

Letter of the Superior General for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception 2015

L.J.C. et M.I.

Dear Brother Oblates,

Happy feast day! On this, our patroness' solemnity, we gather as a family to express our love for Mary Immaculate. One of her titles special to the heart of Saint Eugene was the Mother of Mercy. How appropriate as the Church begins this "Year of Mercy" that we remember our Oblate connection to this title of Mary. We ask Saint Eugene to intercede so that we will experience joy because we believe the Father of mercies is among us, deep in the heart of the world, offering grace and salvation in the face of ever crueler poverty, more abandoned sisters and brothers and an increased need for the Gospel. Celebrating the beauty and wonder of the Father's mercy in the Immaculate Conception of Mary, we renew our faith in the Spirit, always at work in our lives and in the world, manifesting God's merciful love through all generations.

We have been on pilgrimage during the Oblate Triennium over the past two years, seeking to respond to God's transforming grace in our lives. Now we enter the third year of the Triennium, with the great hope that the Spirit working within us will do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine (Eph. 3: 20). Conversion is not the result of a program of exercises, but the disarming movement of the Spirit in our lives, transforming stagnation and gloominess into life and light. In the Holy Spirit we pray, watching and waiting, listening and wide awake, in the vivid expectation that the Comforter will provoke within us the "profound personal and community conversion to Jesus Christ" called for by the 2010 General Chapter.

This year of the Oblate Triennium, coinciding with the Church's Year of Mercy, will be marked by many special events within the Congregation throughout 2016: on January 25th the 200th anniversary of our foundation as the Missionaries of Provence; in March, the Congress on Mission with Youth; in July, both the Congress on Vocations Ministry and the Oblate Youth Encounter before the World Youth Day in Poland; and the 36th General Chapter from September 14 to October 12. We look forward to a wonderful year filled with many events in the Provinces, Missions and Delegations commemorating the third year of the Oblate Triennium. Please support and pray for these events and send in news and pictures to Father Shanil at the Oblate Communications Office to share with the entire Congregation.

During the first year of the Oblate Triennium, we reflected on a core dimension of Saint Eugene's missionary foundation: Oblates are gathered as brothers in apostolic community. He often described our vocation to live in fraternal communion with words evoking the strongest family bonds and he frequently recalled the one heart and soul of the first Christians. It is essential to our charism that we always start afresh in giving ourselves with joy and generosity to the task of forming community. At the great Millennium, Saint John Paul II called the Church "the home and the school of communion." Most recently, in opening the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis reminded religious that we are to be "experts in communion". Although a strong trend pulls us toward individualism and activism, prophetic resistance insists that the mission to live fraternal communion is essential to Oblate consecrated life. Because of an inherent relationship between apostolic community and the vow of chastity, it was this vow that we considered in the first year of the Triennium. We appreciated anew that we are chaste celibate men because of a special invitation from the Lord (C# 14) and we recognized

that healthy chastity has been an impetus for us to develop the riches of our hearts (C# 16). The vow of chastity, which consecrates all our affectivity, enables us to create fraternal communion and to generate meaningful relationships in apostolic communities throughout our lives.

During this past year of the Oblate Triennium, we broadened our understanding of ongoing formation (CC# 68-70) as a lifelong task of disciples always growing in the Lord as human beings, as consecrated men and as missionaries. Continuing formation is more than special studies for higher degrees. It is a commitment for life to become, as Eugene de Mazenod called us to be, saints. In this second Triennium year we also reviewed our lives as individuals and communities in relation to the evangelical counsel of poverty (CC# 19-23). It is essential that this vow be more radically assumed by each one of us as a sign that our one true treasure is Jesus Christ alone. The vow of poverty compels us to enter into a deeper communion with Jesus and the poor! (C# 20) Our lives of ministry with the poor question us on many levels: gratitude, simplicity, joy, providence, work... We must evaluate our style of life and examine how materialism and the appetite to consume can diminish our commitment to share everything we earn and receive with our brother Oblates.

The Oblate Triennium this year takes us to a theme that Oblates are passionate about: Mission (CC# 1-10). We also will pray over and reflect on how we live the vow of obedience (CC# 24-28), following Jesus whose nourishment was to do the will of his Father (Jn. 4:34). We must constantly work toward a more mature understanding of obedience within the context of discernment, fraternal and honest questioning, community consultation and participation, along with availability, humility and faith. Obedience is directly related to mission and together they express what oblation signifies.

As we reflect on Mission during this year of the Oblate Triennium, a prophetic and visionary Scripture passage orients our vision: Luke 4:14-21:

“Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.”

Our Founder chose this text to inspire the Congregation and it illumines our discernment on mission during this 200th Jubilee Year. Personally, I experience the power of the Holy Spirit and the call to mission whenever I hear this passage proclaimed. Pondering it prayerfully in community renews us in our missionary oblation. In this moving text Jesus announces his mission in the anointing of the Spirit and it begins with the poor: he is sent to bring good news to captives, the blind and the oppressed and initiates a year of grace, thus revealing the Father’s heart of mercy toward the most abandoned. Our Founder’s vocation, a call born in a journey of conversion and marked by a significant experience before the crucifix, is a faithful echo of Jesus’ mission announced in the synagogue of Nazareth.

This third year of the Oblate Triennium invites us to reexamine our faithfulness to the charism of Eugene de Mazenod and ultimately our faithfulness to Jesus' mission. All the Units of the Congregation are called to review their missionary activity in the light of this Scripture and our CC&RR. The recent documents of Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si'* give us a tremendous impetus to renewed missionary vigor. These writings confirm the Oblate charism and illumine our discernment of mission, creating new missionary ardor among us. Already some Oblate Units have engaged in a courageous process of discerning mission and taking hard decisions for the vitality of Oblate life and faithfulness to the charism. I want to encourage and bless them as they discern new directions. Each Unit should prayerfully review, as a missionary community, how it participates in the mission of the Trinity and discern where it is being called to witness at the present time in light of our charism. We pray for the anointing of the Spirit so that we have free hearts to leave behind ministries where we have done great work in order to respond to the most urgent needs and challenges of evangelization today.

A new heart; a new spirit; a new mission: this has been the movement for which we have asked God's grace. The General Chapter of 2010 called us to a new missionary outlook characterized by mazenodian audacity and courage to leave familiar ways, comfortable routines and deathly inertia in order to embrace, not just new or different works of ministry, but a whole new way of being missionaries committed to Jesus Christ. The key is how we are missionaries, not simply being defined by what we do, but by who we are as disciples of Jesus, and how we live our oblation. We are called to integrate, in a mutually life-giving way, the values of consecration with the commitment to mission.

The call to conversion to which we have been led by the Spirit is generating signs of new life among us. The Spirit is leading us to discover the sacred and prophetic unity of life witness and evangelization. The call to a profound conversion to Jesus Christ brings us beyond the destructive dichotomy between life and work or between being and doing to a spirituality in which we are challenged to maintain holistic relatedness both in the work we do for God's mission and in our religious consecration. We can no longer be satisfied to subordinate the value of our consecrated life -- the vows, our life of faith and apostolic community -- to endless activities freely described as mission.

Mission is a precious gift of the Trinity who invites and draws us to participate in God's endless gift of Self, saving, loving, gracing all of creation. Mission does not belong to us as though it were our possession. As missionaries we must nurture a deep appreciation and reverence for this invitation to cooperate with the work of salvation. Participation in the mission of the Holy Trinity requires community participation and common commitment over individualism; discernment and prayer before business-as-usual meetings and mere organizational discussions; the passionate following of Jesus through the vowed life over living like bachelors who are self-absorbed, post-modern consumers. Our consecration as religious is a constitutive element of how we participate in God's mission.

When we live the integration of mission and consecration, our lives hold the tension, creative and dynamic, between our missionary action of evangelization and the other essential dimensions of life, namely, our relationship to the Trinity, whose will we seek to do; our relationship to others in apostolic community which humanizes and sanctifies us; and the prophetic following of Jesus through the vows. When these dimensions are lived with integrity there is abundant energy for the Kingdom, faithful commitment and joy. When we are committed to maintain the integrity of this tension our lives give greater Gospel light and we witness the Oblate charism through closeness to the poor, zeal for the Gospel and availability for difficult missions. Living more faithfully the values of our consecration will not diminish our commitment to mission. On the contrary: the more dedicated we are to the vowed life, prayer life and community life, the greater will be our apostolic oblation for God's mission. This relationship is expressed in the biblical motivation for our Jubilee, Mt 5:13-16:

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

The witness of our lives is salt and light for the world and whatever good we might do will shine not for our own personal glory and renown, but will focus on giving all the glory to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

I trust that the faith sharing resources have been helpful to guide the reflections in communities and that some signs of conversion have come about in our lives. In fact, we have seen many Units of the Congregation promoting this sharing of the experience of God among Oblates and trying to express conversion through real changes in our lives. I would like to ask all the major superiors and local superiors, directors and animators to make an extra effort to encourage all of us to enter into this journey by sharing our faith in community and by seeking some gestures of personal and community conversion among us. The sharing of our experience of God in community builds a strong foundation for a meaningful life together; it empowers us to live with patience and forgiveness; it gives us joy and generous hearts to bear and support one another.

The Spirit is anointing us and breathing new life into the Congregation! The 200th Jubilee and the Year of Mercy are offering us a kairos and wonderful signs of new missionary life are visible among us! Let us seize this opportunity to recommit ourselves to be missionaries for the Church’s most difficult and challenging missions and dare to offer our lives unconditionally for the evangelization of the poor and most abandoned today. Wherever we have become settled in safe and comfortable ministries that do not require missionary audacity and zeal, let us be uprooted for God’s mission! Let us be set on fire as we contemplate: Jesus gathering his disciples around him and sending them out two by two (not alone!); the first Christians coming together as community to break bread, care for the poor and announce the Good News; Eugene de Mazenod calling some good men to share life and mission. So now, celebrating two hundred years of our existence with immense hope, we return to the roots of our Congregation. This is not nostalgia for the past, but clarity and strength to express with creative fidelity the life-filled charism given to the Church through Saint Eugene de Mazenod. The mission is to be true cooperators with the Savior in offering God’s gracious and tender mercy to all, beginning with the poor.

As we celebrate this feast of the mystery of the Holy Trinity’s mercy in Mary’s life, I would like to remember the numerous close collaborators who share with us in the charism of Saint Eugene all around the world. Honorary Oblates, the Missionary Association of Mary Immaculate, Oblate Associates, Friends of St. Eugene, the Mazenodian Family, members of secular institutes and religious congregations, lay people, young people, single and married people, friends and relatives... you give yourselves, your time, talent and resources in countless ways, drawn to participate in the charism of Saint Eugene. We are united as a great Oblate Family on this feast of Mary Immaculate, on which we begin the third year of the Oblate Triennium. We journey forward to the 200th Jubilee of the Congregation hungering for a profound conversion to Jesus Christ. We give you thanks for your support, love and missionary lives. We count on your prayers for us. Happy feast day to all of you!

Mary Immaculate, Mother of Mercy, pray for us!

Father Louis Lougen, OMI
December 8, 2015