

# THE OBLATE CAVALRY OF CHRIST

Robert Wright, O.M.I.



OBLATE  
HERITAGE

8



# THE OBLATE CAVALRY OF CHRIST

by  
Robert Wright, O.M.I.

**8**

Oblate Heritage Series  
O.M.I. General Postulation  
Rome, Italy  
1998

## **DEDICATION**

This booklet is dedicated with gratitude to the memory of Fr. Pierre Doyon, O.M.I., who did basic research on the history of the Cavalry of Christ. He died December 7, 1997. The Oblates in Texas will be celebrating 150 years of apostolic work in that State in 1999.

Translated by: Ernest Ruch, O.M.I.

Cover: Claude Tardiff, O.M.I.

Printed by: Tip. Città Nuova  
Largo Cistina di Svezia, 17  
00165 Roma (Italia)

## THE OBLATE CAVALRY OF CHRIST

The seven men in Roman collars and broad-brimmed hats, sitting astride their horses lined up side by side in front of the camera, patiently posed for their group picture to be taken on a sunny day in late January 1911. These Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate had travelled from their missions spread throughout the country bordering the Lower Rio Grande (Big River) in South Texas to help solemnize the blessing of yet one more Catholic church built and staffed by the Oblates. The photograph was for Fr. Ledvina, vice-president of the fledgling Extension Society which raised funds throughout the United States for poor missions within the country. He had come as the guest of Fr. Henri Constantineau, O.M.I. the first provincial of the Second United States (later Southern) Province of the Missionary Oblates, which had just been established in 1903. When the photograph appeared soon thereafter in the *Extension* magazine, it was entitled “the Cavalry of Christ.”



*The O.M.I. Cavalry of Christ, January 29, 1911.*

*L to R: Frs. Paul Hally, Julius Bornes, Jules Piat, Juanito Bretault, Jean Horeau, Eugene Regent, Henri Janvier.*

Thus was born an image and a title that were destined to become increasingly famous symbols of the first generations of Oblate missionary work along the Texas-Mexico border.

At the time the photograph was taken, this mounted group of men were only a small fraction of the 85 Oblates of the Southern Province. Within the previous eight years, the Oblates in Texas had expanded their ministries at a phenomenal rate reminiscent of the zeal of their founder, Eugene de Mazenod, seventy years earlier. They had moved far beyond their familiar bases along a 400-mile stretch of the Rio Grande bordering Mexico into almost every section of the vast state of Texas – from Dallas in the northeast to Houston in the southeast, from the central Hill Country above San Antonio to Big Spring and Midland in far West Texas. They had even expanded into central Mexico, and in a few years would enter New Mexico, Louisiana, and California.

The photograph of the “Cavalry of Christ” reveals how this astonishing growth could occur, in that it captures a truly historic transitional moment for the Oblate personnel in Texas. Of that group of seven men, five had been ordained within the previous decade. They were part of the new infusion of young Oblates from Europe who made the expansion in ministries possible. The other two men in the photograph, “Padre Juanito” Bretault and “Padre Julio” Piat, were the last remaining Oblates to have entered the Texas mission before 1880. Eight other veterans of the founding generation had died in the very same years that the new young Oblates in the photograph were beginning their ministry.

The new recruits arriving in the first decade of the 1900s were able to build upon the solid foundations of fifty years of Oblate labour in South Texas. Fathers Bretault, Piat, and their companions in the first generation of Oblates in Texas had gained a well-deserved reputation among both clergy and laity as zealous and devoted missionaries, particularly among the Mexican-origin people on both sides of the



international border. Those Oblates had indeed been the Cavalry of Christ among God's people, ranging far and wide in the more remote areas of Texas and at times in Mexico, and often beset by external and internal difficulties that threatened the very life of their Mission. As the first historian of the worldwide Oblate congregation wrote, their story "*will be something of a novel... War, hurricanes, revolutions, yellow fever, drought, calamities of all kinds, heroism of the Apostles, martyrs of duty and charity, nothing will be missing.*" The following is a brief account of the first years of that story.

### A Bold Initiative

For the first few decades after their initial arrival in Texas in 1849, the remoteness and the difficulties which the Oblates encountered often hampered their efforts and made them an almost constant cause of concern for their founder, Bishop de Mazenod. It had only been eight years since De Mazenod had sent the first Oblates from France to Canada, in a bold move that launched his young congregation into overseas missionary work. Now he received the news of the



*Fr. Pierre Telmon, O.M.I.*

equally bold step being initiated by Pierre Telmon, one of his missionaries in Canada. Telmon had received permission to make a foundation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in the United States, but everyone had in mind some place in the northeastern states close to the Oblate foundations in eastern Canada. The attempt at Pittsburgh had not been successful, however, and while Telmon was back in Canada he met the visiting Bishop Odin of Galveston, who was trying to recruit religious workers for Texas. Telmon agreed to go to Texas and took along four

other Oblates without waiting for permission from France. In actuality this was equivalent to accepting another overseas foundation, since it was at the opposite end of the North American continent from Canada. Although informed belatedly, nevertheless Bishop de Mazenod allowed the foundation to go forward.

The Texas which awaited Father Telmon's first little band of Oblates consisted of two very different territories in demographic, cultural, and even environmental terms. In the original Texas stretching eastward from San Antonio to the Louisiana border and including the new towns of Galveston, Houston, and Austin, there were several major rivers, more abundant rainfall, and more verdant land. The great majority of the population was Anglo American, with a large African slave presence and increasingly significant European immigration. English was the common language, with some European-language usage.

The other half of Texas, stretching south and west to the Rio Grande, included such old Mexican towns as Laredo and El Paso and such new towns as Corpus Christi, Brownsville, Roma, and Eagle Pass. All these towns, except for Corpus Christi, were situated along the Rio Grande River, and Corpus Christi itself was located on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Most of the population in this Rio Grande country, other than the various Indian tribes, was of Mexican origin. The very small minority of mostly European immigrants took on the prevalent Mexican language and culture, and the Mexican peso remained the currency of the land.

The five Oblates who arrived in Texas in December 1849 were destined for the new town of Brownsville at the southern tip of Texas, where the Rio Grande emptied into the Gulf of Mexico. Fr. Telmon, Fr. Alexander Soulerin, and Bro. Menthe proceeded there immediately as the first persons representing the Diocese of Galveston to take over responsibility for the Texas side of the Lower Rio Grande country. Up to then the Mexican parishes across the river had served both sides. In the area confided to the Oblates'



care there were an estimated 9,000-10,000 Catholics, almost all Mexican with a small number of European and American immigrants. This was the greatest number of Catholics in any mission district in Texas.



*Fr. Augustin Gaudet, O.M.I.*

Fr. Augustin Gaudet and scholastic Br. Gélot went temporarily to Galveston until the situation in Brownsville could be adequately arranged. Located on the upper Gulf coast, Galveston was the major Texas port of entry and the episcopal see of the diocese. Gaudet and Gélot were still at Galveston in August 1850, since the Oblates at Brownsville had encountered very little financial support. By then Gaudet had become the only priest in Galveston. He complained that the situation was beyond his

strength and capacity, since he was still far from becoming adept at English.

In Brownsville things had been so difficult that the missionaries had been unsure from one day to the next whether they would be able to remain. In September things finally began to be more promising and De Mazenod's official approval of the new mission foundation arrived. Ironically, however, that same month the Oblate General Council in France, unaware of the improved situation, decided to recall Gaudet and Soulerin back to Canada due to the "isolated and perilous position" about which those two priests had written. Telmon was allowed to remain in "his foundation" with the deacon Gélot. But when Gaudet and Soulerin obediently left Texas in early November, the foundation quickly unravelled. Brother Menthe apparently

departed at the same time, and the scholastic Gélot opted to apply for the diocesan priesthood rather than join Telmon in Brownsville. Left completely on his own, Telmon sailed back to France in late January 1851.

*“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth”* (I Cor. 3:6). Though the bold initiative of Telmon to plant an Oblate missionary foundation in Texas had apparently failed, in actuality a seed had been planted that germinated within the year. Bishop Odin, impressed by the work the Oblates had accomplished in Galveston and Brownsville, was very desirous of having them back in both places. When he embarked on a begging tour in Europe later that year, he headed for Marseilles to petition Bishop de Mazenod personally. Undoubtedly, Fr. Telmon, now back in France but in poor health, added his encouragement. On November 14, 1851, the Founder agreed to send a group of Oblates back to Texas with much greater responsibilities than they had undertaken previously.



*Bishop John Mary Odin, C.M.  
First Bishop of Galveston*

It is remarkable that for such multifaceted and demanding tasks, De Mazenod selected his newest recruits, with only one of them having even three years of experience in ministry. There were six priests and one Brother – Jean Marie Verdet, Etienne Vignolle, Jean Marie Gaye, Pierre Parisot, Pierre Keralum, Rigomer Hyppolite Olivier, and Brother Pierre Roudet – the largest group of missionaries De Mazenod had ever sent forth at one time. They were all very young, ranging from 24 to 34 years old. All but Verdet

were just finishing their Oblate formation, with Bro. Roudet professing his vows in December and the other five clerics preparing for ordination in February 1852. Although only 26 years old himself, Verdet was chosen to be the superior of the missionary band since he alone had any experience, and that barely three years, as an Oblate missionary priest in France.

In hindsight, De Mazenod chose very well. Bishop Odin praised their selection as excellent, remarking that “*there is nothing extraordinary among them in regard to talents, but they all appear to be of good spirit.*” The youth, dedication, and perseverance of this original “Cavalry of Christ” (seven men, just as in the famous 1911 photograph of a future generation) destined them to have a long and profound impact on the Oblate mission in Texas, where they all remained until their deaths. Four of them worked until the end of the century; two others ministered twenty and thirty years respectively. Only one had a very premature death after just four years in Texas.

As the young missionary group was preparing to leave for Texas, Bishop Odin suggested that the Brownsville foundation be postponed, since he had received word in France that the Lower Rio Grande country was in turmoil due to a revolution on the Mexico side of the river. Such turmoil would unfortunately become a repeated experience of the Oblates along the border. Consequently, all the Oblates proceeded first to Galveston, where they arrived in May 1852 and dedicated themselves to studying English and Spanish.

Bishop Odin was not mistaken in his assessment of the potential for ministry among the Mexican people in several of his new Oblate recruits. But he certainly had other needs as well. The Church in Texas had to attend to a very diverse immigrant population. There was an urgent need to establish Catholic education and even, Odin hoped, a seminary where foreign seminarians could be acculturated to Texas and local youth could be trained for the ministry.

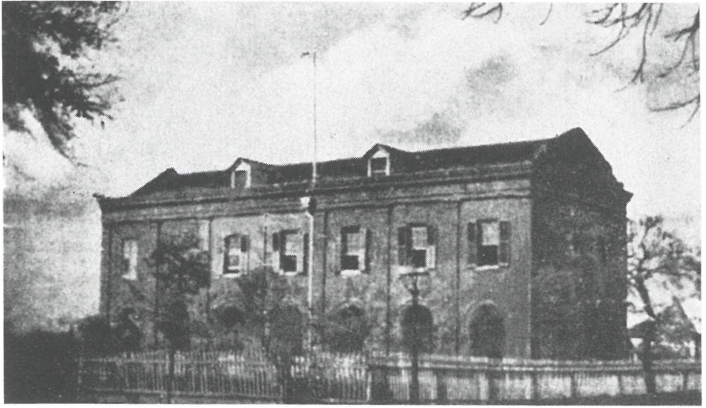
These goals had been written into the contract between Bishop Odin and the Oblate Founder. As was clear from the ministries in France which Bishop de Mazenod accepted for the Oblates, the Founder had a deep interest in the training of future priests, and it was this same motivation which led him to accept the proposed combination of “college” and seminary in Texas. This combination was typical of new dioceses in the United States at that time, in the hopes that the college income would help to support the seminary at the same time that the seminarians could assist in teaching at the college and thus keep the cost of faculty lower.

In view of the pastoral needs and the various Oblates’ perceived talents and interests, therefore, it is not surprising that Father Verdet selected Fathers Gaye and Olivier and Brother Roudet to go with him to recommence the Oblate foundation in Brownsville in October 1852. Fathers Parisot, Vignolle, and Keralum remained in Galveston to work toward the founding of the college-seminary as well as to help provide pastoral care. Within six months Keralum, who had been an architect and craftsman before entering the Oblates, was transferred to Brownsville to help plan the construction envisioned there.

## Galveston and Educational Ministry

In Galveston the college-seminary project proved to be a frustrating effort. The young Oblates were inexperienced and had limited English ability. Efforts were made to remedy these weaknesses by sending other Oblates from Canada, but one of the most capable ones, Fr. Baudrand, died in an epidemic of yellow fever only a few months after his arrival. An ambitious construction project was not completed until 1855, when the college finally began classes.

In October 1856 Father Gaudet returned from Canada to Galveston, site of his initial labours in 1850, as the superior of the Oblate house there. He saw immediately that the Oblates were really only directing what he called “a primary school,” and declared that the missionaries should have nothing to do with it. Almost no native vocations to the



*St. Joseph's College. Built by Fr. Parisot in 1865.*

priesthood from Texas would be discovered for another two decades, and Bishop Odin sent any foreign clerics needing more than their last few months of studies to the Vincentian seminary in Missouri. Furthermore, the Oblates found it very difficult to provide suitable personnel who were both fluent in English and good teachers. Questioning the college as a suitable Oblate ministry, the Oblates in Texas asked that it be relinquished to the diocese.

In response Bishop Odin pleaded that Catholic education was indeed a missionary work within the context of United States society at that time. Bishop de Mazenod and his Council responded sympathetically but in basic concurrence with their missionaries in Texas. In June 1857 they decided to relinquish the staffing of the college. While two of the Oblates at Galveston were reassigned back to Canada, five were transferred to Brownsville.

When Father Verdet and his fellow Oblates set out for Brownsville in October 1852 to refound the Oblate mission there, they were encouraged by Bishop Odin to extend their pastoral visits as far as they could, from the nearby seaport of Point Isabel all the way up the Rio Grande to Laredo. This was thoroughly in keeping with the mind of the Oblate Founder, who would write in regard to Texas several years later:



“Our Fathers are not involved merely in performing curial functions. I never accept those functions on their own and only allow our Fathers to accept them insofar as they permit the Fathers to remain religious, to live as such, and especially to be essentially missionaries”. As soon as Father Keralum arrived in Brownsville from Galveston in March 1853, Father Gaye headed for Laredo to help the first non-Mexican priests assigned there to orient



themselves during their first month of ministry. He then spent two months travelling slowly back down the river visiting the towns of Roma and Rio Grande City and many small *ranchos*. Some typical *ranchos* closer to Brownsville were described by Verdet:

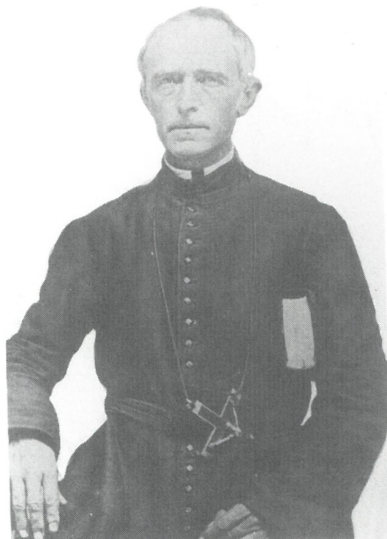
“Every two or three leagues one finds a few houses, or rather thatched-roof huts.... The walls of these houses are



usually made of reeds, the roof of the fan-shaped branches of a small palm .. called a palmito. These clusters are called ranchos. The Mexicans who dwell in them cultivate a little corn, sometimes sugarcane”.

Gaye was thus the first Oblate to travel any great distance from Brownsville along the missionary route that would eventually become known in Texas as the “Oblate Trail.” But, as Verdet observed, even the smallest outings demanded equestrian skills: *“The missionary here must be a good horseman, otherwise he would be a prisoner in his house.”*

Certain Protestants were diligently spreading Bibles and anti-Catholic religious tracts among the Mexicans in Brownsville. Bishop Odin recognized a *“lively but little instructed faith”* among the people, and saw Catholic education as the only way to protect them. Accordingly, in 1853 the Oblates helped the newly arrived Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament to build a convent-school in Brownsville, which was intended to compete with a recently initiated Protestant girls’ school. The Oblates themselves briefly conducted a simple school for boys. They suspended it, however, giving as their reason the adverse affect it had on the health of the Oblates who taught in it.



*Fr. Jean Marie Gaye, O.M.I.*

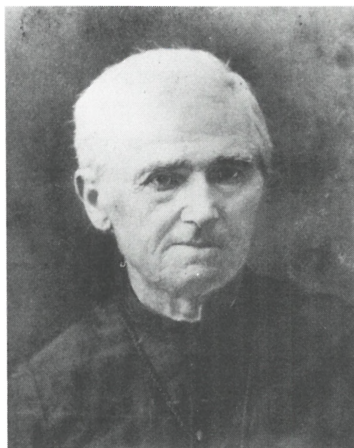
In 1854 Verdet and then Olivier were the first priests to journey north from Brownsville to visit the scattered

## The Roma Mission

ranches of "la Costa." "The Coast" was the inland country of the Brownsville missionary district which extended north of the Rio Grande along the Gulf Coast for over 100 miles toward Corpus Christi. The very capable "Padre Ipólito" Olivier was similar to Father Gaye in being an unheralded founder of Oblate ministries among the Mexicans. Somewhat brusque in character, he was a dedicated worker who loved the ministry of the ranches and served well in them. He was also a good and conscientious preacher, who with the passing of time would be requested by bishops and priests to contribute to "missions" or revivals in various towns in other parts of South Texas and northeastern Mexico.

In the same year the Oblates decided to establish a missionary residence in Roma in order to be more available to the people upriver. Roma was 100 miles from Brownsville in a straight line, but much more distant following the twists and turns of the river trail. Father Gaye began the new mission centre, where he was joined a few months later by Keralum. The zeal of this first small band of the Cavalry of Christ apparently knew no limits. They were beginning to be called fairly often to help provide ministry on the Mexican side of the river, especially at Matamoros across from Brownsville. Matamoros was by far the largest city along the Lower Rio Grande and a center of international trade with the interior of Mexico. The new bishop of the diocese of northeastern Mexico expressed interest in an Oblate foundation in his territory.

By February 1855 Gaye left Keralum in charge of the Roma mission so that he could travel further into



*Br. Peter Roudet, O.M.I.*

Mexico to raise funds for the church construction in Brownsville. By the end of that year he began to help out the Mexican priest in Matamoros for several weeks at a time, with Olivier taking a turn later. In Brownsville itself, the Oblate who would provide the most enduring presence was Brother Roudet. Helping to supervise an Oblate-established brickyard, he contributed to the construction of many Catholic edifices there. At his death in Brownsville in 1907 he was the last member of De Mazenod's missionary band of 1852.

The Lower Rio Grande country was markedly affected by both its Mexican past and the reality of having become very recently a major international border. The Oblates approached this country with definite views of its missionary challenges derived from Fathers Telmon and Soulerin and Bishop Odin himself. Odin declared that the "laxity and inertia" of the Mexican clergy were responsible for what he viewed as the "deplorable" state of religion on the Mexican side of the river. Thus Bishop de Mazenod wrote to Father Verdet in early 1852: "*There is an immense amount of good to be done in that country facing Mexico, where the presence of only one good priest corrects the habits of the people.*"

After less than a year in Brownsville, Verdet's comments on this subject revealed both the power of preconceptions and the limited perspective of a newcomer:

*"This population is all Catholic but extremely ignorant and more superstitious than religious. They have many faults, but some good qualities without forgetting their vices. With patience one can accomplish much among them.... They are very ignorant but at least they are Catholic and they glory in being so".*

Gaye's reports from his ranch visits were more positive. He described the Mexican people as having a lively and ardent faith, an inviolable attachment to their religion, and absolute respect for the missionary. In contrast, Verdet had

nothing good to say of the European and American immigrants along the Rio Grande:

*“The foreign population of Americans, French, and Spaniards is a collection of everything one can imagine as bad. The French above all stand out by their impiety and their sovereign contempt for everything that is sacred. We have a lot to be ashamed of in our compatriots”.*

While the Oblates indeed tended to view most Mexican priests along the border with disapproval, they did have praise for a few. Molded by the strong missionary reform movement in the French Church, their expectations of priestly conduct stressed very strict if not puritanical behaviour and zealous missionary activity. They were not well prepared to understand some legitimate differences in pastoral care and priestly conduct in northern Mexico due to both past tradition and current social turmoil. On the other hand, they clearly encountered certain Mexican clergy who were indeed scandalous by most people’s criteria. Whichever the case, as a general rule they sought to maintain good relations with the priests on the Mexican side.

Just as things appeared to be developing quite well, however, the little Oblate band experienced a series of difficult trials. A newly ordained diocesan priest who had come as a seminarian from France and had entered the Oblates in Galveston made his religious profession in Brownsville in 1854 only to die in an epidemic in early 1855. In June 1856 the Oblates sadly turned the Roma district over to the diocese at the orders of their superiors in France. Bishop de Mazenod and his Council deemed that the distance of the one or two Oblates in Roma from their few confrères in Brownsville was detrimental to the community life of all. While the five young Oblates along the Rio Grande could see the Founder’s point, they regretted leaving the Roma district where they saw much more good happening than in Brownsville. The missionaries were still adjusting to this great disappointment when one of their number, in fact their

superior Father Verdet, drowned at sea in a shipwreck in August 1856.

The insistence of the Oblates in Texas in 1857 that they be allowed to pull out of Galveston becomes even more understandable in the context of these events. Rather than becoming demoralized by the series of setbacks and the increasing needs along the Rio Grande, the Oblates decided to withdraw from Galveston in order to once again have the personnel in the Valley which would allow for missionary expansion. The Founder concurred in this reasoning, and



*Fr. Pierre Parisot, O.M.I.*

reassigned Fathers Gaudet, Parisot, Vignolle, Hipolyte de Lustrac, and Brother George Copeland to Brownsville in August-September 1857. "Padre Esteban" Vignolle, a person of limited talents and a difficult personality, would help insure a regular priestly presence in Brownsville itself for decades, serving the Mexican community there for all but a few years until his death in 1902.

The last Oblates from Galveston had just arrived in Brownsville in October 1857 when an unexpected golden opportunity appeared to present itself. Bishop Odin, unable at the moment to provide qualified diocesan substitutes for the English and Spanish-speaking parishes in San Antonio, asked the Oblates to care for both those communities temporarily. Rather than unpacking, therefore, Father Parisot went with Father Gaye to San Antonio. To their disappointment as well as that of Bishop de Mazenod, Odin did not extend to them an invitation to stay there permanently. This would have given them a strong foundation in the most populous city in Texas at the time. Rather, in mid-1858 Odin was again able to send his own

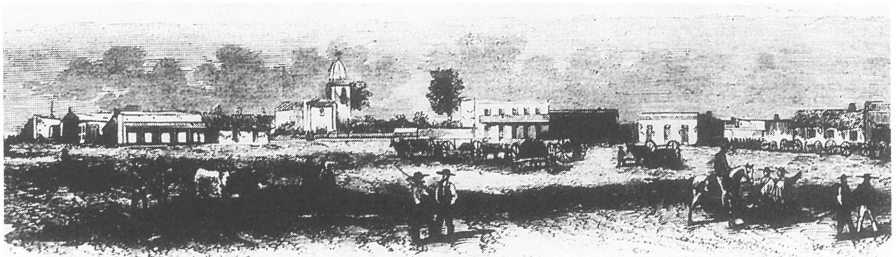


The “French  
Intervention”  
of the  
Oblates in  
Mexico

diocesan priests, and Gaye and Parisot headed back to the remote southern tip of the state.

At this juncture, there were nine Oblates, including six of the Cavalry of 1852, crowded into the small Brownsville residence! But another exciting foundation was already being cautiously set in place. Father Músquiz, the pastor of Matamoros and also the ecclesiastical Dean of northern Tamaulipas, was impressed by his Oblate neighbours across the river and the pastoral help which they had been providing him for several years. As soon as Father Gaye returned from San Antonio, Músquiz had him preach a month-long mission at La Gavia in Tamaulipas. Then, in view of his own desire to retire, Músquiz worked out a personal agreement with the Oblates to make Gaye the *de facto* administrator of the Matamoros parish beginning on July 23, 1858.

This ambitious foundation had a dark pall hanging over it from the beginning, and in hindsight that pall’s name was “French.” The Oblates would administer the important parish of Matamoros for eight stormy years, from July 1858 through June 1866. Far from being coincidental, those dates embrace one of the most bitter periods in Mexican history, that of the War of the Reform and the French Intervention in Mexico. This was in many ways a merciless struggle over the basic economic, social, and religious structure of that country. Often the Oblates in Matamoros would literally find themselves in the crossfire of competing armies, and some would be thrown into jail.



*Matamoros, Plaza de Allende, Sanctuary of Our Lady of Refuge.  
The first Oblate Work in Mexico.*



During this period of bitter civil conflict in Mexico, the Oblates as French ecclesiastics became thoroughly identified with the parties favouring the institutional Church and the French Intervention in Mexico. It was a foregone conclusion that their ministry in Matamoros would be buffeted by the political winds and that, when their side eventually went down to shattering defeat, they would have to exit in humiliating fashion, indeed, escape with their lives.

But in 1858 and 1860 they had no way of knowing how things would turn out. And Mexico, storied, different, mysterious, tumultuous, challenging – and almost universally perceived by outsiders as “*Catholic, yes, but almost completely abandoned in regard to religion*” during this time — was a dreamed-about field of evangelization for zealous Christian reformers, Catholic and Protestant. The Oblates, young and old, in Texas and in France, were no exception, and were quite conscious that they were poised at the very threshold of this field. When apprised of the possibility of staffing the Matamoros parish, the Oblate General Council rushed back its “full and warm” approval.

## A Team in Mexico

The General Council backed up its verbal support with action. Enthused by reports of the great success of the missions preached by Olivier, Parisot, and others in several towns in Tamaulipas, and keenly aware that two Oblates had been lost to an epidemic in 1858, De Mazenod sent Fathers François Sivy and Joseph Rieux in December 1859. These two were followed by Fathers John Eugene Schumacher, Jean Maurel, and Jean-Marie Clos in 1861. Sivy and Schumacher would themselves be lost to yellow fever in 1862 along with Brother Copeland; but Rieux, Maurel, and Clos would all live into the 1900s.

The new men immediately threw themselves into the work. Fathers Clos and Keralum gave small missions to thirteen villages in Tamaulipas in one tour alone in 1865. Although the Oblates were very disappointed when Gaudet, their Superior, was only able to obtain Brother Pierre Charret and Brother Robert from Father Fabre’s General Council in

1864, their faces brightened with the arrival of Fathers Jean-Marie Jaffrès, Joseph Malmartel, and Pierre Bonnemaison at the end of 1865. These latter were again sent especially in view of the mission in Mexico.



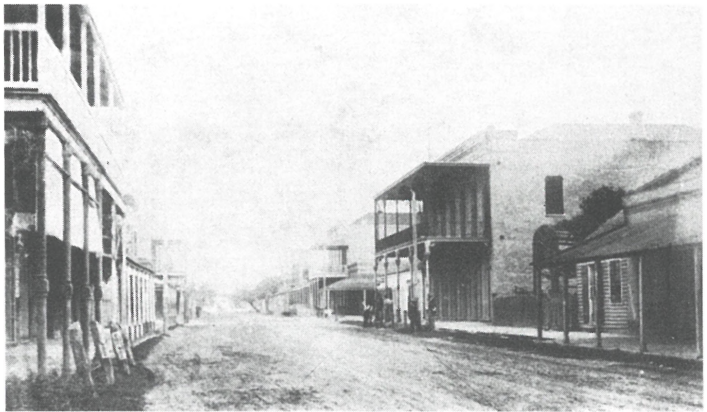
*Fr. Jean Maurel, O.M.I.*

Various parishes in Mexico were indeed experiencing at least temporary shortages of clergy during this time due to the disturbed conditions of the country. For this reason Father Parisot made several lengthy visits to Reynosa, halfway up the Rio Grande between Matamoros and Roma, in 1861. But the parishes in important cities like Matamoros and Ciudad Victoria were coveted by the clergy of the diocese, who did not want to see the Oblates permanently established in these places. Even less so were the Oblates desired by the often anticlerical and anti-French political authorities of the time, who finally succeeded in banishing them from Ciudad Victoria in 1860 and Matamoros in 1866.

In 1864 the Oblates agreed at the request of the bishop in Mexico to accept Agualeguas, a small parish with a formerly famous shrine to Our Lady which was in the hills distant from any major population centres. Again Father Gaye was chosen to make this new Oblate foundation. Here the Oblates finally found a post in Mexico which no one else coveted. Gaye, assisted most of the time by Rieux, remained serving Agualeguas and other communities in the district for twenty years as his strength gradually waned. It was with great sadness on his part and that of the people that he and the Oblates finally left this rural haven in 1884, when it was decided to relinquish Agualeguas as part of the organization of the new United States Province.

## Renewed Trials and Trails on the Lower Rio Grande

If the situation for the Oblates was unstable and at times perilous on the Mexican side of the border from 1858 to 1866, it was not any less so on the Texas side during the same period and beyond. After their withdrawal from Roma, the Oblate work in Texas itself was confined to the vast district of Brownsville. The blows began when the missionaries' joy over their first native novice, the well-regarded Brother candidate José Maria Garcia, turned into grief over his death from yellow fever in 1858. Father de Lustrac fell victim to the same epidemic barely a week later. Five Oblates died in the Texas mission in as many years, causing Bishop de Mazenod to exclaim: "*Oh cruel mission of Texas, how you wound my poor soul!*" The decimation would continue at the same horrendous pace, as Schumacher, Sivy, and Copeland fell to yellow fever in 1862.



*Brownsville: Street Scene in the 1880's*

In 1859 the Brownsville district was ravaged by the raiding and pillaging occasioned by the Cortina uprising for Mexican rights in that district and the armed responses to the uprising. Things had barely become more normal when the Civil War broke out in the United States in 1861 and quickly made its way to the Lower Rio Grande. The Oblates would be almost completely isolated for the four-year duration of the conflict, and would experience the ravages of competing armies in their midst.

In 1861 the missionary band also lost their venerated Founder and the great friend of Texas, Bishop de Mazenod. His solicitous care would be sorely missed as the new Oblate General Administration led by Father Fabre began to look at Texas much more warily, especially after the demise of the Matamoros mission in 1866. In the same year of 1861 Bishop Odin of the Galveston or Texas diocese was transferred to the Archbishopric of New Orleans. But his successor, Bishop Dubuis, was a veteran French missionary in Texas like the Oblates and every bit as dedicated as Odin to the good of the people and the Church.

After the Oblates were forced to withdraw from Matamoros in 1866, they clearly had more than enough personnel to take on a new mission. Ten priests and three Brothers were crowded into Brownsville, with two more priests at Agualeguas. With the end of the Civil War the previous year, Father Parisot had been able to start a boys' school in Brownsville with two lay teachers. But the school would have a checkered career, sputtering along at times and usually a bone of contention among the Oblates in regard to the allocation of resources and especially personnel.

One obvious choice was near at hand. The immense Roma mission district upriver was being served by only one diocesan priest, and the Oblates had regretted leaving there back in 1856. Furthermore, Roma was the closest point in Texas to Agualeguas. Thus it was that "Padre Juan" Clos, "Padre Juan" Jaffrès, and "el Hermano Pedrito" Charret assumed responsibility for Roma in March 1867. This huge



*Fr. Jean Clos, O.M.I.*

district included nearby Rio Grande City and extended halfway to Brownsville on one side, two thirds of the way to Laredo on the other, and around fifty miles inland from the river. The names of Clos and Charret would become synonymous with the Roma mission, where they would serve until their deaths forty years later.

In October 1867 a hurricane devastated Brownsville, damaging one Catholic building and destroying another which had to be rebuilt. A more widespread and lasting affliction, however, was the raiding by both Mexicans and Anglo “cowboys” which plagued the countryside during the unsettled decade of political and economic adjustment after the Civil War. But the most serious problem for the Oblate missionaries which began to manifest itself at this time was an internal one, that of missionary vision and leadership. When two new priests arrived at the end of 1867 and joined the Oblates at Roma the following year, that still left eight priests and two Brothers all assigned to Brownsville. Even though the number of personnel in Brownsville remained about the same over the next sixteen years, no new foundation was undertaken during all that time.

This was the external manifestation of a long internal struggle, a collective dark night of the soul, borne by the Oblates of Texas for almost two decades. The Cavalry of 1852 and their companions — Clos, Charret, Maurel, Jaffrès, and later Malmartel, Desaulès, Bretault, Pitoye, Piat, and Michel — were to a man strongly dedicated to the Texas Mission to which they had been sent, and they wished to see it expand in response to new opportunities and challenges. But the new Superior General, Father Fabre, and his Council in Paris were reassessing the worldwide Oblate commitments in view of the many — too many — requests coming from all the Oblate mission foundations which had been undertaken in rapid succession in the previous twenty years. From everywhere came urgent pleas for more personnel in order to continue and indeed expand the ministries begun.





*Immaculate Conception Church, Brownsville.  
Architect: Fr. Pierre Keralum, O.M.I.*

Meeting in 1863 with Father Gaudet present, the General Council surveyed the very uncertain situation faced by the Texas-based Oblates in Mexico, which nation they considered “the future of the mission.” The Council acknowledged that “very serious motives force us to examine the very opportuneness of the Rio Grande missions.” Their principal motive was the demand for personnel throughout the Congregation. Only Gaudet’s argument that a retreat from Texas “*would produce an unfavourable impression in America*” persuaded the Council against withdrawal then and there. Other than



Brownsville, the Oblates' only foundations in the United States at this time were Buffalo and Plattsburgh in New York and Tulalip in Washington state, all on the Canadian border. Thus as a Congregation the Oblates were still very much on the margins of United States society. In view of this, the Council decided that "*we will keep what we already have, but that we will not accept new works or establishments*" in the Texas Mission.

In effect, a large question mark was thus placed over the Mission. The forced withdrawal of the Oblates from Matamoros in 1866 eliminated the only future which the Council had found worth pursuing. They would accept the foundations in Agualeguas and Roma, but only since these were really minor extensions within the same basic mission territory, and sufficient personnel were already in place. They would even continue to send a new Oblate or two every once in a while to demonstrate good will toward the Oblates in the Mission. But in closing the door to any expansion, the Council in reality, whether it realized it or not, was saying the Mission had no real claim on the Congregation's future.

For obvious reasons of morale, these conclusions were not shared with the men in the trenches, probably not even with their Superior, Father Gaudet. Gaudet and the others, however, were not slow in guessing the direction things were taking. As their requests to make new foundations were denied one by one and as they received only a minimal number of new personnel, they watched with deep chagrin and mounting frustration as religious congregations just entering Texas took on promising new fields in the rapidly developing areas of the state. Meanwhile they, the pioneers who had endured the early trials, remained confined to the struggling and isolated mission which they loved but which could not of itself sustain an Oblate future. Sadly, the General Council would leave them in this demoralizing situation for twenty years. As they sensed the crisis developing around their mission and Gaudet's deepening disheartenment, the Oblates on the Rio Grande lost confidence in him. Tensions increased and

disagreements became more vocal. The men wanted an enthusiastic and strong spokesperson who loved the Mexican people and the Mission as deeply as they did, involved himself in the ministry and gave it direction, and brought them into his counsel.

It was during this time of extended crisis that the particular drama of the death of one Oblate became symbolic of his own Oblate spirit to his contemporaries and, in a more general way, of that of his companions in the Cavalry of Christ. "Padre Pedrito" Keralum's subsequent fame did not derive from his skills as an architect and craftsman, with which he helped to build where other Oblates had laid the foundations. It came, rather, from his evident personal holiness and his manner of dying.

Father Keralum was known during his lifetime for his piety, humility, generosity, and dedication to visiting the scattered Mexican ranches. Since he was not a good preacher, he was rarely in the pulpit at Brownsville, but rather often on his horse touring the countryside. A visiting Oblate Assistant General in 1868 wrote that Keralum, "*being of a timid character, was not rigorous enough to dominate the Mexicans*



*Fr. Pierre Yves Keralum, O.M.I.*

*and impose respect and obedience upon them.*" Perhaps this helps explain the people's affection for their 'Padre Pedrito' and the same Visitor's observation that "*he does much good.*"

By 1872 at the age of fifty five Keralum's failing health and eyesight made his fellow Oblates anxious about him

continuing his missionary circuits, especially since he had already become lost on at least one occasion and barely arrived at a welcoming ranch. When Keralum never returned from a missionary trip in November 1872, foul play was suspected from bandits raiding the area at that time. The mystery of his disappearance was finally resolved ten years later, when some cowhands came across his remains in a remote section of the brush country, identifiable by his undisturbed missionary belongings. He had become lost rather than a victim of violence. In this dramatic death bespeaking arduous journeys and unflagging service to the poor and abandoned, the Cavalry of Christ found its spirit epitomized.

When it became clear in 1873 that a new Superior would have to be chosen, the General Council sent the highly regarded Father Florent Vandenberghe. Unfortunately, this only made the situation worse. On the Rio Grande Vandenberghe showed no affection for the Mission, scorned all that had been done, showed an exaggerated preference for the Anglo Americans, kept to himself without becoming involved in the ministry, lacked candour and failed to take the other Oblates into his counsel, and in his turn became quite discouraged. The majority of the Fathers objected strongly to his diverting of personnel and resources to the English-speaking college effort in Brownsville at the expense of the ministry to the ranches. The Galveston question had returned!

It should be acknowledged that Vandenberghe, had a very unenviable task. His community in Texas assumed – incorrectly, it turns out – that he had been



*Fr. Florent Vandenberghe,  
O.M.I.*

sent to find a way for the Oblates to leave Texas. But they were not far off the mark, for the General Council recorded in their private minutes in July 1874 that they “*would not be opposed, should an occasion arise, to quit this mission for good.*” In Texas the tension and murmuring only increased.

What is most remarkable is the near unanimity and determination of these Oblates, no matter how long ago or how recently they had arrived on the Rio Grande, in insisting that the Mission continue in the face of its lack of support by their Superiors. Two Assistant Generals came to assess the situation in 1868 and 1877. Both heard the complaints of abandonment and a fierce desire to continue. Father Soullier in 1877 failed in an effort to have the Jesuits take over the Mission despite the protests of the Oblates. After Father Vandenberghe died of yellow fever in 1882, Father Malmartel, his first assistant, received a letter addressed to Vandenberghe from a Belgian religious congregation, stating that they accepted the Mission. Malmartel, a strong defender of the Rio Grande mission, neither answered the letter nor shared it with his Oblate superiors.

During the twenty years in which their beloved Mission was under a suspended sentence of death, the Cavalry of Christ forged ahead as best they could on their own. We have already noted how in 1867 they were allowed to accept the vast mission district of Roma. But later requests for new establishments — San Diego (a town halfway to San Antonio), Reynosa and Camargo across the Rio Grande from the Oblate missions, and even San Antonio and Eagle Pass — were regularly refused by either the General Administration or Vandenberghe.

In the 1870s the Oblates began facing renewed efforts by Protestant groups to establish Mexican congregations at Brownsville, Rio Grande City, Agualeguas, and at various other points. Partially in response to this activity, an Oblate residence was established at Rio Grande City in 1880. Anticlerical Masons were also organizing opposition to



*Texas Mission Church and Parishioners*

Catholic efforts. Beginning in 1875 Fathers Olivier, Jaffrès and Clos began preaching missions in the other parishes of South Texas: San Diego, Laredo, Corpus Christi, San Antonio. Within the territory of the Oblate Mission itself, more chapels began to be built, mostly of brick or stone, in various outlying stations. A hurricane in 1880 severely damaged the ones nearer the coast. In the years 1877-1878 the Fathers provided services to the parishes across the river in Mexico which were temporarily without priests due to the troubled political situation.

**The Fruits  
of their  
Labour**

Ironically - or should one say providentially? - it was the death of Father Vandenberghe in 1882 which finally led to the resolution of the long-questioned status of the Texas Mission. Father Aimé Martinet, an Assistant General who was visiting in Canada at the time, immediately requested to go visit Texas. In him the Cavalry of Christ finally had an advocate. He had already told the Superior General that in his opinion "*in the General Council and in practice we have considered Texas too much as a mission forsaken and condemned.*" He proposed instead that the Council "*do our utmost to give the Mission new life and prosperity*" by



giving “freer rein to our missionaries” and “taking into consideration the English-speaking element in an English-speaking country.”



*Santa  
Maria  
Mission  
Chapel  
near  
Brownsville.  
Built  
in 1881  
by  
Fr. Louis  
Pitoye,  
O.M.I.*

This clear and far-sighted vision is precisely what Martinet set out to implement. Once he arrived in Brownsville in December 1882, he realized that such a poor and relatively isolated mission territory and one so overwhelmingly Mexican needed to be allied with and strengthened by some solid English-speaking establishments in order to assure a future for the Oblates in the United States. To bring this about and make the Oblates more notably present in the rapidly developing nation, he proposed nothing less than forming a new United States Province.

## **A New Province**

This province was to be composed of the three flourishing houses in the Northeast established by the Canadian Province, the enduring missions along the Rio Grande, and



a new English-speaking foundation in thriving San Antonio that would bridge the two. In order to obtain St. Mary's Parish in San Antonio, the most influential parish in the city, Martinet agreed to take on the mostly Mexican-populated Eagle Pass mission in West Texas, which the Bishop had been eager for several years for the Oblates to accept.



*Fr. Aimé Martinet, O.M.I.,  
Assistant General.*

The proposal was breathtakingly captivating by its very audacity and broad vision: a province with its feet dangling in the tropical Mexican Rio Grande and its English-speaking head touching the icy land of Canada, with no body in between! Nobody, that is, if it were not for the crucial San Antonio link where the two

could come together. The proposed First American Province came into being in May 1883, and English-speaking Oblates from the Northeast were sent to make the Oblate foundation at St. Mary's in San Antonio the following year. That same year Father Olivier led the major Oblate entry into the Eagle Pass district encompassing the whole western section of the San Antonio Diocese. In one master stroke, Martinet set the future course which in just twenty years would lead to the creation of the Second American Province headquartered in San Antonio.

As Fathers Bretault and Piat posed on their horses for their picture with the new young Oblates that sunny winter day

in 1911, in the presence of the Provincial of their new Texas Province and the money man from Chicago, they could look back with pride on the fruit of their resolute labours and that of their companions. They had witnessed their beloved Rio Grande Mission pass from death to life, and now the Lower Rio Grande country itself was being transfigured into the booming “Magic Valley.” It was due to their devoted labour among the Mexican people that the Oblates were invited by appreciative bishops not only to San Antonio, but also to West Texas, the Hill Country, and now even Houston. Their confrères had recently returned to Mexico. Grateful laity to whom they had faithfully ministered through trying times in deep South Texas left or would leave them important endowments to continue their work: the Lomita lands in between Brownsville and Roma, the Kennedy bequest at the far northern edge of their original Brownsville mission.

There they were gathered, in fact, the old and new Cavalry of Christ, to dedicate a church in a new town named Mission in memory of their La Lomita chapel down the road. They were standing on the Lomita lands given to them in recognition of their ministry and sold by them to support the new demands of that ministry. Their thoughts must have turned to Verdet, Gaye, Olivier, Keralum, Roudet, Parisot, Vignolle, Clos, Maurel, Charret, Jaffrès, Pitoye – several only recently deceased – and, yes, even to Gaudet and Vandenberghe. For their part, Padre Juanito and Padre Julio may very well have offered yet another silent prayer of thanksgiving to Martinet, and exclaimed with another Apostle: “*Qué impenetrables las decisiones de Dios, y qué incomprensibles sus caminos!* How unsearchable are God’s judgments, and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom. 11:33).



## **OBLATE HERITAGE SERIES II**

### **1998**

- 7. Oblate Witnesses: 1831-1997**  
Sixty-eight Oblates who lost their lives in connection with their ministry
- 8. The Oblate Cavalry of Christ**  
Early mounted Oblate missionaries in Texas and Mexico
- 9. The Spanish Oblate Martyrs**  
Twenty-two Oblates shot in 1936 during the troubled times of Spain
- 10. Oblate Brothers Amid the Snow**  
Some Oblate Brothers who by example and work were outstanding missionaries
- 11. Oblate Victims in the Far North**  
Five Oblates - a Brother and four Priests - killed in the Canadian missions
- 12. Five Oblates of LaBrosse**  
In the intrigues of World War II, these five men were summarily executed
- 13. German Oblate Resistance**  
Faced with Nazism, forty-two German Oblates suffered for their resistance
- 14. Oblates Along the Mekong**  
Six Oblates shot as Communism spread throughout Laos

**Oblate General Postulation**  
**C.P. 9061**  
**00100 Roma-Aurelio**  
**Italy**