregation's foundation and growth in Nigeria. Following the above topic assigned to me, the article presents three main periods of Oblate presence in Nigeria: the origins, the stabilisation and consolidation, and the growth and expansion, and then highlights some of the achievements, challenges, and prospects.

The Oblates of the Virgin Mary…

The Oblates of the Virgin Mary is a religious institute of Pontifical right consisting of clerics and coadjutor brothers. They dedicate themselves to God and follow Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Oblates work on various ecclesial missions, including attending to the ministry of the Word, promoting the ministries of reconciliation and mercy, contributing to the formation and fraternal assistance of the clergy, and evangelising culture. They prioritise pastoral care for people experiencing poverty, young people, and families, as well as the promotion of peace. Their presence on four continents and in ten countries is a testament to their global reach, unity of mission, and commitment to serving the Church.

1. FROM THE ORIGINS *TO THE FIRST RELIGIOUS PROFESSION (1983-2004)*

1.1. The beginnings of Oblates' "journey with Africans in Africa"[3]

[1] This revised article was originally published in the magazine, *The Nigerian Catholic Encounter*, 2024, pp.30ff
[2] https://www.omvnigeria.org/viewcontent3.php?tab=2 ; https://www.omvusa.org/about-us/our-history/
[3] "*A Journey with Africans in Africa: The Oblates of the Virgin Mary's Ten Years Experience in Nigeria"* is the title of the documentary video of the brief history of the Oblates in Nigeria. It was produced by the Oblates' Seminary community, Suleja, in 2008, as one of the initiatives to mark the tenth anniversary of the Oblate presence in this African nation. Watch it on YouTube at: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivkdLaiB5gA.* Later, another short video, titled "OMV Nigeria: 20th Anniversary" was produced in 2018 by Fr. John Idio, OMV, to mark the twenty years of the Oblate foundation in Nigeria. Watch it on YouTube: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7lynZK-eKo.* The celebratory videos briefly highlight some aspects of the beginnings, life, vocations, mission, and projects of the OMV in Nigeria.

"The (General) Government should see to the possibility of a foundation in Africa and that the question of future admission of African vocations should be re-examined" and investigate *"the possibility of new foundations […] in Africa"* (General Chapter OMV, Rome, 1985).

In the 1980s and 1990s, successive General Chapters of the Congregation received a series of written formal requests and approved proposals to (1) resume the admission of African candidates to the Seminary in Rome and (2) establish an Oblate community in Nigeria.[4] The historical origins or beginnings of the Oblate foundation and presence in Nigeria are rooted in these General Chapters. The General Chapter of 1997 reaffirmed and acted upon the decision of the Chapter of 1991, which mandated the immediate admission of African candidates and the founding of "a house in Nigeria in a short time during this Government".[5] Today, the Nigerian Delegation of the Oblates of Mary is a living expression and continuation of the Congregation's spirituality and charism, contributing significantly to the Church and society in Nigeria.

Efforts to implement the General Chapters' decision to resume admission of African candidates to Oblate seminaries took time and faced challenges. Initial attempts were made in the 1990s to recommence the admission of African applicants into any of the Oblate Seminaries in Rome, Brazil or the USA, and these efforts were unsuccessful and, consequently, postponed by the Council of the Congregation held in (Canada)1992.[6] The focus turned to implementing the approved decision to establish an Oblate foundation in Nigeria. The foundation "required a period of gestation, discernment, and preparation."[7] Exploratory visits[8] were made to Nigeria

[4] Ogunu, Oseni, "Foundation and Presence of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary in Nigeria-Africa: A Documentary History of Proposals, Decisions and Orientations since 1983", in: *Lanterianum,* 2008, No.1. https://oblati.org/docs/Lanterianum-2008-1.pdf (pp. 151-162).

[5] Ogunu, Oseni, "Foundation and Presence of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary in Nigeria-Africa," in: *Lanterianum,* 2008, No.1. https://oblati.org/docs/Lanterianum-2008-1.pdf pp. 159-160.

[6] Cf. Letter of the Rector Major, Fr. Peter Gojuk, OMV to Fr. Oseni Ogunu, OMV (1992).

[7] Zirattu, Sergio, OMV, "An Adventure of Faith and Hope: At the Service of the Word of God in the Church and in Nigeria", in Oseni Ogunu (ed), *Love and Serve in the Name of Jesus*, 636; also in *The Nigerian Catholic Encounter*, No.4, 2008, pp.40-41.

[8] In 1972, the Congregation mulled over the possibility of accepting vocations from the USA and from Nigeria into the Congregation's Seminary in Rome. In view of this (recruiting of candidates), Fr. Giovanni Capello, OMV, the Secretary General of the Congregation, visited both countries. After the visit to the USA, applicants from the USA were admitted into the Oblate Seminary in Rome. He visited Nigeria from 2-17 October 1972, reaching five cities in southern Nigeria. After this visit, the Secretary-General recommended the inadvisability of admitting candidates from Nigeria, much less founding a house or community in this country. The Government of the Congregation at that time considered it opportune to uphold that recommendation. And so it happened. The case is closed, and the matter died, *de facto.* Giovanni Cappello, "Viaggio negli Stati Uniti e in Nigeria", in: *L'Oblato,* Gennaio-Marzo, 1973, pp.10-11. Earlier, in the late 1950s, the laconic and generic announcement in *L'Oblato* - an internal bulletin of the Congregation – seemed to arguably hint that there might have been, somehow, a thought about the possibility of its presence in Africa. The announcement simply and only invited the Oblates to pray. No further specific information or details was provided about the subject. It never materialized if there was in fact any such project. Cf. *L'Oblato*, n.d. (probably 1958?). In any case, therefore, the independent requests approved by the General Chapters from 1983 through 1997 concerning establishing a foundation in Nigeria till its realization in 1998 represented a new beginning.

in June 1985[9], 1991[10], and 1997[11]. The Italian Province of Saints Peter and Paul was responsible for establishing the foundation in Nigeria in 1998.[12]

1.2. **The realisation of a commitment**

The Congregation opened its first foundation, an Oblate community, in Suleja, Niger State, Nigeria, in April 1998, in the Catholic Diocese of Minna. The Province of Ss. Peter and Paul in Italy established and supported the Oblate communities in Nigeria and assumed responsibility for the administration and sustenance of the communities until October 2017. The Provincial Rector at that time, Fr. Sergio Zirattu, OMV, joyfully announced it: "…we were able to *realise a commitment* we had made in the last two [*sic*] General Chapters, that of extending our presence to Nigeria[…]."[13]

With the approval of the authorities, the new Oblate community started as a Formation house, with a primary focus on the formation of its candidates. Fr. Efeturi Ojakaminor, OMV, accompanied the postulants in their formation. He was the first Local Rector of the Oblate House and the first Director of Postulants (and Philosophy students) of the Seminary Community. He admitted and accompanied the initial sets of postulants during the early years of the Seminary and was assigned to ensure that the Congregation acquired or built its first two houses in Suleja. The novices were accompanied by Fr. James Gerlett, OMV, an American, the first novice master of the Nigerian Delegation, and the first member of the Italian Province and non-Nigerian to live and work in Nigeria. The formation of the temporary professed candidates or the Theologate students (began in 2004) and the duties of Local Rector of the Seminary (from October 2006) were entrusted to Fr. Oseni Ogunu, OMV, who fulfilled these roles till early October 2015 except for the period he served as the Novice Master (September 2011-2012). Other formators will succeed these formators. Therefore, the initial phases of formation for Consecrated Life and Priesthood in the Nigeria Delegation were completed during this period: Postulancy/Philosophy studies, Novitiate and Temporary Profession/Theologate. The Oblates began (2004) by holding the first of a series of celebrations of religious professions and, later, the Ordinations of many sets of candidates.

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[9] In 1985, the declared double purpose of the visit was to explore the possibility of admission of new aspirants from Nigeria and of establishing an Oblate community in Nigeria and seek the advice of the bishops on the matter. "Report on the Visit of Fr. Kevin to Nigeria. 12-20 June [1985]" (Original in Italian), in *General Archive OMV*, Rome; Ogunu, Oseni, "Called to Cooperate in the Evangelization of Nigeria-Africa", *Lanterianum*, 2008, Fasc.1, pp.173-169; Ogunu, Oseni, "'...How Do We Properly Proceed?': A Commentary on the *Report* Concerning African Vocations and the Foundation of the OMV after the Official Visit to Nigeria (1985)". In: *Lanterianum.* (In Press).

[10] The mandate received was to see the possibility of admission of some of the many aspirants from Nigeria seek admission into the Congregation's Seminary in Rome. Ogunu, Oseni, "Called to Cooperate in the Evangelization of Nigeria-Africa", *Lanterianum*, 2008, Fasc.1, pp.169-173.

[11] For a report on the Oblates' visit to Nigeria in 1997, see Carlo Rossi, "Viaggio in Nigeria" (Journey to Nigeria), in *Myriam*, Anno L – N.3, Maggio- Giugno 1997, pp.18-20: The purposes of this journey, as Fr. Rossi, noted(p.19), were "to meet the young people who had expressed the intention to enter to be a member of our institute *and* to verify the conditions of our eventual presence in Nigeria."

[12] "The General Chapter highlighted how the General Government has encouraged the Italian Province to occupy itself with an Oblate Foundation in Nigeria" (General Chapter 1997, Paris), in: *Lanterianum*, 2008, No.1. (https*://oblati.org/docs/Lanterianum*-2008-1.pdf) , pp.160-161.

[13] Original text in Italian: "…abbiamo potuto realizzare un impegno che ci eravamo proposti negli ultimi due Capitoli generali, quello di estendere la nostra presenza alla Nigeria[…]"). P. Sergio Zirattu, "Fondazione in Nigeria", in *Myriam* , Anno LI – N.4, Agosto-Settembre 1998, p.30.

The members of the Seminary community, Formators and seminarians, were involved in the contributions and achievements of the Delegation through their dedication to various forms of apostolates, the celebrations of Religious Professions and the Ordinations of many sets of candidates.

Years later, as the Rector Major, Fr. Sergio Zirattu, OMV, one of the promoters of Nigeria foundation, recalls this choice: "The hope has been to form young candidates who, through a process of discernment and of spiritual growth, would know the charism and spirit of our Congregation and would set out in a journey to the Religious Life and Priestly ministry."[14] Time proved this choice right. Therefore, the seminary community, the house of formation for Oblate candidates, has played an essential role in the development of the Nigerian Delegation, contributing to the pastoral and formation programs. The encouraging first important fruits and happenings brought a new breath and relief. They confirmed the hope of stability in the Delegation's formation process.

2. STABILISATION AND CONSOLIDATION (2005-2011)

During the period of stabilisation and consolidation, the Oblates in Nigeria made progress. They built a larger formation house at Suleja (Kwamba) and enjoyed growing support from the laity. They organised several meetings to explore new avenues of growth and apostolic mission in Nigeria. They also founded and published several magazines – e.g. *The Nigerian Catholic Encounter (2006)* -- and a Newsletter, built a borehole to provide clean water, and established a hospital (*Venerable Lanteri Hospital)* to provide affordable primary healthcare. They offered ongoing formation through meetings *(e.g. Lanterian Encounter)* and an annual program (*"Word* and *Life Seminar"*).

The Oblates of the Virgin Mary (OMV) registered and incorporated as a member of the Conference of Major Superiors in Nigeria (Men) in 2007. The "Association of Families, Friends and Collaborators of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary"[15] (AOMV) was initiated in 2007 and was formally established in 2008.[16] The Oblates carried out pastoral ministry by assisting the local clergy in the neighbouring parishes, teaching apostolate, retreats, spiritual direction, formation of lay people, Military chaplaincy, and young people. They have dedicated themselves to promoting their Founder and the AOMV in Nigeria[17]. The first website for the OMV in Nigeria was created in 2009, then changed in 2015. The future of the Congregation in Nigeria was considered -- sometimes in the presence of the Provincial Rector (Fr. Rossi, OMV) and the Rector Majors (Fr. Veraquin and Fr. Zirattu)--, including the delineation of the specific Oblates' ecclesial mission and areas of specialised studies and formation that needed to be emphasised in this African nation.

The Oblate pastoral mission in Nigeria has identified social communications, spiritual exercises, formation of laity and clergy, and formation of formators for the Oblate seminary in Nigeria as possible areas of pastoral commitment. The seminary community has organised

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[14] Sergio Zirattu, OMV, "An Adventure of Faith and Hope", in Oseni Ogunu, *Love and Serve in the Name of Jesus*, 637-638

[15] OGUNU, Oseni, OMV, (Coordinator), "The Association of the Families, Friends and Collaborators of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary in Nigeria (AOMV): History, Mission and Development*",* (in Press). *Lanterianum.;*

[16] https://www.omvnigeria.org/newsdetail.php?tab=66

[17] OGUNU, Oseni, "The Promotion of the Founder Ven. Fr. Pius Bruno Lanteri and the Congregation of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary in Nigeria". *In:*
http://www.oblati-nel-mondo.com/images/ressources/Promotion_Of_Founder_In_Nigeria.pdf

initiatives like fish and poultry farming to achieve financial self-sufficiency. The Oblates have also tried to establish pastoral collaboration with Catholic lay organisations, such as the Holy Family Society founded by Sir David Osunde and his wife, Dame Mary-Joan Osunde. The Major Superiors of the OMV in Nigeria are committed to the growth of the young Oblate community; they embraced the foundation project and supported and strengthened many of its efforts. Even some of the most sceptical persons eventually come to admit the seriousness and the solidity of the new foundation.

2. THE GROWTH AND EXPANSION (FROM 2012 TO THE PRESENT DAY)

The growth of a community or institution cannot be measured solely by numbers or physical assets. Quality and multi-dimensional growth are essential factors to consider, along with the fruits of dedication and the efforts of the persons involved. The Oblates in Nigeria have expanded geographically and pastorally outside the Minna Diocese and have been entrusted with at least eight parishes and quasi-parishes. Some Nigerian Oblates continue to carry out forms of apostolate and ministry in Nigeria and foreign missions. Nigerian Oblates also served or are serving as missionaries in Argentina, Austria, Canada, Italy, the UK, the USA and France. In Nigeria, they served or still serve in various offices and assignments in the local churches and Catholic institutions and organisations. A few examples suffice: an Oblate served or still serves a member of the *Theology Committee* of Pastoral Affairs Department(CSN, Abuja); the Vicar for Religious in Minna Diocese; the Coordinator of the Zonal Conference for Consecrated Life in Ibadan Ecclesiastical Province; a member of the Executive Board of the Conference of the Major Superiors of Nigeria [Men]-CMSN; a member of the Building Committee of the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria(Men); the founding Secretary-General of the Executive Board of the *Catholic Television of Nigeria(CTV),* Abuja; the Project Manager of the Catholic Television of Nigeria, Abuja; the Editor-in-chief of "*The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life"* (www.tcvafrica.org). An Oblate was invited to deliver a speech to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria during its annual plenary meeting (March 2022).

The Postulancy and the Temporary Professed students [or the Theologate] were transferred from Suleja to Ibadan in September 2012. So, another name was chosen for this new Formation house, that is, "*Lanteri Oblate Seminary."*

The Oblates in Nigeria canonically became a Nigeria Delegation on June 29, 2015, placed under the responsibility of the Provincial Rector of the Ss. Peter and Paul Province in Italy; in other words, it was a *Provincial* Delegation. The first Delegate of the Provincial Rector in the Delegation was Fr. John Peter Idio, OMV. On October 7, 2017, the status of the Delegation changed: The Delegation was placed under the direct responsibility of the Rector Major. Its first Delegate under the Rector Major was Fr. Paul Etafo Ubebe, OMV. The creation of the Nigeria Delegation of the Oblates is a sign of maturity and progress, a defining moment in the history of OMV in Nigeria and for its future development.

3. ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

One of the fundamental convictions that motivated and accompanied Oblates from the earliest times of the OMV's African dream for Nigeria in the 1980s is that the spirituality and charism of the Congregation are relevant to, necessary and can be lived fruitfully in Nigeria

and Africa.[18] Today, we ask ourselves: how did we receive, understand, express, sustain and advance this conviction in our life and mission in Nigeria? How and where can we further share it? In the celebration of the 25th anniversary of their foundation, the OMV in Nigeria sees a special occasion to look at the past with gratitude, the present with joy (passion), and the future with hope. As a contribution to the Church and society, they strive to live the four-fold fidelity of Consecrated life, namely, the fidelity to the Gospel, fidelity to the Church and her Magisterium, fidelity to the spirit and charism of the Founder and his Congregation, and fidelity to man – especially the "African person" — and his times.

Their principal goal is to lead the people of God to benefit from the Oblate spirituality and charism, evangelise, and advance society's development. They engage in various ministries, including Spiritual Exercises, Spiritual Direction, formation of the clergy, teaching, parish apostolate, Military Chaplaincy, and evangelisation in foreign missions.

The OMV in Nigeria has attempted to achieve closer collaboration and partnership with other Catholic institutions within Nigeria and two other Oblate Provinces. The Delegation explored the feasibility of establishing a Nigerian foundation in one or two countries. It ensured the continuity of the practice of fundraising, for example, through "Parish Supply" and Mission Appeal in Nigeria and some abroad, since it needed to be "able to establish a reliable, organised 'supply-system.'" These endeavours had varied degrees of success. Nigerian Oblates currently work in six foreign missions (Argentina, Austria, Canada, Italy, the UK, and the USA).

Through the years, the Nigeria Delegation has made significant investments and structures toward the delegation's self-reliance or self-sustenance. For example, it established schools such as *Lanteri Marian Academy* (September 2017), the **"***Aqua Oblata Table Water*" - a water production factory started in 2013 by Fr Isaac Abu, OMV-, fishponds and farms.

The Oblate contributions to the local Churches in Nigeria have been diverse, rich, and positive throughout their mission in this African nation. The Oblates in Nigeria continue to seize the present momentum to walk and work together in unity to deepen the spirituality and apostolic charism of the Congregation. They can and should continue to realise the OMV's African dream in Nigeria. But to fully achieve it, it is necessary to strive harder to design it, desire it and then do it, without the pretence or claim of "creating" it *ex-nihilo* or inventing the wheel.

4. CHALLENGES

Establishing a new religious community in a new country is never easy, and the OMV in Nigeria faced many challenges. These challenges can be grouped into six main areas: personnel and community life, economic and financial issues, structures and administrative organisation, formation of candidates, ecclesial mission, and diversification of apostolate.

4.1. Personnel and living a life in common: The challenges here included vocation, life, and mission issues. There are difficulties with the admission of aspirants due to limited resources, resulting in a shortage of personnel for community life, projects, and formation. This scarcity

[18] Oseni Ogunu, "Foundation and presence of the Oblates in Nigeria-Africa", in *Lanterianum* , 2008, No.1, p.154: see n.4: "The charism of Ven. Fr. Pius Bruno Lanteri and the ecclesial mission of the Congregation (including the Spiritual Exercises) are very important for Africa."

can hinder the formation of a desired community. Moreover, it is challenging to plan for a project or do an apostolate competently without sufficient people to manage even basic works and services.

4.2. Financial and Economic Issues

Financial constraints are a major challenge for the Oblates in Nigeria. In itself, this obstacle is neither a novelty nor unique to the Oblates, though each group experience it in a unique way, some more acutely and agonisingly than others. This problem has impacted every primary sector of their life and activities of the Delegation. In addition to the bulk of expenses from other sources, the Oblate communities in Nigeria endeavour to make their quota of financial contribution to become self-reliant and self-sustaining through various initiatives and projects. The most urgent and complete attention is required to address this issue.

Currently, the most urgent challenge is to build the long-awaited Seminary structure in Ibadan City. The seminarians have been living in rented apartments since 2012. Funds are needed to build a seminary and sustain seminarians.

To ensure that Oblate presence in Nigeria continues and remains significant and effective, adequate plans must be made to ensure the availability and stability of funds.

4.3. Administrative organisation and the availability of structures

The challenges in this area were both internal and external. For many years, the absence of a clear organisational or administrative structure caused difficulties in decision-making and executing plans. The perpetually Professed Oblates in Nigeria had several formal and informal meetings to deliberate on important matters. Still, the value, scope, nature, and membership of the General Assemblies were unique and broader. The establishment of a Delegation offered a better chance and opportunity to confront the challenges and meet the needs and goals in an organised and systematic way.

4.4. Vocations and Formation

Vocation and Formation present particular challenges and testing situations. Screening, selecting and admitting new aspirants to the Seminary in Nigeria is an important and sensitive matter. A thoroughness and completeness are needed to attend to all the application letters.

The risk of tribalism or favouritism can lead to conflicts of interest. To avoid this, it's essential to have multiple decision-making teams involved in the process. One of the formators sent to the Major Superior a proposal on the pastoral care of vocations and the admission of aspirants to review and improve the process. The proposal emphasises fairness, equal opportunities, and quality in the selection of aspirants. The work in the admission process of aspirants is frequently like a minefield, and the risks are always present; these can and should be significantly curtailed.

Though the process is challenging, it's feasible to complete the Formation teams and, in the various main stages, entrust appropriate responsibilities in the process to different persons, even if gradually but surely.

4.5.The Ecclesial mission (The Oblate Apostolates)

The Oblates priests and seminarians have been carrying out apostolates before the first priestly ordination of OMV candidates in Nigeria in 2008. They continue to serve in various forms of apostolates such as parishes, educational institutions, hospitals, seminaries, and communities of consecrated persons. The Oblates spread the Gospel values and the sound doctrine of the Church through publications of books and periodicals such as *Nigerian Catholic Encounter* magazine. They also contribute to the formation of clergy and the animation of laity and young people. They dedicate themselves to teaching apostolate, giving Spiritual exercises, chaplaincy, spiritual direction, counselling, and organising pastoral programs.

In 2010, the OMV submitted an official letter of application to the Archbishop of Abuja, requesting him to accept the OMV into the Catholic Archdiocese of Abuja for full-time engagement in the apostolate.

The main reasons requesting for the administration of the parish include, among others, animating the parish with the Oblate spirit and charism, spreading the knowledge of OMV and its spirituality and charism, and providing a place for newly ordained Oblate priests to carry out pastoral ministry under the accompaniment of another Oblate.[19]

4.6. Diversify the Apostolate

Most of the apostolates of the Oblates in Nigeria currently consist primarily in the administration of parishes (parish ministry) and service in Formation House. The OMV should diversify apostolate. Monoculture in farming is dangerous, they say in agriculture. Diversification of apostolates predominantly involves carrying out the specific forms of apostolates of the Congregation by exploring pastoral opportunities offered by its ecclesial mission. The Constitutions and Norms (Arts. 5; 40-42) present the wide range of forms of apostolate that Oblates are called to do in the Church. The success of the Delegation depends on its members' readiness, determination, unity, and collaboration needed to fulfil its collective needs and hopes.

The journey of the Oblates so far in Nigeria teaches many lessons. We learn of the need and value of keeping the memory and gratitude; sustaining and deepening the love, reconciliation and unity; the need for a comprehensive, incisive and far-sighted strategy and planning; encouraging communal discernment; Supporting the inculturation of Religious life; encourage faithfulness to the church, and openness to novelty; Personal convictions, commitment and sacrifices: favouring the sense of family and of belonging; cross the borders of Nigeria to welcome and encounter others; Money is not, and cannot buy everything; Help the poor and miserable in the neighbourhood; Maintaining safety and vigilance; and dedication, patience and perseverance.[20]

[19] "Growing in the Spirit and Charism of the Congregation", in *Lanterianum*, Vol. XXV, n.1. December 2017, pp.165-182.
[20] Cf. Oseni Ogunu, OMV, "Growing in the Spirit and Charism of the Congregation," pp.183-230.

5. PROSPECTS

The Oblates in Nigeria aim to achieve increasingly full maturity, financial self-reliance and self-sustenance, sufficient and appropriate structures, and just autonomy as soon as possible. They aspire to, in turn, be in the condition to effectively support or sustain other Oblates communities elsewhere. In the meantime, the Delegation strengthens and consolidates its gains and gives a more precise direction towards achieving the vision and mission of the Congregation in Nigeria. In view of this, I believe the Delegation should emphasise the accomplishment of specific objectives in the following five vital development goals:

5.1. *The formation of persons:* The focus could be, for instance, on improving human relationships. This involves bettering the quality of interpersonal relations, the character formation and competence of the persons available for a particular mission or apostolate that the Delegation intends to carry out, the ability of the person to live a life in common, to work together, the development of a personal attitude and spirit of love, personal sacrifice for, fidelity to our religious family (OMV).

The Delegation strives to achieve the goal of completing the Formation team for all the phases of initial formation. Fortunately, today, the Delegation has a pool of personnel from which to choose. It can offer some of its members specific training as Formators, whether in Nigeria or abroad. The training provided for formators needs to be integrated, completed and enriched with an organised renewal program on aspects of specifically OMV identity, life and mission, spirituality and apostolic charism.

5.2. *The Growth in Spirituality and Community Life.*

We cannot reinvent the wheels, as they say. In general, Oblates in Nigeria may want to review and reflect on these (and other) themes using the various sources available (e.g. recent documents of the Church, writings of the Founder, Constitutions and Norms and other significant documents of the Congregation and Nigeria Delegation, etc.) The approved sources update, enrich and interpret the Congregation's understanding of spirituality and community life and how we should practice their orientations and directives.

It is recommended to practice inculturation. Some elements of the Oblate spirituality, the evangelical counsels (the religious vows), community life, the apostolic mission, and the formation of candidates and members (Cfr. the *Ratio Institutionis* or Formation Program) of the religious institute can be inculturated.

5.3. *The Development of the Financial and Economic Aspects.*

The focus here should be the establishment of stable, reliable and sustainable sources or "supply systems" of financial self-reliance and self-sustenance. Presently, this need is of the greatest priority to enable the achievement of set goals. The project is feasible and valuable. The prospect and significance of indigenous efforts are wide-ranging even in the long term. Today, the Delegation is in a better position to advance the steps taken before now. The advancement of credible sources or means of self-reliance and self-sustenance facilitates and assures the establishment and sustainability of projects. In this regard, too, the collaboration of the Association of Families, Friends and Collaborators of the OMV, in brief, (AOMV) is welcome and should be sustained and supported.

5.4. *Create, develop and strengthen appropriate and adequate structures.*

The delegation can create and strengthen some structures, such as administrative (Government), formation, pastoral, and economic structures, so that these may properly and more effectively function. Presently, the principal goal is to ensure the building of the proposed Seminary complex in Ibadan and the sustenance of candidates in the Seminary. The first General Assembly of the Nigeria Delegation (Dec. 2014) already recommended the establishment of an administrative structure. Some of its component offices would include, for instance, the Office of Delegate, the Formation Team of the different phases of Formation, and a stable, general archive of the Nigeria Delegation. Other structures can be prospected. Whichever physical structure is chosen, pastoral ministry needs not only funds but also personnel and know-how to manage it.

5.5. *The Engagement in Specialized Oblate Apostolates*

The Congregation will be further enriched by the preparation of more members of the Delegation for some of the specific forms of apostolates of the Congregation. It is necessary to strategically diversify the actualisation of the ecclesial mission (*Constitutions and Norms*, Arts.5, 40-42). It is unreasonable and shortsighted to continue to solely replicate, everywhere, the parish ministry, even when the number of members increases. Some Oblates see their personal charisms harmonise more with other specific forms of the ecclesial or apostolic mission of the institute, and people need and desire to be fed through different forms of this ecclesial mission. Thankfully, in Nigeria, some Oblates are already carrying out various specialised apostolates, e.g. spiritual exercises. A coordinated and planned approach is needed and more productive. The OMV's *Ratio Institutionis* (Formation Program) affirms that "it is by means of his *specific* apostolic mission that the Oblate is essentially defined." The Oblates can carry out their apostolate as a family; in addition, "attention must be given to the needs of the Congregation and the personal charisms that can incline an Oblate towards one or the other of the aims presented in the Constitutions and Norms. The specialisation of the members was promoted for that aspect of the apostolic charism to which they feel called. […] Common to all Oblates, no matter what branch of the goals [i.e., apostolates] with which they are called, is the effort to attain a serious intellectual and pastoral preparation" (XXII General Chapter, *To live the Lord Jesus*,p.77).

An effective accomplishment of these elements -- namely, the formation of persons, the completeness of works and structures, the sufficient economic stability, and the number of members and communities possessed - could even hasten the coming of the day when the Delegation will become a Province. Moreover, the value and necessity of spreading spirituality and charism and preserving the history of the OMV in Nigeria cannot be underestimated. It is a matter that should be pursued in Nigeria by documenting and archiving the relevant happenings relating to Nigeria Delegation, its local communities, and its members.

Final Remarks

Whatever happens, "do not let anyone take away the hope that is in you" (Pope Francis). The OMV began in Nigeria "a journey with Africans in Africa". Looking back, I wish to express fraternal support and appreciation to the Oblates in Nigeria for their contribution and achievements, the challenges encountered, and the audacity to prospect for a brighter future during these twenty-five years. Becoming a canonically established Delegation is a point of arrival, an achievement. The creation of a Delegation in Nigeria, as in other regions, "was a necessary progress in the life of our Institute, considering the remarkable diversity of local

conditions prevailing in the various regions we are called to perform our specific ministry."[21] This is a motive of joy and thanksgiving to God.

However, becoming a Delegation is also a point of departure. It is a journey towards fully achieving the Congregation's purpose in Nigeria.[22] It opens up new perspectives, challenges and opportunities.

Since it belongs to every one of its members, everyone collaborates and offers his personal charisms and talents in the best possible way for the development of the Nigeria Delegation. Each member willingly supports and enriches the Delegation and its mission, government, projects, and other initiatives through love and service.

Fr Lanteri often emphasises the necessity of "reflection". Reflection can enrich spiritual, social, community, and moral life, as well as apostolate and good governance. The lack of reflection, he says, is the cause of many errors and evils. Reflection helps to overcome the temptation to make impulsive and hasty decisions, judgments or actions. A life without reflection is not worth living. Oblates in Nigeria will continue to deepen their reflections on essential issues. What kind of Delegation do we want young people and the future generations of Oblates to meet? What specific or unique contributions can and should the Nigeria Delegation offer today to the entire Congregation and the Church in Nigeria, both at the reflection and pastoral practice levels? What would the OMV want to be known and remembered for in Nigeria?

Reflection is only a part of the symphony. To develop and renew the spirituality and mission of the Congregation, the OMV is also committed to the ministry of the Word and Reconciliation, in other words, to witnessing the Gospel of Truth and Mercy by using appropriate means. The Delegation carries out the forms of apostolate that are consonant to Oblate identity, vocation and mission. Reflections and work advance the realisation of the collective aspirations, dreams and needs of the Oblates in Nigeria.

[21] XXIV General Chapter, *Duc in Altum!*, pp.10.12
[22] *Constitutions and Norms*, Art. 2.