

Hope, mercy and joy

Letter of the Superior General for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, 2019

L.J.C. et M.I.

Dear Brother Oblates and All our Sisters and Brothers living the Oblate Charism,

Several times, I have been asked by Oblates and lay people whether I have a close or special relationship with St. Eugene de Mazenod! It's a fascinating question, and I do feel a special kinship with him in many ways: in his friendship with Jesus; in his closeness to the poor; in his missionary desire to renew the Church; in his love for the Word of God, and in preaching.

In this letter, I would like to share with you another dimension in which I feel a very close bond with Eugene: the witness of his love for Mary, the Mother of Jesus. I invite us all to consider our own special relationship to Eugene in preparation for our patronal feast, the Immaculate Conception. I will describe my connection to his love for Mary with three words: **hope, mercy and joy**.

Immense Hope: *"A great sign appeared in the sky: a woman, clothed with the sun, the moon at her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head..."* Apocalypse 12:1

I feel a deep communion with Eugene in the extraordinary gift of hope that was given to him on August 15, 1822, as he blessed the statue of Mary we now call the "Oblate Madonna" or the "Virgin of the Smile." This event, six years after the foundation of the Missionaries of Provence, saw the zealous Founder fraught with difficulties and misgivings. He was worried and discouraged. A number of the Missionaries of Provence had come and gone. There was opposition to his ministry from other priests. Bishops were recalling his missionaries to their home dioceses. Was this his project or God's?

In this distressed state, Eugene received a powerful grace: the assurance that this small band of missionaries was indeed the work of God, would produce much fruit for the Church, and be a

path to holiness for its members. His fears and doubts evaporated and he received assurance that the creation of this missionary group was the work of the Lord to build up the Church by evangelizing the poor. In a particularly strong time of crisis, Mary's intercession brought hope, confidence and peace.

In the present situation of the Church and the Congregation, we encounter many challenges that can lead to discouragement, pessimism, and cynicism. I have felt strongly encouraged by Eugene to understand that the grace of August 15, 1822, was not just for him at that time. Mary continues to smile on our mission. The assurance that came in this mystical encounter blesses us. The words that Pope Francis spoke in his message to us on October 7, 2016, confirm this grace regarding the Congregation's future and its value for the Church. (See 2016 General Chapter Acts.) We cannot, however, simply rest complacently on Eugene's experience of 1822; we have to do all we can to claim that blessing in our present time.

Tender Mercy: "*Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother...* " (John 19:25)

Many years ago, Fr. René Motte told a group of us in Aix-en-Province that the Founder's favorite title for Mary was "Mother of Mercy." This is no surprise for us when we consider Eugene's personal experience of God's unconditional love before the cross on Good Friday. He who received so much mercy, extended that to others. In Eugene's personal life, in his relations with his family, with his Oblate sons and in his role as bishop of Marseille, the Mother of Mercy always accompanied him.

I have often experienced God's mercy through the presence of Mary in my missionary life, and, in this I find a deep kinship with St. Eugene. Whether in personal failures and weaknesses, or in the challenges facing the Congregation, the Mother of Mercy stands with us, filled with strength, faithfulness and compassion. As she stood at the cross, both in communion with her Son in His agony and in solidarity with all of humankind, Mary stands with us. Her active presence calls me and our entire Oblate Family to a profound union with Jesus and with the faces of the poor, in whom Jesus suffers today.

Exuberant Joy: "The angel Gabriel came in to her, and said, 'Rejoice, O highly favored, the Lord is with you: blessed are you among women!'" (Luke 1:28)

I find a close relationship with Eugene in the joy he so spontaneously expressed about the Immaculate Conception. We are familiar with his 1825 letter to Fr. Tempier in which, referring to our new name, he exclaimed, "...this is a passport to Heaven! How have we not thought of it sooner? Acknowledge that it will be as glorious as it will be consoling to be consecrated to her in a special manner and to bear her name. The Oblates of Mary! This name satisfies the heart and the ear." (Selected Texts # 99, p. 120). The Founder's lively joy was especially evident at the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. His immense happiness overflowed at the Church's recognition of this singular grace given by God to the Mother of Jesus. He was filled with gratitude for her constant presence in his missionary journey.

I feel a deep communion in joy with St. Eugene, rejoicing over this beautiful mystery of Mary's Immaculate Conception. This is not just another privilege of Mary, but reveals the intrinsic connection between holiness and mission. Mary was conceived without sin and full of grace in view of her mission as Mother of the Savior. Grace, holiness, God's life in us is intimately connected with our oblation and mission. St. Eugene didn't want us merely to have devotion to Mary. He wanted us to live her *fiat*, her oblation; to be committed to the prophetic missionary spirit of her *Magnificat*; to stand in faithfulness with Jesus and with the poor in their suffering; and, like her, to be steadfast in prayer in apostolic community, invoking the Holy Spirit to anoint us for mission.

My heart is very close to St. Eugene's as we celebrate the Immaculate Conception: gratitude, praise, joy, wonder... All of us, inspired in the Oblate charism, have a special relationship to St. Eugene. I invite us to consider our own singular bond with him and to share this with others in a prayerful way.

May this Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception be filled with immense hope, God's tender mercy and exuberant joy. Happy feast day!

Rome, December 8, 2019