

Message to Province of France

March 2nd, 2011

Dear Brother Oblates of the Province of France,

I would like to thank Father Yves Chalvet-de-Récy, the Provincial Council and all of you for this invitation to be present at your assembly: “*Opération Vérité*”. It is very good to be here. When we think of the place of France in the Church it is with great honor. As Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, we are connected to a French man, Saint Eugene de Mazenod. As Oblates we are all rooted in the mother province of France. Our spirituality is linked to the French school of spirituality. We cherish deeply this heritage we have received from France.

It is a great honor for me to be here with you. I am very happy that I have come to France at this time in which we are preparing to celebrate the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the entrance into the fullness of life of Saint Eugene de Mazenod. You are the first Province of the Congregation that I come to visit in an official way. I have the Mission Cross of Saint Eugene with me and I would like to bless you with his cross.

I give thanks to God for the missionaries from France who have gone all over the world to preach the Gospel to the poor with missionary zeal, charity and courage. The life and mission of the Oblates from France is told and retold throughout the whole world. Thank you for this witness of life and for your faithfulness to Oblate values. You have been giving the Congregation enormous missionary energy for almost 200 years.

I would like to say two things to you: **First**, please listen to the calls to conversion from the recent Chapter. **Second**, please remember Father Eugene de Mazenod on August 15, 1822.

First: Listening to the Call of the Chapter

Our recent Chapter of September and October of last year was an event of grace for the Congregation. We were led by the Spirit to keep focused on conversion to Jesus Christ and Him Crucified. This is nothing less than the decision to embrace the very Gospel once again as our way of life: “Repent and believe in the Gospel!” What a beautiful surprise! We have recognized that our lives stand in need of change, growth and newness. We are not satisfied with ourselves. The Chapter was a perfect echo of the words of the Founder in his Preface to the Constitutions and Rules: “*They must constantly renew themselves in the grace of their vocation, living in a state of habitual self-denial and seeking at all times to reach the very summit of perfection*” (CC & RR, p. 21).

The Chapter members recognized the return to the Gospel itself and to the following of Jesus as the basis of our life. Our Constitutions and Rules reflect how Oblates live the following of Jesus and we need to revisit that little book. We perceive that it is not only the mission we do that is important, but it is also *how* we do that mission and *who we are* as we carry out the mission to which we have been called. More than our words and teaching, it is the witness of our lives that is our main instrument to preach the Good News to the poor. “*And how should men who want to follow in the footsteps of their divine Master Jesus Christ conduct themselves if they, in turn, are to won back the many souls who have thrown off his yoke? They must strive to be saints.*” (Preface, p. 21).

The Chapter called us to look at conversion to Jesus in various dimensions of our life: community, formation, mission, leadership/authority and financial stewardship. These are significant areas of our Oblate life that we are seeking to live in greater faithfulness to the Gospel. For me the question is whether we have the courage and energy for conversion so that we are radically changed in who we are, how we act and what we do. Will we allow the grace of God to give us a new birth? Do we have the daring to become the new creation in Jesus that began at Baptism? The call of the Chapter is nothing less than this!

For many years now the Chapters have given us the call to leave our home lands and cross borders as missionaries. The most challenging, and perhaps frightening border is the one that separates us from being who God has made us to be. The Chapter asked us to leave our land of Egypt which is known, comfortable and familiar and to journey together to the Promised Land of new life. It made the voice of Eugene de Mazenod present to us, calling us to live the full power of our oblation. That sums up the Chapter. We are tempted to say: "In this Chapter there is nothing new." Yet, if we engage in this process of conversion, we will become totally new!

Do we have Eugene's audacity to cross this border to be born anew by the Holy Spirit? Do we have the courage to open our lives to the grace of conversion? I believe so.

Second: Remembering Father de Mazenod on 15 August 1822

My confidence is based on the grace that Eugene received on 15 August 1822. At that time, the Founder was distressed, discouraged and saddened by various factors: many had entered the Missionaries of Provence, but many more had left; the opposition of the diocesan clergy to his new band of missionaries was constant; some bishops were exerting pressure on their priests to leave the Missionaries of Provence and return to their dioceses; Father de Mazenod struggled with his own temperament. At this time the Founder was feeling very insecure and worried about the future of his small group of missionaries. On the feast of the Assumption, while he blessed a statue of Mary Immaculate, he received a strong grace of complete confidence that his group was really the work of God and would yield great fruit for the Church.

He wrote to Father Tempier: *"Would that I could share with you all that I experienced in the way of consolation on this beautiful day devoted to Mary our Queen! I had not felt for a long time as much joy... I believe I owe to her also a special experience that I felt today; I will not go so far as to say more than ever, but certainly more than usual. I cannot describe it too well because it comprised several things but all related, however, to a single object, our dear Society. It seems to me that what I saw, what I could put my finger on, was that within the Society lies hidden the germ of very great virtues, and that the Society can achieve infinite good; I found it worthy, everything pleased me about it, I cherished its rules, its statutes; its ministry seemed sublime to me, as it is indeed. I found in our Society a sure means of salvation, even infallible, such is how it looked to me"* (to Father Temper on August 15, 1822).

The history of our religious Congregation has shown that the confidence Father de Mazenod was blessed with that August 15th was genuine. I believe that the grace he received continues to a source of blessing for us. It calls us to believe and to have hope that what the Chapter calls us to --- conversion --- is possible. Our Chapter reflected St. Eugene's Gospel daring, "nil liquendum inausum" in calling us to a radical change in our Oblate life. We have a life-giving source of grace in this experience of St. Eugene that confirms what we have been called to undertake by the Chapter. We can do what seems impossible. Mary journeys with us in the most difficult mission of all: crossing the border of our conversion.

I ask Mary Immaculate to intercede for all of the Oblates of the Province of France and for our entire Congregation. May we have the same unassailable hope and confidence she inspired in Saint Eugene so that we be open to hear the call of the Chapter and to respond whole-heartedly to the grace of conversion. This is a great grace: to believe in the possibility of conversion in our own lives and to cooperate with that grace so that we more deeply belong to God as holy missionaries preaching the Gospel to the poor. This is the call of the Chapter to us.

Thank you, each Oblate of the Province of France, for keeping alive the spirit of Saint Eugene de Mazenod in this French soil!

Louis Lougen, OMI
Superior General