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Human Encounter and the Oblate Mission with young people in a Digital World

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The missionary value of Catholic education and Oblate outreach to young people becomes increasingly significant in a world shaped by artificial intelligence and online streaming behaviours. One can already see clear differences between those who grew up before the emergence of 'Generation Beta' (generally defined as those born between 2013 and 2025) and those now coming of age within an environment saturated by digital technologies. Young people today are immersed in systems of communication which often encourage them to interact with one another through screens rather than through the more demanding but deeply enriching experiences of direct human interaction.

The challenge we see today is that young people are growing up in a world where digital platforms frequently mediate their relationships with one another. While these technologies offer many opportunities, they also shape communication habits, with young people preferring to interact virtually rather than engage in the complex, emotionally nuanced encounters that form authentic human relationships. Pope Francis recognised this challenge when he pointed out, 'digital communication, which makes it easy to connect and exchange ideas, does not necessarily lead to the encounter of hearts' (Fratelli Tutti 43).

During my recent visit to Australia, I had the opportunity to visit their Oblate schools and to better understand their ministry. Walking through their campuses, I was struck by the distinctive contribution Catholic education makes as a form of missionary outreach to young people today. What I witnessed was an educational environment which intentionally cultivates experiences of community and human connection. Activities fostered teamwork, encouraged emotional engagement, and allowed friendships to naturally

develop among learners. There was a palpable sense that education was not only about academic achievement but also about forming young people who could live and work with others.

By contrast, the cultural patterns often reinforced by digital technologies—and increasingly by AI-driven systems—can subtly draw young people into more isolated modes of living. When life is mediated primarily through digital environments, relationships risk becoming detached from the depth and unpredictability of real human interaction. Yet genuine human relationships are rarely tidy or effortless. They involve vulnerability, misunderstanding, patience, forgiveness and reconciliation. Human relationships are, in many ways, “untidy” and “hard work.” But it is precisely within this complex space that young people grow, mature, and learn the meaning of authentic community life and faith.

In this light, the Oblate’s mission through education represents a profound missionary opportunity. It offers young people experiences that are rooted in real human encounter—experiences that nurture empathy, generosity, collaboration, and a deep respect for the dignity of others. Through shared learning, service to others, prayer, and community life, learners are given the tools to build relationships that can endure throughout their lives. At its heart, the Christian faith is profoundly relational: a relationship with Christ that calls believers into communion with one another, and this is the missionary opportunity we seek through outreach to young people today within the ministry of education.

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**With heavy hearts, we honor and celebrate
the lives of the following departed Oblates:
May their souls find eternal peace,
and may their lives and devotion to service continue to inspire us all.**

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