



## Letter to the Congregation on the occasion of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary - 2020

L.J.C. et M.I.

Dear brother Oblates and all those who live the charism of St. Eugene,

Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ! (Ephesians 1:3) Our Superior General, Fr. Louis Lougen, OMI, has given the privilege of writing this letter to the Congregation on this blessed feast of Mary, to the Internal Committee for Mission of the Central Government, so that we can share with all of you the blessing and joy of a new mission that the Congregation has accepted!

“I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?’” (Isaiah 6:8)

A little over two years ago, Bishop Emmanuel Kofi Fianu, SVD, Bishop of the Diocese of Ho in Ghana, wrote to invite the Oblates of Mary Immaculate to open a mission in his diocese, entrusting to us a Marian Shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes. Bishop Fianu knew about the Oblates during his time in Rome, when he was the Secretary General of the Society of the Divine Word, and was involved also with VIVAT, an international network of religious congregations working on JPIC issues at the United Nations, in which the OMI is an associate member. Knowing about the Oblates’ Marian dimension in its charism, he expressed the belief that the Oblates “can transform the shrine into a sanctuary of real Marian encounter for the teeming youth of the diocese who are in search of an encounter with God through our mother Mary”. He also noted in his letter the virtual absence of male religious institutes in his diocese, which he considered a “poverty that needed to be addressed to make

evident the universal mission of the Church”. The Bishop expressed openness, too, for the Oblates to eventually found a particular mission of its own in the diocese, a valuable opening to evangelize new faces of the poor, and to be evangelized by them.

The Republic of Ghana is a country located along the Gulf of Guinea and the Atlantic Ocean, in the subregion of West Africa. It has a population of about 30 million, of which about 13% are Catholics. English is the official language, though French is also taught in schools. There are 11 official local languages as well.

The Diocese of Ho is for the most part agricultural and poor. The Marian Shrine is located in the town of Agbenoxoe, Kpando. One can say that it is in the periphery of the diocese and sits by a lake. The shrine was founded 63 years ago, and is the main pilgrimage site for the diocese every year, culminating on December 8, gathering about 4,000 people in an overnight vigil.

The grotto is also linked to a rural parish with 3 outstations, and the Bishop sees the Oblates taking care of the parish and helping it grow its own pastoral identity. There are already existing facilities in the grotto—priests’ residence, Stations of the Cross, basic showers and toilets for pilgrims, and the parish church.

Over the next two years since Bp. Fianu’s letter and subsequent visit to the General House, the Central Government undertook a discernment process guided by our Congregational document *Discerning and Sustaining Oblate Mission*. Two of us visited the shrine and parish, engaged in dialogue with the Bishop and other leaders, and experienced firsthand the piety and energy of

the annual diocesan pilgrimage to the Lourdes shrine on December 7-8! We deliberated in the internal committee and in the Plenary Sessions of the General Council. We consulted the Regional Conferences and other people who could provide valuable input. Most important, we prayed in "...total openness to the call of the Spirit..." for the help of Mary our Mother, and the inspiration of St. Eugene de Mazenod.

"Here am I," said Mary; "I am the Lord's servant..." (Luke 1:38)

Finally, in October this year, in the month dedicated to Mission and to our devotion to Mary through the Rosary, the Superior General and Council accepted in principle the call to mission in the Diocese of Ho, Ghana, echoing Mary's humble and trusting "Yes" to God's invitation.

In opening this new mission, we want to be daring anew, writing one "new page of the Gospel with Mazenodian creativity and audacity" in the early years of the third century of our Congregation's life.

The local church of Ho, through the Bishop, is calling us to respond to perceived missionary needs—witnessing to religious life and to the universal mission of the Church, promoting genuine Marian spirituality, and developing a pastoral community in the periphery of the diocese. We hope thus to continue "the journey that was started by the Founder, a man who loved Jesus passionately and the Church unconditionally...". This is what Pope Francis, reiterating the words of Paul VI on the day of Eugene's beatification, is inviting us to in his message to the participants of the 36th General Chapter on October 7, 2016.

We will be carrying out a mission in and through an apostolic community that will witness to the value and place of religious life in the Church. Heeding the mandate of the last General Chapter, we will ensure that this community will adopt "interculturality as a lifestyle, as a way of being in mission".

We recall how, in a way, pastoral ministry at Marian shrines was a favored ministry at the beginning of our Congregation. "One-third of the Oblate works accepted by the Founder were

shrines...[he] considered these shrines as 'a non-itinerant mission,' and pilgrimages became occasions to think over certain truths, to come to conversion and to live the Christian life better..."

Coming on the year when we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the canonization of St. Eugene de Mazenod, we feel that this new mission in a Marian shrine continues the legacy of St. Eugene "to awaken in souls an enlightened love of Mary" in ministering to pilgrims, at the same time keeping in mind the Congregation and the myriad needs of today's world in our prayers through Mary's intercession.

The mission enables collaboration with the lay people and the local clergy and other religious, and will also provide us an opportunity to invite vocations to Oblate religious missionary life.

Finally, this mission opening in Ho (a locality that shares boundaries with Togo) can also be a stepping stone for us to explore future missionary possibilities for a specifically Oblate ministry, within Ghana or in neighboring places, mindful that, "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".

Bishop Fianu's joy was palpable in his reply to our acceptance of this mission—he likened it to St. Paul's realization of God's call to preach the Good News in Macedonia, after seeing a vision of a man standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" (Acts 16:9). Bishop Fianu wrote: "You cannot imagine my great joy and gratitude to God when I received your email a few days ago. This is good news and I am really grateful that you have heard our cry to come to Macedonia. Your coming to the diocese is a fulfillment of the prayer to offer our people the universal face of the Church."

We are aware of the challenges of embarking on this new endeavor, as we are conscious also of the pressing needs in many Oblate Units, but, like Mary who was conceived without sin, we rely on the grace of God which makes all things possible for his greater glory.

From hereon we will work on the details and arrangements that will put flesh to this

new missionary commitment, counting on the support of the Major Superiors, the generosity of Oblates who may be called to be part of this new mission, and the prayers of all, that we may cooperate with God's grace to "become missionaries of mercy and of hope, ambassadors of the tenderness of the paternal and maternal face of God, like the Virgin Mary, our Immaculate Mother, pondering all things in her heart."

"You are Oblates of Mary Immaculate. May this name ... be for you a constant commitment to the mission".

We pray to Mary Immaculate, patroness of our Congregation, to teach us how to be missionary disciples in this new mission, to put ourselves humbly and fully in God's disposition, and to be mirrors of Jesus' love and total self-giving on the Cross to the people He sends us.

Praised be Jesus Christ, and Mary Immaculate! Happy feast day to all!

Ramon Maria Bernabe, OMI, Alberto Huamán Camayo, OMI, Guillaume Muthunda, OMI, Peter Stoll, OMI  
(The Internal Committee for Mission)

## GENERAL ADMINISTRATION

### GLOBAL OBLATE FUNDRAISERS Another aspect of Oblates assisting their people during the pandemic.

Examples of Oblates directly assisting the people in the regions they serve, a tradition started by our Founder, have abounded during the current pandemics. These examples tell us inspiring individual stories. But they have also offered help in other more subtle, less visible ways, not always known. Besides providing the spiritual support and more obvious material support in the form of hand sanitisers, soap, tissues, masks, medicines, and food, there were other many other diverse needs, specific to each region of the Oblate world.

When most of the planet shut down and went on shelter-at-home mode with the advice of washing hands after doing almost anything, this piece of advice was not easy to follow in many parts of Africa, where people, mostly women, normally walk two to three or more miles a day to obtain the precious water needed not only for washing but also for drinking and cooking. On the onset of the pandemics, these daily trips were no longer possible. Thus, in some missions, particularly in Angola and Cameroon, Oblates bought tank trucks full of water to distribute among their peoples and any other person that needed it.

In most if not all of Latin America, public universities are free and everybody that qualifies can study and graduate at no-tuition cost. But when COVID hit those countries, universities closed and classes moved online.

Except that many young people do not have a personal computer or even internet access in their homes. So, in one mission in Bolivia, Oblates that were planning a project to help their young members with pre-university preparation, purchased a few PCs and installed internet service in four areas of the parish and equipped the chapel classrooms and classrooms with some computers so that these young university students were not relegated in their studies. Since Oblates care for the integral person, they run clinics in many missions, one of them in the Peruvian Amazon. Although that clinic could help their regular patients, it was not prepared to care for the influx of persons affected by the Coronavirus and to properly protect the clinic personnel. The clinic needed and was re-equipped with protection equipment for medical personnel, cabins for disinfection, oxygen tents and balloons, stretchers and stainless steel cure cars, and medicines used to fight COVID (Azythromycin, Ivermectin and Hydroxychloroquine).

Finally, as most Oblate Units had to close parishes, schools and retreat houses, their income was significantly reduced. However, as in many of the countries where they serve there are no unemployment benefits, Oblates find ways to continue paying the wages and salaries of their lay employees. Oblates could provide much of this special aid to their people thanks to the assistance of many generous donors working with the Global Oblate Fundraisers that worked diligently and compassionately to meet these pressing needs.

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**AFRICA-MADAGASCAR**


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**WESTERN SAHARA****And they say there will be no Christmas ...**

*Fr. Luis Ignacio (Chicho) ROIS, OMI*

I look at the photo again, after eight months have gone by. They have been eight months of waiting without being able to celebrate Mass. Eight months of living. The woman - let's call her Maria (Mary) - is with her child, let's call him Yosuha (Jesus). The COVID comes when, like many others she is pregnant. She came to the Sahara from her native country, on the west coast of Africa, after a trip that she does not want to remember. Here, she found good work, with days of more than 10 hours on her feet cleaning fish and thankful for it. She found a partner (as others did not) and she got pregnant (as many of the others did). She began to come to Mass, and we came to know each other. She tells us that her delivery date could come any day now.

She stays in a house with several other renters, (how many to a room, five, ten...who knows?). Of course, they must go to work because the money-making machine cannot be stopped, no matter what happens. One day, at work, everyone is locked up, Moroccans and migrants, for the COVID test. Many tested positive, and so all are quarantined in the same cold rooms where they work, day after day, ... without facilities, without privacy. They call us on the phone, we take turns calling them to encourage them... but they will not let us visit them. We are helpless.

Shut in, too, we still go out into the streets, as though to go shopping, and find people in need. Some are acquaintances, others have been forced to come out, despite the fine - they have nothing to lose and are hungry. We have a Muslim friend with whom we organize food assistance, once, twice, three times. No one else does anything because no one is taking pictures. But, here and there, the official food assistance does take place.

There are new COVID tests. Since Maria is pregnant, they take her to the hospital. We call a friend, ...let's call him Yunis (Jonah) because he has saved many migrants from the belly of the whale. He arranges everything so

she is cared for and given medicine ... but they will not let us see her. We talk to each other, we pray. She is not confident. She says she is fine ... but is her child being treated? Many are not. Well, it will be over, perhaps in a few weeks. Meanwhile, many others are transferred to centers in the area, to be quarantined or to be cured of COVID. "We eat well", they tell us, "they give us medicine," ... but not everyone will take it because they do not trust - so much has already happened to them!

On the weekends, we take turns sending out a message of encouragement: God's Word for Sunday. Then, we celebrate Lent and Easter, some in their homes, the Oblates in the Church, which is, as before COVID, at once, both empty and full. Our Muslim friends likewise cannot pray in their Mosques during Ramadan, Eid el Fitr, Eid al-Adh. In this experience of religious home-sickness, we console each other.

After several months, the Mosques open, and we can also open the Churches in Laayoune and Dakhla, but not in El Marsa where Mary lives. We go back and forth. Before entering Dakhla, there is mandatory PCR, otherwise you may not continue. To be able to enter and celebrate on the weekends, we must undergo the test, once, twice ... some six times or more. Sometimes we wait more than five hours after a journey of six hours. And there, still masked, we celebrate and console one another while we wait. There are more quarantines... some people work, some do not.

In Dakhla, we must close the center for disabled children. The women who work at the center have invented "teleworking" in their own way. Using "WhatsApp", they describe for the mothers the prescribed rehabilitation exercises, physical therapy, speech therapy and it works! Even the children's siblings take part and learn! Bouh is happy. He is moved and we are moved. He still wants to reopen the center as soon as possible. After some months, he succeeds. We carry on, in spite of everything, even the loss of some children who left us during this time. They will be our angels.

As we are coming back from Dakhla, the phone rings. Mary's friend calls us: her labor pains have

begun. Although El Marsa is closed, it is possible to reach El Aaiún. Yunis prepares everything in the hospital for the birth. We are afraid... because of so many other women who have been accompanied by our helpers, in these months (more than eighty), only some of whom are still with us...and only some of their children. We pray. They call us: Yosuha is born! Yunis does everything possible so we can visit her, as he has done before, to enable us to visit other sick people, during this time. We see Mary, happy with Yosuha. We meet her partner who seems scared. They tell us that everyone is fine. We laugh.

The days go by. More trips, sick people, shipwrecks, people who stop working, phone calls, food assistance, medicine, ... Our helpers, themselves migrants, are exhausted, but they are happy. We too are worried; we do not know what we will be able to do next month or the next ... we trust, we prepare for next year ... We come and go, we celebrate Mass,

## SENEGAL

### **My first day with Saint Eugene of Mazenod! 25 years already...**

*Alfonso Bartolotta, OMI*

I was in my second year of mission in Senegal. It was the day before the canonization of Saint Eugene of Mazenod (Aix-en-Provence 1782-1861 Marseille), Founder of the Congregation of Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. And God gave us another rain, albeit out of season. The next day, December 3, 1995, before getting out of bed, I entrust to the Lord the desire to live this holy day with Saint Eugene and in union with all the Oblates of the world.

Everything necessary for the Holy Mass is ready, the Citroën C15 seems to be in excellent shape, ready for take-off towards Ndiémame. With me and the icon of Saint Eugene, there are two other young people. After two kilometers, here is a surprise: mud and puddles. The C15 loses stability and starts to skid, often ending up off the track: it was like ice skating!

The wheels are covered with mud, there is a risk of getting stuck. The C15 is out of breath, the red light comes on, and soon even the engine turns off.

we pray, we listen, we help, we do not know what else to do, we fight ... we live.

Today we take out this photo. In the last eight months, there has been no mass in El Marsa. There are only a few of us, practically hidden away, still not opening our doors, masked ...

Some say, "if this continues, we will have to go elsewhere because there is no work for us here," "To the Canary Islands?" I ask. They tell me, "No, for the moment, to Casablanca"; they laugh, like someone who is playing hide and seek.

"When we open our doors, we will have to celebrate to welcome Yoshua to the community," I suggest. "Yes," says Mary in a strong voice, almost singing and with a smile that disarms me. I smile, we smile, we dream... Angels, shepherds, magi, stars, songs, cries... Marías and Josephs and Jesuses... in the Sahara.

And they say there will be no Christmas, this year!

A quick glance, and I pass the first gear, but the wheels skate; the two young people push a little: nothing happening! I was going to get out of my hinges, I almost wanted to give up the sequel, and then I thought, "Today is your feast, Saint Eugene, and ours too, so give us a hand!" Another last effort and here is the C15 all happy on the track.

Once in Ndiémame, the catechist, before even saying hello, looks with astonishment at the state of the C15 and exclaims: "It was hard, but Saint Eugene helped you!" After an hour of confessions, we begin the Eucharistic celebration; on the wall of the chapel, the icon of Saint Eugene looks at us and assists us. We celebrate this Mass in union with the Pope and with all the Oblates of the world, even though we are here in the middle of the bush.

My thoughts, for a moment, flew to Rome, I imagined St. Peter's Basilica, all dressed for the feast, full of people of all different languages and colors, a sign of the universality of the Church and our religious family. Before my eyes, there was neither the Bernini's "Gloria" nor the choir of the Sistine Chapel and no longer the clouds scented with incense. As an Oblate, I was the only one, but I felt united with all the Oblates who celebrated the same sacrifice, in memory of Saint Eugene.

The cathedral... of Ndiémane is decadent, with cracks in the walls and under the tin roof -often the nocturnal shelter of bats- but whatever, we are called on a mission among the poor: and all this is a great gift from God. In every corner of the earth, where there are oblates, we speak today of Saint Eugene, and who knows in how many languages! I find myself speaking in French, but while celebrating Mass in the serer language.

At the end of the Mass, some faithful want to embrace the icon of Saint Eugene. We are ready now with the suitcases full of those items necessary for Mass and the remaining consecrated hosts to bring them back to Nguéniene, and a young man shows up with a hen and his nine chicks. This time our 'Noah's Ark' sails back to Nguéniène with a change of course: in search of asphalt. We find fewer difficulties, but we skate them well. It is not only the Paris-Dakar, but also the Nguéniène-Ndiémane, and vice versa!

Leaving the asphalt, we take the long 15 km laterite track which, along the way, offers us a free cloud of suffocating red dust. After barely 400 meters of track, we hear something like a gunshot and the C15 loses its head! We stop to see what has

happened: punctured inner tube and burst tyre. My Kodak watch indicated 12:45 p.m., and my colleagues were waiting for me at 1 p.m.!

With young people, we do everything to replace the wheel, but first we have to empty everything we put inside the car: the suitcases for the Mass, the consecrated hosts, the icon of Saint Eugene, ... The hen and its nine chicks! We can finally retrieve the spare wheel and replace it. After the bitter loss of a tube and a tyre, we put Noah's Ark back on track and fill it up with red dust, always free of charge. Once in Nguéniène, the colleagues as soon as they see the car say to me: "But where did you go?" The safari had been interesting, but it was over!

In the evening, before falling asleep, I thanked the Lord:

*Thank you, Lord, for giving us a Saint.  
Thank you, Saint Eugene,  
for founding our congregation.  
Thank you, Mary Immaculate,  
for calling me in this family.  
It was my first day with Saint Eugene and  
my heart was as big as the world.  
Saint Eugene, make us saints.*

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## ASIA-OCEANIA

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### AUSTRALIA

#### De Mazenod Family Gathering 2.0

*Fr Christian Fini, OMI (Provincial)*

The inaugural "De Mazenod Family Gathering" of the Province of Australia was held more than a year ago, in August 2019 in Fremantle and was the beginning of setting up the De Mazenod Family Office. A team was appointed including a Charism Coordinator and a Charism Coordinator Assistant, each one bringing their expertise from their current roles. It was always the team's intention to hold a gathering each year, with every second year being held online. With everything that has been thrown our way this year in 2020, we were becoming all too familiar with zoom and the wonders that can be achieved with technology.

Sunday 29th November was the day we gathered. We had around 100 people gathered with most connected as individuals, plus a small number who connected in Parishes as a community. De Mazenod Family Gathering 2.0 was an opportunity for us to introduce our team, and be able to "see" them, given that COVID-19 stopped us in our tracks, just as we were planning to head into Parishes and communities to meet in person.

Throughout this year we have worked on developing our Vision and Mission statements which will now guide us in all that we do. We also have a set of invitations where we invite you to join us and make a commitment to being an active member of the De Mazenod Family.

We heard about several programs that have been available to us as members of the De Mazenod Family including The May Program, (Winter) Harvest and Adore. While these programs have all been delivered online this year, we are hoping that we will be able to support and equip our communities with the resources they need to run some of these programs locally and in person.

We had a tour of some of our digital resources, including our De Mazenod Family website, our YouTube channel and our newly developed Learning Management System (LMS). The LMS is a project that we hope will develop significantly over the next 12 months with

courses being developed to cover a wide range of topics, including Introduction for new teachers in our Oblate Schools, History of the Australian Province, Charism, plus more that are in the early planning stages.

We also heard about the plans that we have for the coming 12 months. Meeting with people in the communities as travel restrictions ease and travel remains safe, connecting with those who are abandoned or inaccessible, developing a national committee for the De Mazenod Family with a cross representation of as many of our mission's communities as possible, planning for our next De Mazenod Family Gathering in 2021 in June, and more.

## AUSTRALIA

### Asia-Oceania Region Youth Gathering

On the 21-22 November, representatives from all across the region came together for the Asia-Oceania Region conference on Mission with Youth.

Over the two days, representatives from Australia, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Vietnam had the opportunity to explore the Congregation's Vision and Mission Document for Mission with Youth, launched last year at the Interchapter, and to develop an AORC network for Mission with Youth.

Originally planned to be held in Hong Kong in January 2020, it was postponed to August 2020. Unfortunately due to COVID-19 and restrictions on travel, the gathering moved to an online format. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as more representatives were able to attend. The gathering began with prayer, then each of the Units had a chance to share and introduce the work they are doing with their youth. The rest of the gathering was spent exploring and discerning the Vision and Mission Document. Each session began with

a short video presentation that introduced the 3 goals of the Vision and Mission, which was then followed by each Unit spending time discussing and exploring each goal and how it applies to their youth ministry. Units were asked to look at what they are currently doing in their mission with youth, what they are doing well, what could be improved and to come up with some new ideas or actions to implement in the future. After each Unit session, there was an opportunity to share with the whole region. Hearing from each Unit was very insightful and showed that many of the challenges we face in our mission with youth are universal and not just specific to our own Units.

The AORC Gathering on Mission with Youth was an incredible opportunity for the region to come together and share, forming new connections and strengthening old ones. Although we are from many different countries and cultures, we are united in our passion for the work we do with the young people in our region.

The Video resources and worksheets used to facilitate the program are now available on the Oblate Commission on Mission with Youth website, for other Regions, Delegations or Ministries to help explore this important document.

## **Bishop Victor passed away PAKISTAN**

Bishop Victor GNANAPRAGASAM, OMI, first Apostolic Vicar of Quetta, province of Baluchistan, Pakistan, passed away from this world on 12 December, 2020. He was the first and only Oblate Bishop from the Provincial Delegation of Pakistan.

Victor Gnanapragasam was born in Jaffna, Sri Lanka on November 21, 1940. At the age of 19, he entered the Oblate novitiate in Kalutara, Sri Lanka, and received the First Vows on May 31, 1960. After completing the studies of philosophy and theology at the Major Seminary of Our Lady of Lanka in Kandy, he was ordained a priest on December 21, 1966.

First he served as assistant parish priest in Oblate mission, Nilaweli, diocese of Trincomalee-Batticaloa (1967-1969); and then as a member of the community of Oblate Preachers in Jaffna (1969-1973).

It was in 1973, the young priest Fr. Victor was sent to Pakistan as a missionary. Since then, until his death, he dedicated his whole life to minister to the people of God in Pakistan.

His pastoral commitment was in many capacities: as Parish Vicar or Parish Priest in various parishes; as Formator the Oblate Formation Houses in Multan and Karachi; and as Major Superior of the Provincial Delegation of Pakistan.

His Superiors also sent him abroad several times for further studies: Studies in Youth Ministry in Manila, Philippines (1977-1979); Psychology and Spirituality at St. Anselm Institute in Kent, England and then later courses in Spirituality at the Angelicum, Rome (1989-1992).

As the Christian community in Quetta was developing fast in many ways, spiritual, social and political, a new Apostolic Prefecture of Quetta was established on by His Holiness John Paul II on December 07, 2001. Fr. Victor was appointed the first ever Prefect. In that capacity he was at the Vatican for the ad limina Apostolorum visit of the Pakistani Bishops in June 2008.

On 29 April 2010 Pope Benedict XVI elevated the Apostolic Prefecture of Quetta, to the rank of Apostolic Vicariate, and Fr. Victor was appointed as its Apostolic Vicar. He was consecrated Bishop at Saint Patrick's Cathedral, Karachi on 16 July 2010, by the then Apostolic Nuncio to Pakistan Archbishop Adolfo Tito Yllana.

Quetta is the Capital city of the Province of Baluchistan. It was in 1982 that the Oblate accepted a mission in Quetta for the first time. During that time it belonged to the diocese of Faisalabad.

This volatile province has witnessed in recent past suicide bombings, sectarian violence and at times religious-based discrimination as well. On several occasions, Bishop Victor narrowly escaped from bomb blasts and attacks. In 2013, he sustained injuries as a result of a suicide bombing that took place at the vicinity of the Bishop's House.

Bishop Victor served the Apostolic Vicariate of Quetta during the war in neighbouring Afghanistan, which was one of the biggest challenges during his episcopal ministry. As his Vicariate covers vast dessert mountainous areas which are controlled not only by the Pakistani military but also by Balochi rebels, always requires careful movements of priests, most of the time risking their own lives.

In spite of all those challenges, he was always close to his flock and made all efforts to attend their spiritual, pastoral and material needs often by visiting them and being with them. In the recent past, he suffered cardiac issues and despite his ailments, he continued to attend the needs of his Vicariate.

Bishop Victor has left behind a rich legacy to the people of Pakistan, especially the poor, the local church, to the Delegation, to Sri Lanka and at large to the Congregation.

Let us pray for the eternal rest of this great missionary Bishop who has served one of the most persecuted Christian Communities in the world. May his soul rest in peace and consolation to the entire OMI family in the Delegation of Pakistan!



## BANGLADESH Joyful Bethlehehic Experience

*Fr. Ajit Victor Costa, OMI*

On December 21st, after travelling 10 hours by bus, I finally reached the Oblate Parish of St. Paul in Katadanga in the evening. Fr. Rocky Costa, OMI, the Parish Priest, welcomed me, maintaining a 'healthy distance'. COVID-19 pandemic has constantly been teaching us new lessons. "Stay safe and Keep others safe". However, I had not other option but to travel by public bus!

"Your room is ready, but please wait for a few more minutes, hot water will be supplied soon for shower", he instructed me. I saw Dadu, an elderly man, boiling water for me using dry leaves as firewood. After 10 minutes he brought me a bucket of hot water and I had a refreshing shower. Now it is the season of winter in Bangladesh and obviously the need for hot water is inevitable. The poor villagers can hardly have this comfort!

At dinner table, Fr. Rocky gave me the "Daily Mass Schedule" beginning from December 22nd to December 25th. I was supposed to celebrate the Christmas Mass in many far away villages belonging to the parish. And a few other important instructions: a Nun will accompany me on this journey; a driver will take us to the villages by a vehicle (in fact, a three-wheeler), Mass-kits and Baptismal oils need to be carried as well; cloth yourself with warm cloths, and cover all the villages saying Christmas Mass, administering sacraments, etc.

Already on December 22nd, three days before the Church celebrates the birth of Jesus according to the "Ordo", we began the "Joyful Christmas Celebration" the birth of 'Emmanuel'. By December 25th, out of the 32 Catholic villages and 4 catechumen villages, we were able to offer Masses in 24 of them. The rest were not forgotten. According to the plan, the faithful in these villages participated in Christmas Mass celebrated in the nearby villages.

The Oblates undertook this Parish in 2009, under Rajshahi Diocese, only with 9 Catholic villages. Over the years, God has blessed us immensely to add new communities, thanks to the missionary zeal of the Oblates. Uraon, Santal and Pahari indigenous people became recipients of the gift of Catholicism. They are the most underprivileged ones who live in the periphery - the new faces of the poor we met. Earlier they followed traditional religions. Catechism, faith-formation, education, health awareness, and socio-economic-cultural development projects are the priorities of the OMI missions in these areas.

The simplicity, hospitality, simple but deep faith of these people touched me profoundly. We celebrated Christmas Mass for them either in a home or in a "hut-like" chapel (made out of tin, mud and bamboo). Yet my heart was resonated with "Bethlehehic Joy!" They hope that God will be gracious to grant their prayers to have a good chapel in future through kindhearted benefactors.

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## CANADA-UNITED STATES

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### At Home with God: Welcoming Our Lady of Guadalupe Online

#### UNITED STATES

- National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows

Usually, the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe is a day in which parishes, shrines, and Cathedrals are filled with the faithful who come to Our Lady's house and bring her music,

dance, flowers, and above all, prayers and petitions. Catholics and people of all cultural backgrounds and languages gather to celebrate the Mother of God. On December 12, 1531, Our Lady visited our North American continent in Mexico City. Devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe holds a special place in all Mexicans' lives, and her image has played an essential role in the lives of people in the United States and worldwide. The feast day recalls the apparitions

to St. Juan Diego, who was an Aztec convert to Catholicism. From December 9-12, the Mother of God appeared to Juan Diego and requested a little house - a shrine be built. On that mountain, she will be available to welcome the needs and prayers of "all the peoples of these lands."

Our Lady of Guadalupe visited our continent to help people of different races, and colors feel at home with God and others. In the little house that the Mother of God requested, the many native people and Spaniards found a home. In Our Lady of Guadalupe everyone finds a home with God. The roses that Our Lady sent to the Bishop in Mexico City were Castilian roses which were from his native land of Spain, she invited him to feel at home among the peoples he was sent to evangelize.

This year because of COVID-19, many churches are unable to welcome the usual number of pilgrims to the celebrations. This year, people worldwide are invited to welcome Our Lady of Guadalupe and her message of reconciliation to their homes. Our Lady of Guadalupe and her son Jesus come to us again and make their tent in the homes of so many who are asked to remain at home. By staying at home, the faithful are not abandoned by the Church or her ministry. By being at home, people are encouraged to open the doors of their homes and hearts to Mary's visit. Two thousand years ago, after the Angel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary that she would become Mother to the Son of God, Mary went in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth at her home. This 12th of December, Our Lady goes in haste to visit the homes of the many people around the world who look upon her as mother.

As Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, we are called to be close to the people we serve. Our Lady of Guadalupe is our model of closeness to the people of God. She is the first to "smell like the sheep," as Pope Francis invites us missionaries to do. The closeness of the missionaries this year is aided using social media and electronic means. Social media was once seen as a waste of time and

a dangerous place, today it is seen as a major channel for evangelization. Social media helps us missionaries reach people that otherwise would not go to Church.

Fr. Porfirio Garcia, OMI from Immaculate Conception parish in Houston has seen his "congregation" grow: "Our altar to Our Lady of Guadalupe will be outdoors so people can safely gather, but our Mass will be live-streamed. We have people joining our live stream from Houston, Brownsville, and some parts of Mexico."

The National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville normally hosts a big celebration for Our Lady of Guadalupe, but because of COVID-19 restrictions the celebration is limited to a live-streamed Mass. Fr. Raul Salas, OMI knows the importance of live-streaming the Mass: "It is important to live stream the Mass because it lets both the Spanish-speaking communities know that this feast is as important as any other liturgical feast and deserves this type of response to celebrate our Blessed Mother. Live-streaming the Mass helps remind the Hispanic Community that while we are separated physically our spiritual connection continues as we look for creative ways to minister to them as we battle this virus."

Online ministry does not have to be static; it can be participatory by the attendees. This is the experience that Fr. Ray Cook, OMI, Chaplain at Rice University hopes for when he uses social media for Mass: "There is a sense of connection to other community members who are online at the same time. We encourage them to respond to the Mass parts by typing their responses in real time. I also acknowledge people at home in my homily so they can feel included more intimately in the Mass."

Every day our missionaries find creative and safe ways to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ not only to their parishioners but to the countless number of people who hear the message of the Gospel on their cellphones, tablets, and social media platforms.

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## APPRECIATION

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### Fr. Wilhelm Henkel OMI

Wilhelm Josef Henkel, usually known as Willi among the Oblates, was born on 17 January 1930 in Wittges in the county of Fulda, Germany. Apparently, as a child, he showed interest in the Catholic priesthood. In fact, he wanted to become a missionary priest.

Willi knew the Hünfeld Oblate community, less than 20 km away from home, from childhood. Therefore, it is not surprising that Willi chose the Oblates. On April 25, 1952 he took his first vows as an Oblate.

Bro. Willi Henkel was sent to Rome in the summer of 1952 to study at the International Scholasticate of the Oblates. His memoirs read: "In Rome I lived in a community of about 100 Oblate students from all over the world. The Second World War was only seven years over. Yet, as a German, I experienced a great fraternal spirit ..." In 1955 he obtained a licentiate in philosophy from the Pontifical Gregorian University, followed by a licentiate in theology in 1959.

On November 1, 1960, the young Fr. Henkel was sent to study Missiology at the Westfälische-Wilhelms-University in Münster. Fr. Henkel was ordered back to Rome before graduation, on May 9, 1965. In the General House of the Oblates in Rome Fr. Henkel initially acted as a formator in the International Scholasticate and as coworker in the Mission Secretariat of the General Administration.

With the sudden death of the Archivist of the Pontifical Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Fr. Dr. Nikolaus Kowalsky, OMI (1911-1966), on June 6, 1966, a successor had to be found for the Vatican editorial team of the missionary records "Bibliotheca Missionum" and "Bibliografia Missionaria". The choice was made for the 36-year-old Fr. Henkel. Willi Henkel thus entered a long German Oblate tradition of missiologists.

On June 1, 1972, he was appointed Director of the Library of the Pontifical Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. Between 1979 and 1980, Father Henkel, as the new librarian, carried out the transfer of the library from the historic Palazzo di Propaganda Fide in Piazza di Spagna to a new library building at the Pontifical Urban University on the Gianiculum hill. In the new building, Fr. Henkel had merged the two libraries of the "Propaganda" and the "Urbaniana".

The second modernization project, which Fr. Henkel was responsible for in 1993/1994, was the digitization of the library. By 2004, more than 100,000 titles were accessible digitally. This process facilitates the use for the university studies immensely, since the Urbaniana has a number of affiliated seminaries and educational institutes worldwide, especially in the so-called mission countries.

Fr. Henkel's personal bibliography included, between 1968 and 2008, more than 90 articles on current mission topics, missiological research, mission history of the Oblates, the theology of Henry Newman, as well as the missionary history of Latin America and the Vatican. In 1991, Fr. Henkel was appointed consultant of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Here he worked among other things, on the beatification cause of John XXIII (1958-1963). He was also a founding member of the Advisory Board of the Journal for Media, Ethics and Communication in Church and Society, "Communicatio Socialis". At the same time, he was a scientific advisor to the "International Biographical Centre Cambridge". He was a member of the "International Association for Mission Studies" from 1980 to 1990. He also held memberships in the "Society for History of Councils", the "International Institute for Mission Research", the "International Association of Catholic Missiologists", and the "Roman Institute of the Görres Society". In 1980 and 1988, he organized two international missiology congresses in Rome at the Urbaniana University.

Fr. Henkel was also awarded various honors. He was an honorary member of the “German Society for Missiology”. In 1990, he was decorated with the “Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany”. On December 8, 2000, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C., USA, together with Fr. Josef Metzler, since 1984 Prefect of the Pontifical Secret Archive. On 29 July 2001, Fr. Henkel was made an Honorary Knight of the University of Salta in Argentina.

At the end of 2000, Fr. Henkel retired. His health had been in poor condition since 1996. However, until the end, he took an active part in community life. When the COVID-19 virus reached the Oblate community of Hünfeld on November 14, 2020, Fr. Henkel was one of the first infected. Due to his advanced age, he was not able to cope with the disease. He died on November 19, 2020, just before midnight.

R.I.P.

Fr. Thomas Klosterkamp OMI

## ANNIVERSARIES - January 2021

### 70th Anniversaries of Vows

06/01/1951	08974	Card. Sebastian Khoarai	Lesotho
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### 50th Anniversaries of Vows

25/01/1971	12178	Msgr. Augustinus Bane	Lesotho
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### 50th Anniversaries of Ordinations

09/01/1971	11659	Fr. Alfred Charpentier	Haiti
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### 25th Anniversaries of Vows

06/01/1996	14009	Fr. Tieli Emmanuel Lekhera	Lesotho
06/01/1996	14010	Fr. Moeketsi Andrew Moeti	Lesotho
06/01/1996	14012	Fr. Vincent Tanki Mosenye	Lesotho
06/01/1996	14011	Fr. Itumeleng Augustine Pharoe	Southern Africa
06/01/1996	14008	Fr. Augustine Tseliso Tente	Lesotho
21/01/1996	13628	Fr. Antonio Gonçalves da Silva	Brazil
21/01/1996	13651	Fr. Calixto Mamani	Bolivia
21/01/1996	13668	Fr. Arlindo Silva Moura	Brazil

### 25th Anniversaries of Ordinations

06/01/1996	13286	Msgr. Carlos Salcedo Ojeda	Peru
06/01/1996	13354	Fr. Josenildo Tavares Ferreira	Brazil

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**Suffrages for our Deceased**


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No. 103-117

NAME	PROV/DEL	AGE	DATE	DIED AT
Fr. Charles Héon	USA	83	2020-12-01	Tewksbury
Fr. Aloysius Kedl	Lacombe	91	2020-12-01	Saskatoon
Fr. Jean Col	France	96	2020-12-02	Chambéry
Fr. Wolfgang Boemer Bad	Central European	74	2020-12-04	Hersfeld
Fr. Albert Michael Schneide	Central European	86	2020-12-05	Hünfeld
Fr. André Houle	USA	94	2020-12-10	Tewksbury
Msgr. Victor Gnanapragasam	Pakistan	80	2020-12-12	Quetta
Fr. Antonio Di Benedetto	Mediterranean	82	2020-12-13	S.Maria a Vico
Fr. Salvatore Lavorgna	Mediterranean	86	2020-12-13	S.Maria a Vico
Fr. Robert Michel	N-D-du-Cap	86	2020-12-15	Richelieu
Fr. Gerard Brunet	USA	90	2020-12-19	San Antonio
Fr. James Pillar	USA	92	2020-12-19	Tewksbury
Fr. Benoît Garceau	N-D-du-Cap	90	2020-12-22	Richelieu
Fr. Myles Cyr	USA	93	2020-12-24	Tewksbury
Fr. Héctor Manuel Luján Guzmán	Mexico	55	2020-12-25	Ciudad de México

“They are before God, bearing the sign, the kind of character proper to our Institute, the vows common to all its members, the firm habit of the same virtues. We are linked to them by the bonds of a special charity. They are still our brothers and we are theirs. They now live in our mother-house, our main residence. The prayers and the love they retain for us will one day draw us to them and we shall live in our place of rest together with them.”

*(Letter of Founder to Fr. Courtès, 22 July 1828)*

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