

## **De Mazenod Experience in French, April 2023**

The first De Mazenod Experience in French, after Covid, was held at Aix-en-Provence from April 18 to June 16, 2023. This gathered Oblates of different origins, including those from missions outside of their home countries of origin: for example, Cameroun, Haiti, Brazil, Madagascar, Vietnam, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, along with Congo Brazzaville, my own country of birth.

As a part of ongoing formation, the De Mazenod Experience offers all Oblates the possibility to drink from the sources of the Congregation. "After many years of working in the Lord's vineyard, it also allows us to make a stop so that we can pose some questions to ourselves about our pilgrim way: the steps that are already taken and that which is still in front of us.

This De Mazenod experience occurred six months after the last General Chapter, which presented to us a program encapsulated in the theme: "Pilgrims of Hope in Communion." From this theme, the General Chapter gave us to use the fruits of their labors, the "Acts of the Chapter," which constitute a real vademecum so that we can continue our pilgrimage. It was in this spirit that we had lived through this beautiful De Mazenod Experience and the community at Aix, with the assistance of Fr. Jacques Nguyen Van Thom, a Vietnamese Oblate, who brought us the necessary teachings during this time of grace.

I have lived in the Aix community for two years, and from this fact, I can say that I know the place, but I still don't have the full knowledge of it, and I'm always studying to know better the history of our Congregation.

The first week of the Experience enabled us to situate ourselves in relation to the context into which our founder was born: the city of Aix, the history of the French Revolution, history of the Church in France, presented by the Vicar-General of the Diocese of Aix. The days of retreat placed at the weekend of this first week were for us like a spiritual sap, which irrigated our first encounters, so that they were for all an experience of a springboard, to live better the other moments which were to come in the Experience. In this way, we continued our Experience with numerous themes in the program, augmented by visits and pilgrimages to places important to the history of the Congregation.

Marseille, like Aix-en-Provence, is also a place full of history for us Oblates, the Founder, lived there from 1823 to 1861. As Vicar-General, then Bishop of Marseille, our Founder worked there as a Good Shepherd who loved his people until his death. Outside of many works of charity and parishes, the Basilica of Notre Dame de la Garde, which overlooks the city of Marseille, remains a place of pride for the Oblates. It was with much pleasure and with hearts full of joy that we made our pilgrimage to Marseille, visiting Notre Dame de la Garde, Les Accoules, the cathedral, and many other places, symbolizing the passage of the Oblates through the diocese. Father Bernard Dullier and Brother Jacques Langlet both helped us to live well on this pilgrimage, serving as passionate and remarkable tour guides.

In the same week, on Sunday, April 30, the Association of the Friends of St. Victoire organized a pilgrimage, unlike the others, an ascent of the Mount of St. Victoire! Some of our group had the courage to join them to go up to the summit, where we participated in a Eucharist celebrated in an old chapel of prayer by Monsignor Christian Delabre, Bishop of Aix-en-Provence. I was positively touched by the enthusiasm of the pilgrims. They were hyper-motivated, and I heard that something stronger pushed them to climb the summit of the mountain, despite the rain and the cold. Also, some people were elderly; to see this pilgrimage restarted after many years is something extraordinary!

### **The last month of the De Mazenod Experience included:**

-Two weeks of Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. This was a key moment in our time of renewal. It enabled me to meet myself where I was, to discover my weak and strong points, to enrich my spiritual life,

and to make certain resolutions in regard to my life of prayer, basing myself on the Word of God. I was greatly enriched.

-Mass celebrated at the Founder's tomb with the young people "Walking with St. Eugene." It was a moving moment that gave life to my vocation as a Missionary Oblate, ready to share the charism of our Founder with the laity and the youth. In effect, it is the charism, which makes of us, Oblates, Oblate Youth and laity, men, and women of communion, ready to spread this balm in the hearts of those who surround us.

-The collections of *Vie Religieuse, l'Eglise, Vie spirituelle du Fondateur* helped me re-read my vocation and continue to look to my baptism as a spring of real personal renewal. The tenacity of Eugene de Mazenod in all that he undertook appealed to me a lot. He did not back down before anything, he did not miss any effort to be worthy, including answering his baptismal vocation and putting all into the success of the Congregation that he founded. He was consumed by a particular love of the Church!

-The Visit to St. Laurent du Verdon. This place that shaped us, which saw the birth of our Rule of Life, is always worthy of a visit and worthy of addressing our prayers during a Eucharistic celebration in the chapel of this little village, calm and tranquil.

-The presentations of the various units made by participants in the De Mazenod Experience were, for me, an occasion for a glimpse into our different places of mission and an occasion to share with others the difficulties which mark our local pastoral activities; this enabled me to continue to pray for our confreres that work there, especially in difficult conditions.

The last week of the De Mazenod Experience was dedicated to an encounter with the General Administration, represented by the Superior General, Fr. Chicho, the Vicar-General, Antoni Bohm, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Assistant-General, Fr. Asodo Istoyo. They invited us to put into life the Acts of the 37<sup>th</sup> General Chapter on a daily basis and to make our Constitutions and Rules a true beacon for our Oblate life.

**Brother Jean Marie Diakanou, OMI**

**Aix-en-Provence**