

An Oblate Missionary Experience on the Path to the third Century

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Introduction

To be a religious priest is one of the greatest gifts that God has bestowed upon us. Yet, to be a missionary is a vocation within that vocation. It is a unique and profound calling that finds its true beauty when it is lived faithfully, in harmony with its identity and charism. It is true that we have received this vocation through the rich charism of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), founded by St. Eugene de Mazenod in Aix-en-Provence, France. The charism of the Congregation “the evangelization of the poor” remains profoundly relevant even in today’s world, marked by social inequalities, political instability, economic injustice, and cultural fragmentation. It is this charism that gives meaning to our missionary vocation. We become missionaries because mission is inseparable from the very identity of an Oblate. We became an Oblate because we heard God’s call through this charism - a call that continually leads us as missionary to seek out the poor, the abandoned, and those who are most in need of the Gospel.

Why to celebrate this bicentenary?

The bicentenary of the approbation of the Constitutions and Rules is a significant milestone in the history of the Congregation and deserves to be celebrated with gratitude and joy. I would like to highlight two principal reasons for this celebration.

First, the approbation of the Constitutions and Rules by the Catholic Church marked the official recognition of the

Congregation as a religious and missionary institute within the Church. Through this ecclesial approval, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate received their canonical identity. Our oblation became not merely a personal response to God's call but an ecclesial vocation, entrusted by the Church for the evangelization of the poor and the most abandoned. The approbation affirmed the authenticity of our charism and established the Congregation as an instrument of the Church's missionary mission.

Second, this Congregation has given birth to generations of Oblates who have faithfully lived the same vocation and handed it on to us through the witness of their lives. Their fidelity, missionary zeal, sacrifices, and heroic commitment continue to inspire us today. They paved the way before us, often at the cost of great hardship, so that we might inherit the rich spiritual and missionary legacy we now enjoy. By celebrating this bicentenary, we honour their memory, express our gratitude for their witness, and renew our own commitment to live the Oblate vocation with the same generosity and fidelity.

For these reasons, this anniversary is far more than the commemoration of a historical event. It is an occasion to give thanks to God for the gift of our Congregation, to celebrate the faithfulness of those who have gone before us, and to renew our dedication to the missionary charism entrusted to us by St. Eugène de Mazenod for the the evangelization of the poor.

God formed St. Eugene de Mazenod through every stage of his life. His noble family background, his years of exile, and the upheaval of the French Revolution became instruments in God's hands. None of these experiences were meaningless; each prepared him for the mission God had planned for him.

Eugene was born into an aristocratic family in Aix-en-Provence. His family enjoyed social status, education,

and influence. Through his father, mother, relatives, and the environment in which he was raised, Eugene became familiar with leadership, culture, and responsibility. These early experiences gave him confidence, vision, and a broad understanding of society. God was already laying the foundation for a future leader of the Church.

The French Revolution forced Eugene and his family into exile. This period became a second school of formation. He lived in different countries, learned new languages, encountered diverse cultures, developed deep friendships, and benefited from the guidance of spiritual directors. Exile exposed him to suffering, uncertainty, and dependence on God. It broadened his vision of the Church and the world. What appeared to be a tragedy became a privileged moment of preparation. I believe that his experiences in exile led him to develop a spirit of becoming a missionary and send missionaries beyond France. He never hesitated to dispatch them to different countries.

The Revolution profoundly affected Eugene's understanding of faith and mission. He witnessed the suffering of the Church, the martyrdom of believers, the persecution of clergy, and the spiritual abandonment of ordinary people. Churches were destroyed or secularized, religious communities were suppressed, seminaries were closed, and many priests were imprisoned, exiled, or killed. This painful reality deeply moved him and awakened within him a desire to serve God's people and restore the faith.

He stood firm, often alone, amid the challenges brought about by the French Revolution, which demanded allegiance to the authority of the State rather than to the Church. Despite the immense pressure exerted by civil authorities, as well as by local bishops and priests who had accepted the State's ecclesiastical policies, he refused to compromise his convictions. Instead of conforming to the prevailing system, he courageously chose a

different path, remaining steadfast in his fidelity to the Church and to the mission entrusted to him by God.

These three formative experiences gradually prepared Eugene to become a priest, a religious and finally a missionary to establish a small community of missionaries, and eventually to found a religious Congregation that would become the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

A decisive moment in Eugene's formation occurred during his famous Good Friday conversion. Eugene recognized the emptiness of a life separated from God. Reflecting on that period, he wrote: 'I was in mortal sin, and it was this that caused my sorrow.' He realized that worldly success, prestige, and pleasure could not satisfy the deepest desires of the human heart. He needed conversion, and that conversion became genuine and lasting. On Good Friday, Eugene stood before the crucifix and contemplated Christ crucified. He saw the nakedness of Christ on the Cross. He saw the emptiness, humility, and humanity revealed there. Above all, he saw the total and self-giving love of God. As he gazed upon the Cross, he recognized his own life in the suffering Christ. The Cross became the place where he encountered God's mercy and discovered his true identity. Eugene's life seemed marked by disappointment and uncertainty. The French Revolution had brought instability and suffering. His family had been scattered. Personal hopes and ambitions had faded. His future appeared uncertain. Yet, in that moment of grace, he realized that his life belonged not to himself but to God. He heard a call to serve Christ and His Church. At a time when religion was widely opposed and faith seemed to be disappearing from public life, Eugene courageously chose a different path. Despite strong opposition from his mother, he resolved to become a priest.

In 1808, at the age of twenty-six, Eugene entered the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice in Paris despite strong opposition from

his mother. Explaining his decision, he wrote: “As the Lord is my witness, what he wants from me is that I renounce the world... that I devote myself especially to his service and try to re-awaken the faith that is becoming extinct amongst the poor. In a word, that I make myself available to carry out any orders he may wish to give me for his glory and the salvation of the souls he has redeemed by his precious blood...” Oblate Writings XIV, p. 55ff, n. 27.

For Eugene, the call to priesthood was not an escape from the world but a mission to restore faith among those who had lost it. A few years later, writing to Father Henry Tempier in 1815, he expressed his vision: “Since the Head of the Church is persuaded that, given the wretched state in which France finds herself, only missions can bring the people back to the Faith which they have practically abandoned, good priests from different dioceses are banding together in response to the views of our supreme Pastor. We likewise feel that it is utterly necessary to employ the same remedy in our regions and, full of confidence in the goodness of Providence, have laid the foundations of an establishment which will steadily furnish our countryside with fervent missionaries... One part of the year will be devoted to the conversions of souls, the other to seclusion, study and our individual sanctification” Oblate Writing VI, 1814-1825, p.6ff, n.4.

This vision eventually led to the foundation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a congregation dedicated to evangelizing the poor and abandoned.

From this moment, a new chapter in the history of evangelization begins for both the Church and the world. We have inherited this missionary spirit through St. Eugene de Mazenod and the profound experience of his encounter with Christ.

When St. Eugène de Mazenod wrote his first letter-known as the Supplique-to the Capitular Vicars General of the Diocese

of Aix-en-Provence on 25 January 1816, he clearly articulated the fundamental vision of the community he desired to establish with Frs. François Tempier, Auguste Icard, Sébastien Deblieu, and Pierre Mie who were the the diocesan priests. This document presents both the purpose of their common life and the missionary identity that would later characterize the Congregation. In this petition, Eugène explained: “The purpose of this Society is not only to work for the salvation of our neighbour by dedicating themselves to the ministry of preaching, but it also has as its principal aim to provide its members with the means of practising the religious virtues for which they have such a great attraction that most of them would have devoted themselves to observing them all their lives in some religious Order, if they had not conceived the hope of finding in the community of Missionaries more or less the same advantages as the religious state to which they wished to dedicate themselves.” (Oblate Writings VI, 1815–1861, p. 2ff., no. 13).

With the approval of the diocesan authorities, the missionaries established themselves in the former Carmelite Convent of Aix-en-Provence, where Eugène was appointed the first Superior of the community. There they began to live together according to the ideals that had inspired their foundation. On Holy Thursday, 11 April 1816, Fr. Eugène de Mazenod and Fr. François Tempier made their first act of oblation by pronouncing their vows. This marked a decisive moment in the birth of the Congregation and gave concrete expression to their desire to consecrate themselves entirely to God and to the evangelization of the poor.

As the missionary apostolate expanded and new members joined the community, Eugène became increasingly aware of the need for a more structured form of religious life. The invitation of the Bishop of Digne to assume responsibility for the Shrine of Notre-Dame du Laus led to the establishment of the second

Oblate community. This new stage of development highlighted the necessity of formulating clear Constitutions and Rules that would guide the life, mission, and spirituality of the growing Congregation. Accordingly, in 1818, the first General Chapter was convened. During this assembly, the Oblates formally embraced the vows of chastity, obedience, and perseverance, laying the foundations of their common religious life. It was within this context that the first Constitutions and Rules gradually took shape, providing a stable legislative framework for the Congregation.

In a profound spiritual sense, however, the Congregation had already been born on Good Friday, the day of St. Eugène's conversion, when he first experienced the transforming love of Christ Crucified and discovered his lifelong mission to the poor. The subsequent events-the formation of the community, the drafting of the Constitutions, and the canonical recognition of the Institute-gave juridical expression to the charism that had already taken root in his heart. Convinced that the Congregation's future depended upon the approval of the Holy See, Eugène travelled to Rome and devoted himself tirelessly to obtaining ecclesiastical recognition. His correspondence with Fr. Tempier vividly reveals the depth of his hope, his perseverance, and his confidence in Divine Providence. The numerous prayers, Eucharistic celebrations, and sacrifices offered for this intention testify to the profound spiritual importance he attached to this undertaking.

At last, on 17 February 1826, Pope Leo XII officially approved the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate as a religious congregation of the Catholic Church and confirmed its Constitutions and Rules. This approbation bestowed canonical identity upon the Congregation and affirmed its missionary charism within the life and mission of the universal Church.

The bicentenary of this approval is therefore far more than the commemoration of an historical event. It is a celebration of our own identity and vocation. The history of the Congregation is our history; the faith, sacrifices, and missionary zeal of our predecessors are our inheritance. As we commemorate this anniversary with gratitude, we renew our commitment to live faithfully the charism of St. Eugène de Mazenod and to continue proclaiming the Gospel to the poor with the same apostolic fervour that inspired our Founder and the first Oblates.

The first missions

Before reflecting on the missionary experiences, it is important to understand the original missionary vision of St. Eugene de Mazenod and the historical context in which the Congregation was founded. This vision continues to shape the missionary identity of every Oblate today. Although our missionary presence varies from country to country, from one culture to another, and from one geographical context to another, our identity remains firmly rooted in the same charism that St. Eugene received under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The forms of our ministry may differ according to the needs of the people we serve, but our mission remains the same: to evangelize the poor.

When we look back at the origins of the Congregation, we discover that St. Eugene responded courageously to the concrete pastoral needs of the people living in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Faced with these realities, St. Eugene discerned three missionary priorities that became the foundation of the Oblate apostolate.

The first priority was the preaching of the Gospel. St. Eugene understood that the Good News had to be proclaimed in a language that ordinary people could understand. Rather than preaching exclusively in formal French, he preached in

Provençal, the language spoken by the ordinary people. The missionary journeys undertaken by the first Oblates throughout Provence clearly demonstrate their extraordinary apostolic zeal. Among these missions were: Grans: 11 February – 17 March 1816 ; Fuveau: 1 September – 29 September 1816 ; Marignane: 17 November – 15 December 1816 ;Mouriès: 9 February – 15 March 1817 ; Arles: 2 November – 16 December 1817 ; Puget: 3 January – 31 January 1818 ; Barjols: 8 November – 20 December 1818 ; Remollon: 17 January – 14 February 1819 ; Eyguières: 14 February – 28 March 1819 ; Rougiers: 14 November – 12 December 1819 ; Rognac: 14 November – 5 December 1819 ; Marseille: 2 January – 27 February 1820 ; Aix-en-Provence: 12 March – 24 April 1820

According to Jozef Pielorz, O.M.I., in *Premières Missions des Missionnaires de Provence (1816–1823)*, there were more than forty parish missions preached between 1816 and 1820. Although the following examples represent only a selection from these numerous missions, they are sufficient to illustrate the extraordinary missionary zeal that characterized the first Oblates.

The second priority was prison ministry. St. Eugene regularly visited prisoner, listened attentively to their stories, accompanied them spiritually, and celebrated the Sacrament of Reconciliation with them. Many of these prisoners were awaiting execution, and he never knew whether those he met would still be alive the following day. “I go every day to the prison. Today I spent three and a half hours. Many are willing to follow my recommendations for their salvation. I know that I should not let myself be dazzled by these beautiful appearances, but I am moved to tears of joy at seeing the collaboration of most of them.” (August 3, 1821, in *Rey*, I, p. 277-278). This could serve as an inspiration for us to continue the Founder’s missionary vision in our respective Provinces.

The third priority was the formation of young people. The Foundation House, formerly the Carmelite Monastery purchased by St. Eugene as the first house of the Congregation, became not only the residence of the missionaries but also a place where young people could gather, grow in faith, and receive Christian formation. St. Eugene understood that forming the youth meant shaping the future of both the Church and society. Consequently, youth ministry became an integral dimension of the Oblate apostolate. “And Eugène de Mazenod allowed himself be led to the poor. First of all the prisoners, with the ministry of prisons founded two centuries before him, a ministry still alive today in Aix-en-Provence. Then the jobless youth in front of the Palace of Justice, with whom he would found the Association of Christian Youth in April 1813.” Paweł Zając OMI, ed., *To the Ends of the Earth, Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, 1816-2016, A Documentary Sourcebook*, 2016, p.833,834.

These three apostolic priorities became the foundational expressions of the Oblate missionary identity. They continue to inspire the mission of the Congregation throughout the world today. While the contexts in which we serve have changed, the missionary spirit of St. Eugene remains alive, calling every Oblate to proclaim Christ to the poor, to accompany those on the margins, and to become a living witness of God’s compassionate love.

To be a missionary Oblate

From the perspective of St. Eugene, the vocation to become a missionary is fundamentally distinct. It is a vocation rooted in continual renewal in Jesus Christ and in the total gift of self to the mission, a commitment lived through the evangelical counsels. The missionary is called to risk everything in fulfilling the demands of the mission. For St. Eugene, mission is the primary orientation and purpose of the Oblate’s life; it is from this conviction that he seeks every possible means to reach the poor.

Fr. Leo Deschâtelets, former Superior General, addressed all the Oblates in his Circular Letter No. 191, in which he defined the essential identity and character of the Oblate. I would like to highlight a few key insights from his reflections.

(1) “An Oblate is a) a priest, b) a religious, c) a missionary; d) an oblate, a man dedicated, as were the Apostles themselves, to the pursuit of holiness and to apostolic labours; e) a man aflame with love for Jesus, our divine Saviour, and for Mary Immaculate, the Mother of God and our Mother also ; and a man in whom this love is unceasingly nourished by a profound spirit of prayer; f) a man who, in his profound spirit of prayer, learns complete detachment from self by obedience and poverty and a simple and upright intention; g) a man whose genuine Christian charity embraces the members of his own religious family and all his fellow men; h) a man whose heart, because of its intimate union with Jesus and Mary, overflows with unlimited zeal and boundless mercy which urge him to seek out particularly all those who are poor and most abandoned.”

(2) “Among the most saintly founders of religious orders, has any one spoken more forcefully than our Founder when, like a general exhorting his troops before the battle, he says: “They should seriously strive for their own sanctification, and courageously walk in the paths trodden by so many apostles. They should wholly renounce themselves. They should continually renew themselves in the spirit of their mind, and live in a state of habitual self-denial, seeking at all times to reach the very summit of perfection. They should labor assiduously to become humble, meek, obedient, lovers of poverty and penance, mortified, free from inordinate attachment to the world or family,...” (Preface).

(3) “Each Oblate should be a pattern for all religious to follow, he should be a living embodiment of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: ‘He who wishes to become one of our members, must have

an ardent desire of his own perfection, and be inflamed with a love of our Lord Jesus Christ and his Church. He must have a burning zeal for the salvation of souls. He must have a heart that is free from every disorderly affection for things of earth, and from excessive attachment to parents and native land. He must not be desirous of riches, nay more, he will regard riches as dung, that he may gain Christ. His one desire must be to spend himself in the Service of God and the Church, whether in the Missions or in the other Works of the Congregation. He must have the will to persevere unto death in devoted obedience to the Rules of our Institute”” (Article 697).

For the Missionary Oblates, the poor are not simply one group among many but the privileged recipients of their apostolate and the heart of their missionary vocation. This is what distinguishes the Oblate from other priests and religious. The Founder envisioned the Congregation as existing above all for the evangelization of the poor, and it is in this mission that the Oblate identity is formed and continually renewed. Consequently, regardless of the obstacles encountered, Oblates are called to embrace every missionary challenge with generosity and courage, opening new frontiers for the proclamation of the Gospel.

The name ‘missionary’

We received the formal name, “Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate” after the pontifical approbation of the Church from then Pope Leo XII on the 17th of Feb, 1826. Actually a few months before (8th Dec, 1825) St. Eugene wrote a letter to the Pope for changing the name of the society from ‘Missionary Oblates of St. Charles’ to ‘Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate’ (Missions des Oblats de Marie Immaculée, N.280, Sep.1952, pp. 56-62). The word ‘missionary’ was the deepest intention of St. Eugene that signifies intensively the characteristics of the society that he founded. When St. Eugène first made his act of

Oblation in 1818, he signed it simply as “priest, missionary.” The title “missionary” was not merely a designation but a profound expression of his identity, deeply rooted in his heart from the very beginnings of the Congregation.

“The first missionary attitude is to love the people and groups of people to whom we are sent, with their history and their culture, with their values and also with their faults” said Fr. Marcello Zago, the former Superior General. He continued addressing the missionary attitudes, he said, “We must accept the pluralistic society, composed of groups with different visions. We have to accept the youth with their culture. We must accept immigrants etc.” (*La missione ad gentes interpella la Chiesa che è in Italia. Nuovi aeropaghi della Missione. Conference at the National Missionary Congress, Belluria [Italy], September, 10-13, 1998*), Fabio Ciardi, ed., “Nihil linquendum inausum” *An Oblate Breviary*, p.102.

The term “missionary” is profoundly significant for every Christian, for it embodies the very mission entrusted by Christ to His Church. It is not merely a title or a function but an identity rooted in Baptism and lived in communion with mission of evangelization. Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), presents a compelling vision of the Church as essentially missionary. He writes: “In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus; we no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries’, but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples’” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 120). For Pope Francis, the Church is missionary by its very nature and is called to go forth to all peoples; it is the vocation of every baptized person. The Holy Father further challenges the entire Church by proposing what he calls a “missionary option”: “I dream of a ‘missionary option’,

that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation" (Evangelii Gaudium, 27).

This vision is a powerful summons to all missionaries and, in a particular way, to us, the Missionary Oblates. It invites us to move beyond comfort, routine, and self-preservation in order to respond courageously to the challenges of the contemporary world—a world marked by inequality, fragmentation, and indifference. Thus, a missionary becomes the one who thinks, acts, and sees the world through the eyes of the Crucified Saviour.

Pope Francis on the Missionary Spirit of the Oblates

During his audience with the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate at the conclusion of the 37th General Chapter in 2016, Pope Francis highlighted three essential dimensions of our missionary vocation that are closely related to our reflection today: missionary history, missionary courage, and missionary impetus.

1. Missionary History

Pope Francis beautifully reminds us that to be an Oblate is to belong to a rich missionary history. Over the past two centuries, countless Oblates have dedicated and consecrated their lives to the service of the Gospel. Their hearts were especially directed towards the poor, the abandoned, and those most in need of God's mercy. The Holy Father reminds us: "Today, every land is 'mission territory'; every human dimension is mission territory, awaiting the proclamation of the Gospel." These words invite us to recognize that the mission of the Church is continually expanding. New social realities, new cultures, and new forms of poverty call us to renewed missionary commitment. Every generation of

Oblates is called to contribute a new chapter to this living history. The missionary heritage we have received from St. Eugene is not merely a memory of the past; it is a living tradition that continues to shape our identity and inspire our future.

2. Missionary Courage

Our missionary history would have little meaning without missionary courage. The Oblates have never disappeared from the life of the Church. Our mission has not been forgotten, nor has our witness been erased from the hearts of the faithful. Throughout the history of the Church, the Congregation has been recognised for its fidelity, generosity, and readiness to undertake the most demanding missions.

Several Popes have acknowledged this missionary spirit. Pope St. John Paul II described St. Eugene de Mazenod as a “man of Advent.” Pope Pius XI called the Oblates “specialists in difficult missions,” recognising their willingness to serve in the most challenging circumstances. Pope Francis likewise encouraged us to remain “men of Advent.” This is our missionary courage. The Holy Father further exhorted us: “May the joy of the Gospel shine forth first on your faces, making you joyful witnesses. Following the example of the Founder, may charity among you be your first rule of life, the foundation of every apostolic activity; and may zeal for the salvation of souls be the natural fruit of this fraternal charity.”

3. Missionary Impetus

Finally, Pope Francis speaks of the missionary impetus that must continually renew our vocation. He points to three indispensable elements: prayer, encounter, and discernment. Prayer is the foundation of every missionary life. Without a deep communion with Christ, missionary activity risks becoming mere human effort. Encounter is the heart of our community

life. We encounter Christ in one another, in the poor, and in those to whom we are sent. Authentic fraternity strengthens our missionary witness and becomes itself a proclamation of the Gospel. Discernment enables us to recognise the voice of the Holy Spirit amid the changing realities of the world. Through continual discernment, we remain faithful to our charism while responding creatively to the new challenges of evangelisation. Pope Francis encourages us never to lose heart: Do not ... “allow yourselves to be discouraged by the difficulties you encounter in the mission, but instead be steadfast in your fidelity to your religious and missionary vocation.”

Our missionary commitment is modelled on the Gospel itself. Jesus Christ is the first and perfect missionary. He came to seek and save the lost, to proclaim the Good News to the poor, and to reveal the merciful love of God. Following Him, and inspired by the example of St. Eugene de Mazenod, may we continue to live our missionary vocation with generosity, courage, and joy. Let us write new pages in the missionary history of the Oblates, remaining faithful to our charism and leading many souls to the saving love of Christ.

The present challenge

The very identity of being an Oblate is inseparably linked to the charism of the Congregation. Identity and charism are intimately united in both meaning and purpose. When St. Eugene de Mazenod founded the Congregation in the aftermath of the French Revolution, his vision was clear: the Society was to exist for the service of the poor and the most abandoned. The Congregation was founded for no other purpose. The charism that inspired the Founder continues to speak powerfully to every age and remains ever relevant wherever the poor and the abandoned are found.

An Oblate is formed according to this charism so that, through his free response to God's call, he lives in community and is sent forth as a missionary to those who are most in need. Consequently, the life and mission of an Oblate are directed toward the poor and the most abandoned. Their struggles, hopes, sufferings, and aspirations must become his own. To be an Oblate is not simply to serve the poor, but to identify oneself with them and to make their cause one's own.

Unless we define ourselves clearly and continually renew our understanding of who we are, we risk losing our identity as Missionary Oblates. This observation may seem unsettling, but it expresses a reality that cannot be ignored. At times, some among us have gradually lost sight of our origins and the clarity of our missionary purpose. Whenever we fail to deepen our appreciation of community life, our fidelity to the evangelical counsels, and our missionary zeal, we become less capable of responding effectively to the increasingly complex challenges of the contemporary world.

The Book of Genesis reminds us that the serpent awakened in humanity the desire to possess the knowledge of good and evil independently of God. This temptation ultimately led to humanity's fall. Today, we live in a world inundated with information, technology, distractions, and countless attractions that can easily divert our attention from what is truly essential. Knowledge, scientific progress, and technological advancement are undoubtedly valuable gifts, but they become dangerous when they lead us away from our deepest identity, our vocation, and our relationship with God.

Our present challenge, therefore, is not merely to adapt to the modern world but to remain firmly rooted in our missionary identity while engaging that world with evangelical wisdom. We are called to return continually to the essentials of our vocation. We must rediscover the richness of our charism, renew our personal

encounter with Christ, strengthen the bonds of our fraternal community, and rekindle our missionary passion for the poor and the most abandoned. Only by remaining deeply rooted in the spirit of St. Eugene de Mazenod can we respond faithfully, creatively, and courageously to the needs of the Church and of our time.

Just as Christ thirsted for the salvation of humanity and continues to offer Himself for us in the Eucharist, so too every Oblate is called to share in that same thirst—a profound longing to bring the love and mercy of Christ to the poor. This missionary zeal is not simply one dimension of Oblate life; it lies at the very heart of our vocation. It is the defining characteristic of our identity and the enduring legacy of St. Eugene de Mazenod. As long as we remain faithful to this charism, we will continue to be authentic witnesses of the Gospel and credible missionaries in today's world.

The Poor: The Heart of Our Mission

Our identity as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate is most clearly manifested in our missionary witness among the poor. The Church needs religious who become the voice of the poor, who stand in solidarity with them, and who tirelessly seek new and effective ways of bringing them the hope of the Gospel. In this regard, the recent Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Leo XIV, *Dilexi te* (I have loved you), offers us a profound source of inspiration. I would like to reflect on three fundamental dimensions that can deepen our understanding of this vocation: the choice of the mission, recognizing the voices of the poor, and fidelity to the desire of the Church.

a. The Choice of the Mission

One of the greatest challenges facing the Church today concerns the choice of mission. Traditional missionary work requires generous commitment, personal sacrifice, financial

resources, and, above all, missionaries willing to give themselves completely. Such a commitment is increasingly demanding in our contemporary world.

When we study the missionary activity of St. Eugene de Mazenod, we discover that his apostolate was fundamentally a ministry of presence among the poor. The poor and the most abandoned were never merely recipients of charity; they were the very reason for the existence of the Congregation. The Founder chose his missions not according to convenience or prestige, but according to the needs of those who had been forgotten by society and neglected by the Church.

His concern extended beyond improving the material conditions of the poor. He desired above all to restore their dignity as children of God and to help the Church recognize the many faces of poverty present within society. In this sense, the mission of the Oblates is never an isolated undertaking; it is a participation in the universal mission of the Church. Through our presence among the poor, we assist the Church in identifying those who remain marginalized, abandoned, and without hope.

This fidelity to the Founder's vision continues to challenge us today. Whatever the place or ministry entrusted to us, our missionary discernment must always begin with one fundamental question: Where are the poor, and how is Christ calling us to be present among them? Only by remaining close to them can we remain faithful to our charism and to the mission entrusted to us by the Church.

b. Recognizing the Voices of the Poor

The realities of poverty in today's world are increasingly diverse and complex. Contemporary society is shaped by relativism, excessive individualism, consumerism, and ideologies that often disregard both human dignity and the moral order established by

God. As a consequence, countless people experience new forms of alienation, loneliness, and suffering. Many become victims of violence, exploitation, injustice, addiction, isolation, and the loss of meaning in life. Poverty today cannot be measured solely in economic terms. It also includes spiritual emptiness, emotional wounds, broken relationships, social exclusion, psychological distress, and the absence of hope. These are equally profound forms of human poverty that cry out for the compassionate presence of the Church. For this reason, one of the missionary's greatest responsibilities is to recognize the many voices of the poor. Very often, these voices are not loud. The poor frequently suffer in silence. They may never openly ask for help, yet their lives silently proclaim their need for compassion, dignity, and accompaniment. Their poverty is hidden behind fear, shame, or loneliness.

To become authentic missionaries, we must learn to listen not only to spoken words but also to the silent cries of those whose suffering remains unnoticed. Today's poor present themselves with new faces and in new situations. Consequently, our mission is not limited to responding to visible needs; it also demands that we discover those who have become invisible to society. Missionary charity begins with attentive listening, compassionate presence, and the capacity to discern where Christ continues to suffer in the lives of His people.

c. Fidelity to the desire of the Church

Our missionary choices lie at the very heart of our identity as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. The Church approved our Congregation so that this small missionary society, founded by St. Eugene de Mazenod, might faithfully preserve the charism entrusted to him by the Holy Spirit. Our path is therefore unique. It is not defined by personal preference or institutional success but by fidelity to the Gospel, to the Founder, and to the missionary

mission of the Church. Every Oblate is called to remain faithful to this vocation by listening attentively to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Our Constitutions express this identity beautifully. Constitution 2 reminds us: “We are men ‘set apart for the Gospel’ (Rom 1:1), men ready to leave everything to be disciples of Jesus. The desire to cooperate with him draws us to know him more deeply, to identify with him, to let him live in us.” These words describe not only what we do but who we are. They invite us to be conformed to the Heart of Christ and to share in His compassion for humanity. The missionary spirit of St. Eugene becomes our own only when we allow Christ to live within us and to continue His saving mission through our lives.

This missionary fidelity is clearly visible in the life of St. Eugene himself. When he was appointed Bishop of Marseille, he never ceased to be the Founder of the Oblates. He carried both responsibilities with remarkable unity of purpose because he understood that episcopal ministry and missionary life were inseparable expressions of the same pastoral charity.

As Bishop, he saw before him a people whose dignity had been deeply wounded by the consequences of the French Revolution. He did not encounter “the poor” as an abstract concept but as concrete men and women whose suffering demanded an immediate pastoral response. Their pain became his own; their struggles shaped his ministry. For St. Eugene, the poor were never an idea—they were persons. Their faces, their stories, and their sufferings continually drew him closer to Christ.

His example remains a permanent lesson for every Oblate. Our fidelity to Christ can never be separated from our fidelity to the poor. The closer we draw to those who are abandoned and marginalized, the more deeply we encounter the Lord Himself.

Conversely, when we lose sight of the poor, we gradually risk losing sight of Christ, for He continues to reveal Himself in their faces and to call us through their needs. Our commitment to the poor, therefore, is far more than a pastoral priority. It is an essential expression of our identity as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and a concrete way of living our discipleship of Jesus Christ. Through our presence, our compassion, and our proclamation of the Gospel, we become living witnesses to the love of Christ for the poor—the very heart of our Founder and the enduring mission of our Congregation.

We are Missionaries to today's world

The 31st General Chapter (1986) focused on the missionary vocation in today's world. It reaffirmed that the Oblates are called to be missionaries to the contemporary world and declared: "In fact, our mission will have no future unless we can count on being constantly renewed by new members who have been well formed" (No. 6). The expression "constantly renewed" continues to have profound significance in the life of the Congregation. It reminds us that the vitality of our missionary vocation depends not only upon welcoming new members but also upon ensuring their sound formation and their continual growth in fidelity to the Oblate charism. Such ongoing renewal enables the Congregation to respond effectively to the changing needs of the Church and the world.

Following the death of St. Eugène de Mazenod, Fr. Joseph Fabre, OMI, succeeded him as the second Superior General of the Congregation. Recognizing the importance of preserving the missionary heritage of the Oblates, he invited missionaries from every mission territory to submit reports on their apostolic activities for publication. These reports provide a rich historical testimony to the experiences, sacrifices, and achievements of the first Oblate missionaries in their respective mission fields.

In introducing these reports, Fr. Fabre addressed the members of the Congregation in these words: “Yes, my dear Fathers and Brothers, as we hear the accounts of our missionaries, together we shall thank God and our Immaculate Mother. Together we shall grow ever more deeply in love with the family within which God continues to raise up such generous servants. Together we shall strive not to fall behind our brothers in the practice of the religious virtues. Those who are preparing themselves for the apostolic struggle will become even more zealous in making themselves worthy to defend the cause of God and the honour of the Congregation to which they have the happiness of belonging.” (Mission, No. 1, April 1862).

These words continue to inspire Oblates today by reminding them that missionary life is nourished not only through apostolic activity but also through fidelity to the evangelical counsels, fraternity, and continual spiritual renewal.

Sri Lanka is privileged to have received these missionaries, particularly the Oblates, whose contribution extended far beyond the work of evangelization to embrace the integral development of the people. Historical records reveal that they established orphanages, founded and renovated schools, strengthened the faith of Christian communities, built churches, and travelled thousands of kilometres to administer the sacraments—especially the Sacrament of Reconciliation—preach the Gospel, visit the sick in their homes and hospitals, and minister to prisoners. Their missionary service embraced every dimension of both spiritual and human life.

Equally remarkable was their extraordinary capacity to adapt themselves to the local culture, traditions, customs, social structures, and living conditions. Rather than imposing their own customs and way of life, they immersed themselves in the lives of the people whom they served. Their missionary method reflected

the spirit of the Incarnation: becoming one with the people in order to proclaim Christ more effectively.

As I studied their reports, I was deeply impressed by the fact that their primary concern was always the mission itself. They were not preoccupied with obtaining academic qualifications, enjoying extended periods of leisure, or pursuing material comforts. Instead, they willingly embraced lives marked by sacrifice. They faced the challenge of learning unfamiliar languages, endured harsh climatic conditions, adapted to unfamiliar food, and frequently suffered from illness, often with only the most basic living facilities. Yet none of these hardships diminished their missionary enthusiasm or weakened their apostolic commitment.

They freely accepted these demanding circumstances for the sake of Jesus Christ and in faithful obedience to St. Eugène de Mazenod, then Superior General of the Congregation. Their unwavering fidelity, courage, spirit of self-sacrifice, and profound trust in Divine Providence remain an enduring source of inspiration. Their witness challenges us to rediscover the authentic missionary zeal that lies at the heart of the Oblate vocation and to respond generously to the needs of today's world with the same faith, dedication, humility, and love. The lives of these pioneering missionaries remind us that authentic missionary discipleship is measured not by personal comfort or worldly success but by fidelity to Christ, availability for mission, and wholehearted service to the poor and most abandoned. Their example continues to encourage every Oblate to renew his missionary commitment and to carry forward the vision of St. Eugène de Mazenod with renewed courage and hope in the service of the Church and the world.

Let us be missionaries

Let us be missionaries animated by Jesus Christ

As Fr. Fernand Jetté, OMI, reminds us, the missionary must be “animated by Jesus Christ in walking in the footsteps of the Apostles” (OMI Apostolic Man, 1992, p. 33). Jesus Christ is both the source and the goal of our missionary vocation. To be animated by Christ and to walk in the footsteps of the Apostles means to remain faithful to His call and to place ourselves at the service of the Church, wherever she sends us, especially among the poor. Our missionary identity is rooted in our communion with Christ, for “the community of the Apostles with Jesus is the model of our life” (Constitution 3). Wherever we are sent, we are called to continue Christ’s own mission.

Let us be missionaries conscious of our missionary commitment

Our missionary vocation demands a profound commitment. Every aspect of our ministry - our pastoral presence, the administration of the sacraments, our preaching, and our prayer, should reflect the distinctive missionary character of the Oblate vocation. Such commitment should make visible the uniqueness of our missionary formation and witness.

The Constitutions remind us: “We preach the Gospel among people who have not yet received it and help them see their own values in its light. Where the Church is already established, our commitment is to those groups it touches least. Wherever we work, our mission is especially to those people whose condition cries out for salvation and for the hope which only Jesus Christ can fully bring. These are the poor with their many faces; we give them our preference” (Constitution 5). Missionary commitment therefore requires a preferential love for the poor and an unwavering dedication to those most in need of the Gospel.

Let us be missionaries who live for the evangelization of the poor

The missionary vocation calls for total self-renunciation in the service of Christ and His Church. Throughout the world, countless people continue to long for authentic evangelization. They seek missionaries whose words are sincere, courageous, prophetic, and deeply rooted in personal experience of Christ. Such voices transcend the barriers of culture, language, and religion, bringing hope to those who have lost meaning in life and leading them back to Christ. As members of the prophetic Church, “We announce the liberating presence of Jesus Christ and the new world born in his resurrection. We will hear and make heard the clamour of the voiceless...” (Constitution 9). This prophetic mission remains at the heart of our Oblate vocation.

Let us be missionaries who embrace both suffering and joy

Missionary life inevitably includes both suffering and joy. I wish particularly to emphasize missionary suffering, because it forms an integral part of the missionary experience. Missionary work involves human relationships, cultural encounters, misunderstandings, disappointments, and personal sacrifice. Consequently, suffering cannot be avoided. Rather, it becomes a privileged means of growth, purification, and deeper dependence upon God’s grace.

At the same time, missionary life is filled with profound joy—the joy that is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. This joy arises from faithful service, fraternity, encounters with people of diverse cultures and languages, and the realization that Christ continues His work through His missionaries. Constitution 29 reminds us: “Our perseverance is thus a sign of Christ’s fidelity to the Father. We will help each other find joy and fulfilment in our community life and in our apostolate.” Missionary suffering and missionary joy together shape the missionary into a faithful witness of Christ.

Let us be missionaries who never forget our origin and purpose

The origin and purpose of the Congregation are found in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, manifested in the charism entrusted to St. Eugène de Mazenod. While we appreciate the richness of many spiritual traditions within the Church, we must never lose sight of our own missionary identity. Modern tendencies toward excessive individualism, personal comfort, or prestige can gradually weaken our missionary spirit if we are not vigilant. We are Oblates, missionaries specifically called and consecrated for the evangelization of the poor.

The Preface to our Constitutions and Rules expresses this ideal: “They must strive to be saints. They must wholly renounce themselves, striving solely for the glory of God, the good of the Church, and the growth and salvation of souls. They must constantly renew themselves in the spirit of their vocation.” These words remain as relevant today as when they were first written.

Let us be missionaries whose quality is rooted in the liturgical and spiritual life

Finally, authentic missionary effectiveness depends upon a deep spiritual and liturgical life. Fr. Fernand Jetté observes that the Oblate can become “a man of prayer, a man for others, a poor man according to the Gospel, a witness of the faith,” but only through total commitment (OMI Apostolic Man, p. 36). He further explains that this requires an ever-deepening knowledge of Christ through prayer, study, contemplation, and continual conformity to His life (p. 51). Missionary quality is inseparable from our relationship with Christ. Without this foundation, missionary activity risks becoming merely humanitarian rather than evangelical. Daily Eucharist, personal prayer, oraison, and continual discernment sustain and renew the missionary vocation.

They enable us to remain faithful to our charism and distinguish the Oblate missionary by the depth of his communion with Christ.

Finally, the witness of the first Oblates reminds us that missionary life is not measured by comfort or success but by fidelity, sacrifice, holiness, and love. We can become authentic missionaries to today's world, carrying forward the mission entrusted to us by Christ and handed down through our Founder.

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