

BLESSED JOSEPH GÉRARD, OMI

(1831-1914)



Eugene de Mazenod, as the founder of the congregation, constantly shared his vision for the life and mission of the Oblates with his missionaries. As the father of this religious family he embraced his sons with his whole heart and tender love. In his correspondence he prepared and inspired the Oblates, especially during the time of crossing frontiers into new cultures and challenges of missionary life. He carefully selected those sent to the foreign missions, focusing on their wiliness for the missionary life and ministry, at the same time assuring that they would carry his spirit, with the only desire for the Glory of God, good of the Church and salvation of souls.

Eugene wrote in the Instruction on the Foreign Mission, “Not all the members of the Congregation are fit for foreign Missions, but those only in whom the characteristic signs of that sublime vocation are to be found, and who, under the inspiration of grace, feel an inclination for such a ministry.” He obviously saw those qualities in young Joseph Gérard whom he sent to Natal mission as a deacon in May 1853.

Eugene insisted that his missionaries learn languages of the people they were to serve, so it doesn't surprise us that the first task for Gérard, after his ordination on February 19, 1854, was to learn English. It must have lifted Eugene's spirit knowing that this young Oblate showed an extraordinary talent to immerse into the language and culture of the people he served. This was clearly visible when Gérard, along with Fr. Barret, went to live among Zulu people.

Eugene was very straightforward and clear with his missionaries about his expectations. As he wrote to Bishop Allard, the superior of Natal Mission, “It is difficult for me to find any consolation, you were not sent [to Africa] to minister to the few heretics who people your town, but to the Africans, and it is their conversion that the Church expects from the sacred mission she intrusted to you.” Father Joseph Gérard must have known about Eugene’s vision for the mission since that was his priority to minister among those most abandoned who haven’t heard the Good News of Jesus Christ yet.

Eugene de Mazenod in his correspondence might have come across sometimes as very strong and demanding. However all the directions he gave to his missionaries were coming out of the father’s caring heart. This caring approach echoes in another letter to Bishop Allard, “I cannot recommend too strongly, my dear Bishop, that you be a kind father to all of them and at all times. You realize, I am sure, that these dear sons have only you to comfort them in affliction.”

His tender fatherly love can be felt in the encouragement he gave to Fr. Gérard after initial failure of St. Michael’s mission. Gérard shared his pain, but also resilience, in the face of difficulties in his letter to the Superior General on June 10, 1860, “Their objections against our holy religion are the same as the European unbelievers utter. Unfortunately they form but a compact whole with their chiefs. No one is strong enough to break away and become a Christian. That is the position at St. Michael’s. I am not discouraged; I am happy where I have been placed and if I had to begin again I would choose Kaffraria.” Eugene responded with compassion and empathy, but also with some words of encouragement and advice, “Their obstinacy is deplorable and must be the cause of great distress to you. After so many years and not a single conversion, it is frightful; still one must not be discouraged. The moment will come when the merciful grace of God will seem to explode and your kaffir church will take shape. For that it may be necessary to strike deeper among the native tribes. If you should find some who have not been indoctrinated by Protestants and who have not had contact with whites, you would probably succeed better...” (Letter of Eugene de Mazenod to Fr. Gérard on September 4, 1860).

This significant note from the father of the congregation introduces a turning point of the mission in Natal. Following his advice Bishop Allard and Father Gérard began a journey “deeper among the native tribes” which succeeded with beginning of the mission in Basutoland. In 1861 they went

to the king Moshesh who welcomed them into his land and agreed to let them open a mission station. This was the beginning of Gérard's journey of faith with Basuto people that he dedicated the rest of his life to. As Eugene would envision that, Fr. Gérard began with learning Sotho language and culture, visiting the people in their homes, building relationships with the approach of human, Christian, saints pedagogy. He used the "line-fishing" method, working with individuals that he learned from blessed missionary Laval whom he encountered in Mauritius during his travel to Natal.

Eugene de Mazenod, as the father of the family prepared, sent, directed and nurtured his Oblate missionary sons among whom was Blessed Joseph Gérard. His deep influence and insight on Gérard's life can be testified by the retreat note written by this missionary of Basuto people, "The answer is on every page of the Gospel: we must love them, love them, in spite of everything, love them always. The good God has wanted that we do good to a person in loving that person." I believe it truly sums up his missionary legacy and echoes Eugene's last words to his sons, "Among yourselves practice charity, charity, charity... And, outside, zeal for the salvation of souls." (Fr. Joseph Fabre, circular letter no. 9, May 26, 1861).

Blessed Joseph Gérard, pray for us!

By Jarek Pachocki, OMI