

**The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate
The name...The project...**

**(The place of Mary in the missionary preaching of
the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, in the past and today)**

By Michel Courvoisier, OMI

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Every year, the French Society of Marian studies (SFEM) organizes a session on a chosen theme. Thus, in 1999, at La Salette, it was: "The Virgin Mary in catechesis, in the past and today;" and in 2001, at Lourdes, it was: "The place of Mary in the teaching of theology, and in the catechesis of adults." The present theme, "Mary in missionary preaching, in the past and today" is proposed for the two sessions of 2006 and 2007. Various missionary groups, the Spiritans, White Fathers, La Salettes, Sisters of Fr. Kolbe, Montfortains, Xaverians, OMI's were asked for contributions. Since I was asked to represent the Oblates, I have written two papers. The shorter one is according to the requirements of the Congress, and will be published by the SFEM along with the other papers. The present text is somewhat longer, with more numerous and longer quotes. This is meant to be an essay, not an academic text, provided for serious reading, but also as a contribution to clarifying our identity as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

Introduction

For me, the proposed theme of the Congress was a challenge. First of all, this was because it seems presumptuous to try to summarize in a few pages what was, and is, a lived reality, over almost two centuries of existence of an international Congregation, which is quite decentralized.

Even more, it was especially difficult because, within the theme of the Congress, our name "Oblates of Mary Immaculate", could raise expectations which might be then disappointed. We must be honest. For the Oblates, despite our name, it does not seem that the Immaculate

Conception, or even Mary, was ever at the center of our missionary preaching, or of our spirituality. For more than a quarter of our history, the Oblates were marked with a long period of devotion to the Sacred Heart. The mission of Montmartre had a profound effect on the entire Congregation. On the other hand, there was never a "Mary Immaculate period", neither after the proclamation of the dogma in 1854, nor after taking over the sanctuary of Pontmain

Therefore the title of this paper "Missionary OMI's, the name, the plan ..." is rather enigmatic. Clearly, I am coming from the point of view of the Congress.

The period of the founding

The period of the founding of the Oblates is rather paradoxical as regards Mary Immaculate.

In the spring of 1813, the young priest, Eugene de Mazenod, who had recently returned to Aix-en-Provence, started a group for Christian youth "under the name of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary". It was his first work. The young people "*consecrated to the Blessed Virgin*" are asked to pray to Our Lady with the Little Office, the weekly Rosary, and the "Memorare", to say short ejaculations to Mary, and to celebrate her feast days. However there is no sign, either in the Statutes or in the reports of activities, of the bases of what could be seen as a Marian spirituality. There is an Act of Consecration of the young members, but it is a consecration to the Holy Trinity "*through the hands of Immaculate Mary, the Blessed Virgin, our mother and patroness*". That is to be noted.

In 1816, Eugene de Mazenod brings together several priests, with the goal of preaching parish missions in Provencal. They call themselves “Missionaries of Provence”. The blessed Virgin is not mentioned, neither in the first official documents (the Statutes, and the official permission from the diocese), nor in the reports of the first missions. The mission at Marignane in November – December 1816 is the first, with a long report drawn up by de Mazenod himself. As Leflon says: “There is no mention of a Consecration to the Blessed Virgin, even though the feast of the Immaculate Conception took place on the fourth Sunday of the mission”. (Vol. 2, p.109).

The great mission of Marseille in 1820 is preached jointly by Abbes Rauzan and Forbin-Janson of the Missionaries of France, and by the Missionaries of Provence. There is a procession to Notre Dame de la Garde, where the chapel was in very poor condition. It was on February 2 that Forbin-Janson preached on Mary “weeping at the foot of the Cross at the death of her Son”. Writing about that day to Marius Suzanne, who was still a scholastic (EO 6, 69), Eugene de Mazenod only emphasizes the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament: “We exposed the Body of Jesus Christ for the adoration of 50,000 kneeling people scattered around the mountain”. There is no mention of Mary. Several days later, De Mazenod preaches to an even larger crowd at the close of the Mission, but it is at the Calvary, built for the celebration of the Cross.

In missions afterwards, a Consecration to the Blessed Virgin became a regular part of the mission program. We do not know very well how, and when, this was presented and celebrated.

In 1818, the Missionaries of Provence take charge of the sanctuary of Notre Dame du Laus, in the High Alps, and therefore outside of Provence. The documents of the foundation of this second community hardly mention that this was a Marian sanctuary – neither in the request made by the Vicar General of the diocese, nor in the reply of De Mazenod. It was seen mainly as a place from which the missionaries could preach missions in the whole diocese, as well as where missionary

work – mainly the Sacrament of Reconciliation – could be done. In October, Eugene wrote to Fr. Mye: “We have become guardians of one of the most famous sanctuaries of the Blessed Virgin, where God shows the power that He has shared with the beloved Mother of our Mission ... After preaching penance to the good souls there and having praised the glories of Mary, we will go from there into the mountains to preach the Word of God”. (EO 6, 51).

Accepting this second foundation also brought about the writing of the Constitutions, and taking up religious life by the Missionaries of Provence. Naturally, the texts say that the missionaries put their life and work under the protection of Mary “whom they will always regard as their Mother”. They are to encourage the faithful to mortification, to receive the Sacraments, and to devotion to the Blessed Virgin ... all of which are put on the same level. The Rules of that time required the missionaries to make a daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament and to Our Lady “to whom they will all have a special devotion and great love”. St. Alphonsus Liguori had already written in much the same terms. We cannot say that Mary is at the center. In fact, it is explicitly Jesus who is the center, and Jesus the Saviour of humanity by His Cross. “It is urgent to teach degenerate Christians who Christ is ... to spread the reign of the Saviour”.

In the letter of May 15, 1822 to Tempier (EO 6, 98 ff.), De Mazenod opens up his heart. We see his most profound thoughts, and so, his preaching about Mary. But this is a private letter, almost intimate, showing the depth of his heart to his closest friend; a letter which his companions will not see, at least in principle. The statue of the Blessed Virgin had been blessed several hours before in the Mission Church in Aix: “I am happy with the homage we have paid to our good Mother, at the feet of the beautiful statue which we have put up in her memory in our church... How can I tell you all the consolations I had on this day dedicated to Mary our Queen? For a long time, I have not had as much happiness as this morning in teaching the people, speaking of her greatness, and rousing the faithful to put all their trust in her. I believe that I was understood, and

tonight I think I saw how the faithful who come to our church share the same fervour which the sight of the statue of the Blessed Virgin inspired in us. Even more, I dare say that she obtained many graces from her Divine Son for us, as we called to her with so much devotion, because she is our Mother. I think it is also due to her that I had this special feeling today – I would not say more than ever before, but certainly, more than usual. It is hard to describe because it includes several things, all of which have to do with one thing, that is, our beloved society”.

By 1825, after another foundation at Nîmes, the name “Missionaries of Provence” was really no longer apt. For several months, they were called Oblates of St. Charles. However, some problems with some of the bishops lead De Mazenod to go to Rome to seek the approval of the Holy See. At his initiative, the name of the small society became “Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate”, the name under which it was approved by the Pope in 1826. The first mention of the new name is found in his letter to Tempier on December 22, 1825 (EO 6, 226 ff.), the day after the audience with Leo XII. “*I had four questions to which I wanted the Head of the Church to answer clearly. The fourth was ... Does your Holiness approve that the Society take the name of the Oblates of the Most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary, in place of the name of Oblates of St. Charles, which it had before? ... The Pope said neither Yes nor No. I understood that he said it would be in the report. I did not insist that he explain further, since it was less important, and we could wait without any problem. I felt the change was necessary in order to not be confused with so many other communities with the same name”.*

Eugene never explained when and how the idea had come to him. But it was on December 8, 1825, after having taken part in the Novena in preparation for the feast of the Immaculate Conception, that he finished writing and signed the petition asking for the approbation from the Holy Father. In this petition, he clearly shows his mind: “*Your Holiness is asked, in the Brief requested by the missionaries, to kindly give them the name of Oblates of the Most Holy and*

Immaculate Virgin Mary, in place of the Oblates of St. Charles, in order to avoid confusion with the name of other Congregations”. (The text is found in *Missions OMI*, 1952, p. 461.) It seems that it was only afterwards that he saw that the change of name (“*something less important*”) was perhaps more important than he first thought. Two days after the letter mentioned above, on December 24, in a second letter (EO 6, 234), which describes the audience given by the Pope, the Founder enthusiastically stresses the change of name: “*We must renew ourselves, especially in our devotion to the Blessed Virgin, to become worthy of being Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Why, this is a passport to heaven! Why did we not think of it before? Let us understand how glorious and consoling it will be for us to be consecrated to her in a special way, and to carry her name. Oblates of Mary. The name is pleasing to the heart and to the ear! I must admit to you now that I was quite astonished when we decided to take the name [of St. Charles] that I thought I was leaving behind. I had very little feeling and no pleasure, and I would say even a sort of repugnance, about carrying the name of the saint who is my special protector, and to whom I have great devotion. Now I tell myself: it was because we were doing wrong to our Mother, our Queen, to the one who protects us, and will obtain for us all the graces of which her Son has made her the Mediatrix. So, let us rejoice in bearing her name and her colours”.*

The Papal approval was given on February 17, 1826, and the official Brief dated March 21. There we read: “*We hope that the members of this holy family who are dedicated to the ministry of preaching, and take as their patroness the Mother of God, the Immaculate Virgin, will apply themselves, as their strength permits, to bring to the mercy of Mary all the people that Jesus Christ. From the height of the Cross, wanted to give her as her children”.* Here we have [and we emphasize this] the first text which gives a Marian mission to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. It is even in the final paragraph of the Brief. We can think that De Mazenod had a hand in it. Then a small important addition is made in the Rules, in the section “Prayers and other religious exercises”. To the old article

“They will say the Rosary every day” is added: “They will zealously work so that all people fervently and confidently honour the Immaculate and Holy Mother of God”.

Eugene de Mazenod announces the success of his efforts in a letter of March 22 (EO 7, 65), showing again his enthusiasm: “Let us understand who we are! I hope that the Lord will give us that grace, with the help and protection of our holy Mother, Immaculate Mary, towards whom we must have a great devotion in our Congregation. Do you not think that it is a sign of predestination to bear the name of Oblates of Mary? We are consecrated to God under the protection of Mary, whose name the Congregation takes as a family name, in common with the most holy and Immaculate Mother of God. That is enough to make others jealous. It is the Church which has given us this great title. We receive it with respect, love and gratitude, proud of our dignity, and of the right we have to be protected by the one who is almighty next to God”... We see that the mystery of the Immaculate Conception is not particularly emphasized – De Mazenod does not think it necessary. However, to the letters “L.J.C. = Laudetur Jesus Christus” which he normally put on top of his letters, he now adds, for the first time “et M.I. = et Maria Immaculata”. From then on, the letters L.J.C. et M.I. become the rule for him. It can be mentioned that Alphonsus Liguori, around 1745, put this on top of his letters “Praised be the Most Blessed Sacrament, and Mary Immaculate”.

The General Chapter, meeting at Calvary after the return of the Founder, finishes with his talk, which the Acts of the Chapter summarize: “From now on, we battle the enemies of heaven under the standard which is our own, and which the Church has given us. On this standard shines the name of the most holy Immaculate Virgin”. There is no further mention of a Marian mission, which one might expect. Nor is there mention of one in the next General Chapter of 1831. Mary is mentioned only to spell out the feasts which are preceded by a day of fast – nothing else.

What we have seen above, in the official texts during the first 15 years of the Society and in the

exhortations of the Founder, leads one to reflect, in the following comments:

- Mary is seen especially as Mother, Protector, Almighty before God, Mother of the Mission, and Mediatrix of Graces for all people but especially for the Oblates in their missionary work.
- The emphasis is on devotion and confidence as her sons.
- As was common at that time, there is no theological/spiritual development. The statements are taken for granted; there is no need to explain them, nor to give a theological basis. There is no further thinking on the Immaculate Conception. It seems to be the same to speak of Mary, Mary Immaculate, the Blessed Virgin, and Mother of God. Gospel texts are never cited as reference or proof.
- Perhaps it is good to note here, that in all of the writings we have of St. Eugene, there is no explicit reference to any Gospel text about Mary – neither to the Infancy Narrative, with the Annunciation, nor to Cana, nor to the short account of Calvary in the Gospel of John. In looking at those Scripture texts, René Motte found nothing in De Mazenod. A comparison with his contemporaries might prove interesting, though some of the documents consulted seem to show, surprisingly, that those Scripture texts were not considered.
- In the preaching of parish missions, there was nothing specifically Marian. However, there was always a concern to develop devotion to Mary.
- It would be interesting to look at the hymns used at the time; the OMI Archives in Marseille has a “Collection of Hymns and Prayers for the use of the Missionary Oblates of Mary, of Provence” dated 1826, with the approval of Bishop Fortuné of March 20. Of the 113 French hymns (there are none in Provençal), nine are hymns to Mary. One, entitled “For the Conception of the Blessed Virgin” has these lines: *Receive the homage of your children/ Lend your ear to their appeal./ Lord, it is your most noble work/ That they celebrate in song .../ David from*

the dying stump/ Sees the most beautiful flower grow. / [And in the fourth verse:] The angels, rich in splendor/ Cross the heavenly plain/ To contemplate their Sovereign/ And leave the place of happiness. The rest is much the same. Enough for the hymns.

Marian shrines from 1818

Fortunately, the texts do not tell us everything. The apostolate and mission are activities. The apostolic choices of De Mazenod and his companions speak to us as well, and more concretely. The sanctuary of Notre Dame du Laus was our second house in 1818. There followed Notre Dame de l'Ósier, in the diocese of Grenoble in 1834, Notre dame de Lumières in Avignon in 1837, and other places of pilgrimage. A note from 1835 insists on seeing Marian sanctuaries as places for the reconciliation of sinners. It is from the Act of Visitation of N.-D. du Laus. The founder speaks of *"the growing number of faithful coming to the feet of our Good Mother, confident that they will find on the steps of the earthly throne of the Queen of Heaven zealous ministers of her Son, who are particularly able to reconcile sinners upon whom the Mother of Mercy calls down pardon and peace, by her powerful protection"*. A strong connection is made between devotion to Mary and conversion, reconciliation, and pardon, thanks to the dedication of the Mother of Mercy, and the ministry of the priests.

The lived pastoral experience allows us to more clearly formulate another idea about the task of the Oblates in Marian sanctuaries. Eugene wrote to the Oblates at Osier on September 3, 1835 (EO 8,172): *"Remember that Providence has put you at the service of this sanctuary in order to give a better direction to the devotion of the people. Their devotion to the Blessed Virgin is to lead them to conversion through your ministry"*. He says: *"Your ministry should give a better direction to their lives and lead them to conversion"*. In writing about Lumières, the Founder places that house *"especially under the protection of our sovereign Lord and Master"*, and adds: *"It is our head, the Saviour, who gives us these sanctuaries, and who places us there as*

in a fortress from which our missionaries spread out into different dioceses to preach penance". (Journal, June 2 1837 - EO 18,177 ff.)

In his Journal on June 9, 1837 (EO 18, 187), De Mazenod copies the Act of Founding for the community of Lumières, signed by the Archbishop of Avignon, but drawn up by the Founder: *"At Notre Dame de Lumières we have canonically set up a community of the said Congregation of missionaries to especially do the following: 1. To be the guardians of the sanctuary to preserve and spread the Devotion to the Holy Mother of God, to direct the piety of the faithful who flock to this holy place from every part of our diocese and even farther; 2. To evangelize all the parishes of our diocese by missions or spiritual Retreats; 3. To give spiritual retreats for the priests who willingly come to pray for several days in the quiet of the shadow of the sanctuary of the Blessed Virgin"*. The purpose is always missionary: to seek conversion to Jesus Christ the Saviour by penance and reconciliation. Marian sanctuaries are privileged places, and the pilgrims are expected to be open to the call. Regarding the sanctuary at Lumières, the Superior, Fr. Bise wrote that *"the Fathers make it almost a continuous mission"* during the summer. (Report to the Chapter of 1850)

It is the same at Marseille at Notre dame de la Garde where the Oblates served, probably from 1831 (the actual date is uncertain). There, they ensure an ongoing welcome for pilgrims, even while they wait for official authorization (it is on military land), and for the building of the actual Basilica. *"Notre Dame de la Garde came from the heart of Bishop de Mazenod"*, said his successor during the consecration of the Basilica in 1864. In a letter to Casimir Aubert, written at Lumières on June 3, 1837, the Founder shows his mind clearly: *"It is wonderful to see us in charge of the most famous sanctuaries of the Blessed Virgin. It seems that God has given us the means to fulfill the designs of Providence and to be able to carry out the duties given us by the Head of the Church when he established our Congregation"*.

On August 20, 1837, the Sunday within the octave of the Assumption, De Mazenod, now

Bishop of Marseille, says Mass at Notre Dame de la Garde: *“to put myself, our community, and the whole diocese under the protection of the Blessed Virgin”*. His Journal (EO 18, 242) states that before Mass, he *“educated the faithful who filled the chapel”*, and gave communion to a large number of people. Later, Bishop de Mazenod would write that Marian sanctuaries, because of the devotion and trust of the faithful, are *“privileged places for her motherly mercy towards men”* Circular Letter to the pastors of the diocese of Marseille, September 21, 1843). On November 1, 1852 he wrote in the Mandate for the reconstruction of ND de la Garde: *“As for ourselves, we have resolved to omit nothing, to have you always draw more from the inexhaustible treasure of grace, open to all souls, which the Lord has placed under the care of His Holy Mother, in the sanctuary which is so beloved by our people”*.

The report of Fr. Dassy (cf. *Missions OMI*, 1864 pp.244 ff), who was Superior of the community at la Garde, must be quoted: *“The essential work of this house is to minister at N.-D. de la Garde. We have a second mission: to continue the apostolate of the Congregation to the poor, and the most abandoned souls ... Without doubt, it was a great grace given to the diocese when Bishop de Mazenod when he placed a certain number of his children, servants of Mary Immaculate, at N.-D de la Garde, to be its guardians, or rather, Missionaries.”* The connection between sanctuary and mission is clear.

As bishop, Eugene de Mazenod rebuked his priests several times for giving too much importance to the decorations, candles etc., during the month of Mary, to the altar of the Virgin, rather than to the Blessed Sacrament. *“We must be careful not to give to the simple images of the Mother of God such veneration that the external signs seem to overshadow the signs that should be given to the Real Presence of Jesus Christ”* (Letter of 1859). We can say that for De Mazenod *“the primacy of the salvific mission of Christ was always ahead of, and situated, the role of the Virgin. He never considered Mary apart from the mystery of Christ and the Church”*. (cf. Maurice Gilbert, *Vie Oblate*, 1976, p. 90).

Other aspects of the theology of the sanctuaries must be mentioned, as these were lived out rather than formally expressed. In going on pilgrimage, Christians show themselves to be first of all, *active*. They take the initiative, come out of their daily routine, and move. This gesture of shifting place, of walking, and often of climbing (as to Notre Dame de la Garde), is a symbol of changing personally, and often collectively (as in parish pilgrimages). It is an active first response to the call of grace. Chaplains can recognize it, go along with it, guide it, give it direction, and help it grow. Pilgrims are the Church on the way, moving on the road of conversion.

Another thought of De Mazenod is worth noting. Marian sanctuaries *“give us on earth a likeness of our heavenly homeland”* Circular Letter to the Pastors of Marseille, September 21, 1843). As one person wrote: *“The sanctuary is a holy place, a privileged place for the meeting of God and men, of the Virgin Mary and men. In itself, it is like a taste of heaven, a point of contact between the Church militant and the Church triumphant”*. (cf. *Etudes oblates*, 1962, p. 45, where E. Lamirande is influenced by L. Locket).

Then came 1854 with everything around the declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. All the texts, circulars, sermons are full of enthusiasm to speak of the glory of Mary, and incidentally (?) of the Pope. The same is true for the commemorative celebrations and the monuments. But was it from the faith of the people? Did it all help to build the faith? The questions arise from looking back after 150 years to those writings, or the Column to Immaculate Mary in Marseille. Happily, the appearance of the Virgin to Bernadette at Lourdes, and (as the Oblates and others believe) at Pontmain, would help the faith of ordinary Christians, more than the clerics did. The Oblates were also touched by it all.

Another major event for the Congregation, the sending of the first foreign missionaries to Canada in 1841, must be noted. The Founder signed the letter of mission (EO 1,11), saying, in part: *“Take up your journey with a joyful*

heart, willing and eager. May the angel of the Lord be with you, and may the Blessed Virgin Mary, conceived without sin, be your guide and protector. You are to remember that it is a special duty of your vocation to spread devotion to her everywhere". Here, the Marian mission is explicitly recalled. However, it does not seem that the Oblates fulfilled it any differently in Canada than they did in Europe.

In 1850, the Founder brings out the "Instruction for Foreign Missions", though it is hard to see its importance and extent. Some suggestions are given for evening meetings, when missionaries visit the villages. In mind are especially the semi-nomadic Indian peoples. These evening meetings are seen in much the same way as the parish missions in France. This includes the content for the sermons – the purpose of man, the malice of sin, the four last ends, the life and Passion of Christ etc. In addition: "*One will not forget to inspire the neophytes with a tender devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and, depending on their situation, to initiate them to works of piety in honour of our Immaculate Mother*". Then it speaks of general Communion, renewal of Baptismal promises, and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

Some comments to end this first section, the period of St. Eugene:

- The essential mission of the Oblates is to call people to conversion to Jesus Christ. Their main work is parish missions, and, in addition, the mission *ad gentes*.
- The devotion to Mary is one of the pious works that accompanies and supports conversion, much like mortification and the reception of the Sacraments.
- The Oblates have neither a specific Marian spirituality nor a theology. In spite of their name, the mystery of the Immaculate Conception does not receive special prominence.
- For the Oblates, Marian sanctuaries very quickly become important, because their missionary work can be very fruitfully exercised there, mainly by teaching, and reconciliation in the Sacrament of Penance.
- There is special attention paid to the faithful,

who often take the initiative for pilgrimages to the sanctuaries. Oblates are to guide, direct and purify such movements. The sanctuaries are never isolated from a more complete pastoral activity.

- Mary is mainly the mother, protector, Mother of Mercy and the Mediatrix of the graces of her Son ...
- In trying to be complete, a unique (?) text can be quoted, perhaps as surprising for us as it may have been in the 19th century. It is found in a letter of Fr. Mille, who was in charge of the scholastics at Billens in Switzerland, on July 24, 1831 (EO 8, 29): "*Let us not forget the Blessed Virgin, our patron. I believe she is meant to appease the wrath of heaven by her powerful mediation with her divine Son, whose redemption men have rejected. Through her, we must seek to obtain the grace that Jesus Christ pray for those many people that He Himself said – I do not pray – Non pro mundo rogo. This is a common thought of mine...*". I know of no other text in the same vein.

From 1861 to 1962 (From the death of the Founder to Vatican II)

How can we describe the 100 or so years between the death of St. Eugene and Vatican II? The risk is to oversimplify, by taking only some aspects of the missionary work of thousands of Oblates on every continent, from the Great Canadian North to Sri Lanka, from Laos to South Africa. Also, work might be attributed to the Oblates which was done in fact in collaboration with dioceses, with other Societies, male and female, and with groups of the laity... Also, for much of this period, devotion to the Sacred Heart was an Oblate characteristic.

The same structure: spirituality, theology and mission will be used.

Looking at the spirituality of the Society, there were several attempts to emphasize the Marian aspect of the Congregation, including from several Superior Generals. The Congregation itself did not always follow. Only in the General Chapter of 1926, which revised the Constitutions

after the new Code of Canon Law, do we see an article added to the text of the Founder. For the first time, Mary is put into the chapter on the ends of the Congregation: *“Our Congregation is placed under the name and patronage of the Most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary. Therefore, we must all develop in our own hearts, and promote among the faithful, a devotion to this heavenly Patron and Mother”*.

On August 15, 1951, Fr. Leo Deschâtelets, Superior General, issued a Circular with the title *“Our Vocation, and our life of intimate union with Mary Immaculate”*. Here are some select passages: *“The purpose of this Circular is to look at our whole vocation as religious priests and missionaries from a Marian perspective... If we wish to live our vocation as Oblates of Mary Immaculate to the full, that means that we must be persons totally consecrated to God by a Marian life and apostolate, to meet the actual demands and needs of the Kingdom of God in the modern world... How should we live this Marian Oblate life, whether personally in our interior life, or as missionaries in our apostolic work?”*

The 90 pages of the Circular include some strong statements: *“We are Oblates of Mary Immaculate. That is not a simple title. The name defines us. ... It is by Mary Immaculate that we will be Oblates of souls, Oblates of Jesus Christ, Oblates of divine love... We cannot be true Oblates of Mary Immaculate without fully living our whole life with her. It is not enough to have an ordinary devotion to Mary Immaculate. There must be a kind of identification with Mary Immaculate, a giving over of ourselves to God with her, and as she did...”* At the time, many Oblates said that they did not find in such a Marian emphasis the tradition received from the Founder, and practiced in 135 years of religious missionary life. We can say the Congregation did not receive that document, in the sense that we speak of the reception of a Council. In fact, there were very few echoes if it, mainly in France.

Nor was there any progress made in the specific area of the Immaculate Conception. The privilege itself was strongly affirmed, but little developed, either in preaching or in spirituality. Today, the

theological work of the Oblates at the university level seems very weak, and could hardly have promoted a new spiritual and pastoral thrust. But was that any different from other people? One theme which could have been deepened and shared was *“Mary, Mother of Mercy”*. That could have been at the heart of Mission, as long as God was also seen as the Father of Mercy, and not only the Judge. On this, perhaps our preaching left much to be desired.

On the other hand, in the hundred years 1860 – 1960, Mary had her place in the great period of missionary expansion. Mary is always present in the missionary activity of the Oblates, whether in Christian countries or in the new missions.

In France, both before the expulsion and after 1930, Mary had her place in the preaching of Missions, whenever possible. It is especially in the sanctuaries under their care that the Oblates preach about Mary, and promote devotion to her. Among others, we can mention: Notre Dame de Sion, near Nancy, and the *Colline inspirée* at Barres in Lorraine [divided after 1871, and returned in 1918, and 1945]. Pilgrims came there by the tens of thousands. In 1933, the Marian Congress was held there, organized by the French Committee, and with 40,000 people at the Mass celebrated by the Apostolic Nuncio. Notre Dame de la Garde in Marseille was served by the Oblates until the expulsion. Notre dame de Pontmain was entrusted to the Oblates by the Bishop of Laval, immediately after the apparitions in 1871. [One of the visionaries, Joseph Barquette (1860 -1930), became an Oblate]. There were some others: Bon Secours, Talence, Clery, Arachon, Neunkirch, Peyragude, Cotignac, Benoite-Vaux, Neuvizy, and the grotto of Lourdes at Mons-en-Baroeul. Many of those places came out of local initiative, but the Oblates were totally involved. Just as in the time of the Founder, they are places where homage is paid to Mary, where the Good News of salvation is announced and celebrated, especially including sacramental Reconciliation... In many cases, especially at Sion, spiritual retreats are organized at the sanctuaries.

The Oblates also had a significant role in the preaching of the Great Return immediately after

the War. It was called “*the greatest Marian action of the century*”.

More research needs to be done on the role of the Editions du Chalet. The book of hymns used by the Christian assemblies of France, included several hymns by Jean Servel OMI, such as “O croix dresse sur le monde “and “Gloire au Christ, parole éternelle du Dieu vivant”. Of those still in use, only one is a hymn to Mary: “*Toute la famille humaine se rassemble pres de toi* “(V 11).

Similar Marian works were done in other countries. To mention a few: since 1883, the Oblates have organized the Anglo-Irish pilgrimages to Lourdes. In Canada, in 1902, they took over the ministry at Notre Dame du Cap, the national sanctuary. In the United States, Our Lady of the Snows, in Illinois, was an Oblate initiative. It serves somewhat as a national shrine. In Italy we have the Shrine to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Pescara.

Much the same can be said for mission countries. How many missions were put under the name of Mary in the North of Canada, in Sri Lanka, and South Africa? This was often done to separate them from Protestant activity. How many local shrines, pilgrimages, novenas, “Lourdes grottoes” ... in all four corners of the world?

Lourdes, Sion, Pontmain all have “branches” in missionary countries. From the 1930’s, we find in northern Canada, near the Arctic Ocean and in the Mackenzie, churches such as: Immaculate Conception in Aklavik; Our Lady of Grace at Tuktoyaktuk; O.L. of the Angels at Syanton; O.L. of Lourdes at Paulatuk; O. L. of Light at Coppermine; O. L. of Sion at Burnside, and finally Christ the King at Minto Inlet. There is a certain interchange with mission territories. In 1873, for the crowning of Our Lady at Sion in Lorraine, the Zulus of South Africa donated a diamond, one jewel among others in the crown of Our Lady. More theological reflection should be done on such exchanges in our devotion to Mary, on this “Church Communion”.

Many texts and prayers mention Mary as the

Mother of missionaries, Mother of the Oblates. How important has Notre Dame de la Garde been for all the missionaries, men and women of all Congregations, who have left from the port of Marseille? One of the traditional hymns [perhaps of Oblate origin], to celebrate the departure of Oblate missionaries says: “*O good Mother of the missionary / Be his support, watch over him / On earth, he no longer has a homeland / For him, only the Cross, and you, O Mary*”.

There is a story, told by Fr. Duchaussois in *Aux Glaces Polaires*, p. 57, which happened to Vital Grandin, later Bishop. After hearing a sermon that touched him, an Indian from Lake Athabasca in Canada, came to see the missionary: “*Father, I now understand that women have a soul, just like we do. ... But, I didn’t speak about that! ... But, Father, when you told us that the Son of God took as His mother a woman of this earth, I then understood that women have a soul and go to heaven, just as men do*”. Mary can play a role in the promotion of women, as she played in the Incarnation.

In Basutoland [now Lesotho], in southern Africa, Blessed Joseph Gerard (1831 – 1914), who is considered the founder of the Church in that country, called the land given to him for the first mission “Village of the Mother of Jesus - *Motse oa ‘m’a Jesu*”. This also was in the context of competition with Protestant missionaries. Before that, the foundation for the Zulus (called Kaffirs then) was dedicated to Our Lady of Seven Sorrows. The first prayer to Our Lady was the *Stabat mater*. At the mission of St. Monica, he built a small grotto of Lourdes, where the school children would come to make a short prayer to their heavenly Mother. A woman of Lesotho said at the process for beatification: “His love of the Blessed Virgin showed in the respect with which he spoke of her. In his sermons, he taught us to love the Blessed Virgin, to pray the Rosary every day, and to put ourselves under her protection. When he went on horseback, he would hold the reins in his left hand and his rosary in his right; and the horse went on quietly”.

In 1872, Bishop Bonjean, the Vicar Apostolic of Jaffna in Ceylon, decided on a project. The

sanctuary at Madhu was from the period of the Protestant persecution of the 17th and 18th centuries, and then left neglected. *“What sadness filled my heart when I saw this famous, but ruined sanctuary for the first time? I determined that a Bishop, Oblate of Mary Immaculate, could not leave a sanctuary of his Immaculate Mother in such a shameful state. So, I resolved to build a beautiful temple to Mary in this jungle; it would be a silent sermon to the many Moslem, Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims”*. (cf. Jonquet, *Mgr. Bonjean I*, p.241). And so he started the building of the new shrine. Now, 135 years later, Madhu, on an island torn apart by civil war, is, for better or worse, still a refuge, an oasis of prayer, for Christians and non-Christians from everywhere. On April 3, 2007, *La Croix* had a long article about it. *“There are 11,000 Tamils as refugees in that Catholic sanctuary....Our Lady of Madhu, a blue and white Basilica in the middle of the jungle, has been venerated by all religions, for the last 400 years”*. The *Church of Asia*, June 16, 2007, says the same, especially for the great feasts such as August 15, or the feast of Our Lady of Madhu on July 2. *“It is not uncommon to see crowds of 200,000 people come together on those occasions, coming from both Tamil and Singhalese areas, and from the Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist religions”*. Indeed, *“a silent sermon for many pilgrims”*, as Bishop Bonjean dreamed.

Some post-conciliar comments

There is little Marian theology from the Oblates. Unfortunately, the only Oblate theologian who made himself heard, was excommunicated by John Paul II in 1997, because of his book *“Mary and human liberation”*. We can see there a whole series of lack of judgment and poor behaviour. Mary Immaculate, Mother of Mercy, could not have been present in that controversy. The following year, the excommunication was lifted. Though we cannot overlook the fact, I think it is better to emphasize that the Oblates, along with the whole Church, have accepted a Marian theology rooted in Scripture, and especially the Infancy Narratives. In this line, we can mention Marius Bobichon, *“Mary in the new Liturgy of the Word”*, two volumes, in Editions du Chalet, 1971 and 1975.

Spirituality. The Oblate Constitutions, the 1980-1982 edition, redone after the Council, give much more room to Mary Immaculate. Finally we come to a wording which expresses the spiritual and missionary experience of the Oblates. In the first chapter, *Mission of the Congregation*, article 10 reads: *“Mary Immaculate is the patroness of our Congregation. Open to the Spirit, she consecrated herself totally as lowly handmaid to the person and work of the Saviour. She received Christ in order to share him with all the world whose hope he is. In her we recognize the model of the Church’s faith and our own”*.

“We shall always look on her as our mother. In the joys and sorrows of our missionary life, we feel close to her who is the Mother of Mercy. Wherever our ministry takes us, we will strive to instill genuine devotion to the Immaculate Virgin who prefigures God’s final victory over all evil.” In article 46, under the formation of the Oblate “apostolic man”, we read: *“Inspired by the example of Mary, we live in creative and ongoing fidelity our personal commitment to Jesus Christ, while serving the Church and God’s Kingdom”*.

At the beginning of 2007, our Superior General, Fr. G. Steckling wrote along the same lines in a letter to all the Oblates: *“We could have been called Salvatorians. But we have received the name of Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Read in salvific perspective, this name gives new depth to our spirituality, since Mary, more than anyone else, reveals the fullness to which salvation can bring a human being. Holiness, brought to its peak in Mary, who is without stain or wrinkle or anything of the kind, tells us that it is possible to overcome guilt and sin, misery and death. A Missionary Oblate, or an Associate, who has met the Saviour as Eugene did on that Good Friday, cannot doubt that everything can change. Thus, missionaries will not seek a half-salvation, but rather, holiness, for themselves and for others, especially the most abandoned. Mary Immaculate shows us that the fullness of salvation is possible. Mary is the perfect example of our name - Oblate... We are encouraged by the shining holiness of Mary. She will guide us – and many others with us – to meet the only one who can save, the crucified Christ”*.

As to how Mary is preached by Oblates today, how do we choose some examples, and omit many others?

In the diocese of Durban, in South Africa, there are 16 parishes under some name of Mary, and almost all of them were started by the Oblates: Our Lady Star of the Sea; O.L. of Fatima; O.L. of the Sacred Heart etc... The same is true for Catholic schools... There is a shrine, with the feast on the last weekend in May... The diocese itself, founded by the Oblates, has the Immaculate Conception as its patroness.

The Oblates began the Notre Dame schools in the southern Philippines, in Muslim territory. These are also attended by many Muslims. Several shrines have been recently opened: Kaliori, on the island of Java in Indonesia; Temento in Casamance, Senegal; Figuil in North Cameroon where this year some 12,000 – 15,000 people gathered, including around 200 who were sick, for January 1, the feast of Mary Mother of God. The pilgrims come the evening before, in groups of 20 to 100, often on foot from 30 and even 50 kilometers away. The theme for the pilgrimage this year was “Mary, Mother of God, Comfort of the Sick.

At Our Lady of the Cape in Quebec, the meaningful theme of the Pastoral Year 2005 was “Jesus Our Way”. It is also significant, that for the past 20 years, at the request of the Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes, there has been an international, multilingual community of Oblates serving at the shrine of Lourdes.

Finally, three reflections, which are undeveloped,

and can be completed as one wishes.

- Madeleine Delbrel wrote: “*The Church is not a How-To manual. Everything in it is life, in living people*”. (*Ville marxiste, terre de mission*, p. 93 [or p. 63, depending on the edition]). In light of that remark, we should read into all missionary work what is lived, the Marian *praxis* of the Oblates which is primarily a missionary preaching.
- Concerning the World Youth Day in Cologne, Cardinal Danneels said: “*Let us light a fire and the youth will come to warm up there.*” (Interview in *La Croix*, 5.8.2005) In Marseille, Saint Eugene de Mazenod, along with others, rekindled the fire of Notre Dame de la Garde. How many people, Christians or not, come to warm themselves there! Bishop Bonjean, in Ceylon, made the same remark: “*I am resolved to raise up in these wild forests a beautiful temple for Mary, which would be a silent preaching for the many Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims.*” And he rekindled the Marian fire at Madhu, a light which continues to burn 135 years later.
- In the final document of the CELAM Assembly at Puebla in 1979, the bishops wrote: “*Mary must more than ever teach how to preach the gospel to people today.*” This reflection was taken up in the book “*Conversations about the faith*” (p. 123) by a certain Joseph Ratzinger... Mary, our teacher in preaching the Gospel, our road to Jesus... That’s the place we are trying to give her in our missionary preaching.

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