



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*”.¹ 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%

¹ Letter to Father General Louis Lougen, August 25, 2018.

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 first-hand 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..."² 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*"³ 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.

² OMI Constitution no. 13.

³ Message of the 36th General Chapter, no. 4.

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*”⁴.

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...*”⁵

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*”⁶ 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*”⁷.

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.*”⁸

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

⁴ Acts of the 36th General Chapter, no. 62.

⁵ Lubowicki, Casimir, *Mary*,” Dictionary of Oblate Values, published by the Association for Oblate Studies and Research, Rome (2000), p. 537.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 538.

⁷ OMI Constitution no. 10.

⁸ Email to the Assistant General for Mission, Fr. Ramon Bernabe, October 18, 2020.

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."*⁹

"You are Oblates of Mary Immaculate. May this name ... be for you a constant commitment to the mission".¹⁰

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!

Fraternally yours,

Ramon Maria Bernabe, OMI

Alberto Huamán Camayo, OMI

Guillaume Muthunda, OMI

Peter Stoll, OMI

(The Internal Committee for Mission)

⁹ Message of the 36th General Chapter, no. 6.

¹⁰ Address of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, to the 36th General Chapter, October 6, 2016.