

JOURNEYING WITH MARY IMMACULATE

January 25th, 1988 - Letter to the Oblates in First Formation - Rome

In order to be in line with the Church, currently celebrating the Marian Year, I shall speak to you in this letter about Mary in the life of the Congregation, and, in particular, about Mary in the life of an Oblate who is in first formation. «We are Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. This name is not a mere label: it is a definition of who and what we are...»[1]

Involved in the preparations for the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, the Founder wrote: «I consider it a duty to do all I can to make some contribution to the glory that this definition will bring to the Blessed Virgin.»[2]

To speak of Mary immediately after having spoken of Christ allows us to underline how much, in the Founder's mind and in our spiritual tradition, the Son and the Mother are indissolubly united.

Father Fernand Jetté said on March 23, 1979: «For us who are Oblates, two persons should habitually be present within us: Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin. And it is in their company and with their sentiments that we should be attentive to people's misery and want to respond thereto.»[3]

1. Mary in the Founder's experience

The spiritual experience that is the key to Eugene de Mazenod's life is centered on Christ crucified and occurred on Good Friday of 1807[4]. His spiritual life was always oriented and centered upon Christ; from this flows not only his spirituality based on the Saviour[5], but also his very missionary zeal which is so intent on evangelization. His Marian devotion too flows from the same source. Having deeply experienced the reality of salvation, Blessed Eugene sees Mary as Mother of the Saviour. In her he sees the person «who has given us him who is the world's life and salvation»[6], as the person who consecrates her-whole self to Christ's life and mission. He stresses Mary's will «to collaborate» in the work of salvation[7], and calls her «the coredemptrix of the human race»[8]. Contemplating her at the foot of the cross, in the moment in which she accepts every human person as her child, is a favored theme of his meditation[9]. Briefly put, we can say that the Marian aspect of our Founder's spirituality is eminently christological and soteriologically oriented; and thus, it is also ecclesial.

In the Founder's life we find several Marian spiritual experiences which have left a deep mark on his existence and on the life of the Congregation. Three are most significant: that of August 15, 1822, that linked to the approval of the Rules in 1825-1826, and that of his participation, in 1854, in the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854.

The first event occurred on August 15, 1822, a difficult time for the little Congregation that was coming into being. In his letter to Father Tempier, written in the evening of the same day, the Founder describes the fruits of this internal grace. Eugene, who from the outset of his spiritual formation had looked upon Mary as Mother, on this day fully felt what her maternity really is and what it means «to put all one's confidence in her.» In a new way he perceived the Congregation's true reality. He found it beautiful and «useful to the Church», in spite of the few vocations at the time and its great internal and external difficulties.

«It seemed to me that what I saw, what I could put my finger on, was that within her lies hidden the germ of very great virtues, and that she can achieve infinite good; I found her worthy, everything pleased me about her, I cherished her rules, her statutes; her ministry seemed sublime to me, as it is indeed. I found in her bosom sure means of salvation, even infallible, such is how they looked to me.»[10]

This gave him courage and hope for the future; it enabled him to face the difficulties realistically and with serenity. This very realism impelled him to seek out the roots of these difficulties, not only in others and in historical circumstances but also within himself.

In the Congregation the August 15, 1822 experience is referred to as «our Mother's smile.» The Founder's deion of it induces us to see it as an interior vision that he experienced as Mary's smile. This «smile» fills his heart with new strength and prompts him to resume a serene and realistic struggle «to surmount such obstacles.»^[11]

Changing our name from that of Oblates of Saint Charles to that of Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate was neither a fortuitous nor a secondary matter. Father de Mazenod was preparing the petition seeking pontifical approval for the Rules and the Congregation. During the novena and octave of the Immaculate Conception he discovered, in a context of prayer and meditation, that Mary was the best model of the apostolic life he wanted for his Congregation, that she was the person most consecrated to serving Christ, the poor and the Church^[12]. Thus he decided to change the Congregations's name. Sure that the change would be made, he wrote to Father Tempier on December 22, 1825:

«Let us renew ourselves especially in devotion to the most holy Virgin and render ourselves worthy to be Oblates of the Immaculate Mary. But this is a passport to heaven! Avow that it will be as glorious as it will be consoling for us to be consecrated to her in a special manner and to bear her name. The Oblates of Mary! This name satisfies the heart and the ear.»

And immediately after the approbation, he wrote to the same Father on March 20, 1826:

«May we understand well what we are! I hope that the Lord will give us this grace, with the assistance and by the protection of our holy Mother, the Immaculate Mary, for whom we must have a great devotion in our Congregation. Does it not seem to you that it is a sign of predestination to bear the name of Oblates of Mary, that is, consecrated to God under the patronage of Mary, a name the Congregation bears as a family name held in common with the most holy and immaculate Mother of God?»

After he had returned to Marseilles, he said at the 1826 General Chapter:

«This is the happy beginning of a new era for the Society. God has ratified the projects that we proposed for his glory, he has blessed the bonds that unite us. From now on we shall be giving battle to the enemies of Heaven under a standard that is our very own, a standard that the Church has given us; and on this standard shines the glorious name of the most holy Virgin, Mary Immaculate. This name is now our own for we are consecrated to the Blessed Virgin, for we are her children in a more particular way. Her protective concern for us, already so tangible today, will be even more so in the future, provided we show that we are worthy of such a Mother...»

The third event is like the crowning of the Congregation's place in the Church and of Mary's in the Congregation. The Founder's participation in the proclamation of the dogma in 1854 was a spiritual experience in which the mystery of Mary is superimposed on that of the Church and on the role of the Roman Pontiff. Some years later, in 1860, in his pastoral letter on the Church, the Founder wrote:

«The new Eve, destined to crush the head of this abominable serpent, is both a perfect, sublime reality and a figure of the Church, Mother of all Christians, just as the Blessed Virgin is the Mother of Jesus Christ and, by adoption, also Mother of all Christians who form one united whole with him. Indeed, without the Blessed Virgin who came to give birth to the Saviour, and without the Church that was established to give life in her womb to a lost world, the Creator's goodness would not have allowed his human creature, separated as it was from its Father in heaven, to multiply here below with the demon as its father, a

detestable tyrant who would have reigned as supreme master over the human race and its domain transformed into a hell.»[13]

These three spiritual experiences of the Founder manifest an awareness of Mary's presence within the Congregation, of her motherly role both in its life and in the life of each one of us.

Other events linked to Mary have been determining factors for the Congregation's life. Accepting the shrine of Notre-Dame du Laus in 1818, for example, was the occasion for the composition of the Rules and, consequently, for the religious expression of our life as missionaries. The increase of Oblate vocations is generally seen as linked to accepting missions abroad; I think, however, that it is equally due to the Congregation's Marian image.

Certain it is that in the Founder's life and in that of the Congregation, Mary has not been an incidental reality; rather, she has been at the very centre of our spiritual experience and missionary apostolate. «She is at the heart of the Oblate charism, but in a discreet, tactful way, as someone who inspires and sustains, who encourages and accompanies.»[14]

2. Consecrated to God under the patronage of Mary

«Oblate of Mary Immaculate, that is, consecrated to God under the patronage of Mary». That is how the Founder interpreted our new name and Mary's place in an Oblate's life. Our consecration is made to God, but through Mary, under her guidance, according to her example, and with her assistance. We give ourselves to Mary so that she may present us to God as persons who have in some way been fashioned and transformed into herself. This consecration is not only the act by which we give ourselves to God definitively by perpetual profession, but is rather a state of life which indicates the nature of our being and what we ought to be, that is to say, which indicates our perpetual commitment to strive for sanctity and to the apostolate. And all this under the patronage of Mary!

Father Deschatelets, in his circular letter no. 191 on «Our Vocation and our Life of Intimate Union with Mary Immaculate,» wrote in 1951: «If we would understand our vocation aright, then it is not enough to have only an ordinary devotion to Mary Immaculate. It is a matter of identifying with Mary Immaculate, of giving ourselves to God through her and in the same manner that she did, a donation which goes to the very depths of our christian, religious, missionary and priestly life.» (p. 348)

Oblates who have best incarnated our charism have lived this relationship to Mary Immaculate. The imminent beatification of Father Joseph Gerard recalls to us his attitude to Mary. The frequent invocations we come across in his diary reveal his confidence and love for Mary Immaculate. The people called Brother Anthony Kowalczyk, «Brother Ave Maria» because of his tender and simple devotion to Mary which he expressed by calling upon her constantly.

3. Mary as model and formator

Our Constitutions present Mary as the model of our faith (cf. C.10), as the model and guardian of our consecrated life (cf. C.13). They also remind us that «the goal of the formation process is that each of us become an apostolic man, capable of living the Oblate charism. 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.» (C. 46)

Blessed Eugene saw Mary as playing an important role in formation. This he did when he was director at Saint-Sulpice in Paris and thereafter with the young people in Aix-en-Provence. As Founder, he considered recourse to Mary an important factor in the increase and perseverance of vocations. He sent those in difficulty to a Marian shrine, convinced that Mary would help them in discerning and resolving their crisis.

«Let us pray to good effect that the Father of the family send us workers to cultivate the vineyard he has confided to us. This grace is one which is for our good Mother to obtain for us for the glory of her divine Son; let us ask for it from her with fervour and perseverance.»[15]

«You will come first to N.-D. du Laus to place yourself until further orders under the mantle of our Good Mother. It is my last effort to save you. Go there with an upright heart, call fervently upon this powerful protector, ask her to enlighten the director I appoint for you in this holy place and to give you the simplicity and docility you need in this situation, decisive as it is for your life.»[16]

Mary's place in initial formation is well spelled out in the novitiate directory which is considered to be the expression of the Founder's thought.

«After devotion to the Savior's sacred Person, the Society's novices ought to consecrate their entire love to his most holy Mother, the glorious and Immaculate Virgin Mary. Here it is a matter not merely of an ordinary devotion such as all Christians profess; nor only of a more special devotion that characterizes churchmen who are more faithful in striving for holiness; the devotion we ought to have for God's Mother is quite unique, one that only among us is verified to such a high degree.

We are not simply Mary's children as all Christians are and as the Church's ministers especially are: we are her children in a way that is more special yet. Jesus Christ it is who has given us his Mother through the intermediary of his Vicar on earth; we bear her name, we have left everything in order to belong to her, to have the happiness of calling ourselves her children.

What a grace and favor this is! How much we ought to value it! And what is any sacrifice worth in comparison to what we have received in return: we are Mary's children, we belong to her beloved family, we serve under her standard and under so great a title, the most glorious, namely, her Immaculate Conception. Will we ever sufficiently comprehend the grace God has given us when he called us to such a vocation? If it is true that no servant of Mary will ever perish and that those who live under her rule have nothing to fear, then what may those who can in all truth consider themselves as her sons of predilection not expect from such a Mother?

Novices of the most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary! If you could only grasp the greatness of the favor God has granted you by bringing you into the beloved family of his holy Mother! No matter how intense your tenderness, gratitude and devotion to Mary, it will never equal the greatness of her love for you. You will never adequately appreciate what she has done for you and all that you owe her in consequence.»[17]

In the novitiate directory of Notre-Dame de l'Osier, drawn up in 1853, the paragraph which treats of Marian devotion opens with this question: «Is it possible truly to love Jesus without loving his holy Mother?» The paragraph continues: «What a shame if we, her sons, her Oblates, do not love her with an ardent love, do not have a boundless devotion to her! (...) When one loves, one will find countless ways of manifesting one's tenderness.»[18]

Eugene's personality cannot be explained without taking into account the place Mary had in his formation, from his childhood until the seminary and on into adulthood[19]. Mary's presence is for him so normal that he does not feel the need to emphasize that fact. His relationship to her surpasses devotional forms and is rather a spontaneous life comportment. Oblates manifested the same kind of behaviour, as the Founder himself often noted.[20]

4. The Superior General's expectations?

Perpetual oblation is the goal of initial formation. It is not the final stage; rather, it denotes the interiorization of the Oblate charism under all its aspects, the ability to proceed fully along this way, a mature commitment to offer one's entire life to God in order to collaborate in his mission. Such a

consecration is attained and constantly lived out under Mary's patronage.

To achieve this, we ought to keep our eyes fixed on Mary and entrust ourselves to her in all simplicity. We must also get to know her.

I invite you to read books and articles on Mary's place in the Oblate charism, in the life of the Founder and of the Congregation. Reading and meditating John Paul II's encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* will help you not only to be in step with the universal Church, but also to deepen your grasp of the Marian elements that are mentioned in our Constitutions (cf. CC. 10, 13). I invite you to learn of Mary through Holy Scripture, the tradition of the Fathers, and the theology of Vatican II. Solid Mariology must not be lacking in the theological formation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

The «doctrine of faith» is, however, not sufficient for our formation. We need «the life of faith and thus an authentic Marian spirituality»^[21]. Hence, we cannot content ourselves with an intellectual knowledge of the mystery of Mary. We need to establish a personal relationship with her that is deep and full of simplicity. We must let our hearts be caught up by «created nature's amazement and admiration»^[22], an element which fills the Founder's writings. We need to live the reality expressed by the simple and profound words of Blessed Eugene: «They will always look up to Mary as their Mother.»

The Constitutions offer us a simple and traditional way of daily living such a relationship with Mary:

«With Mary Immaculate, the faithful handmaid of the Lord, and under the guidance of the Spirit, we enter into closer union with Jesus Christ. We will contemplate with her the mysteries of the Incarnate Word, especially in praying the rosary» (C. 36).

I learned to appreciate and live the Rosary in Laus where, during long journeys on foot, it was the only form of prayer possible. I appreciated it also when I came across forms of prayer akin to it among believers in other religions. As a matter of fact, our rosary not only has similarities of method with other religious traditions, but the beads derive from a similar Hindu object which was transmitted to Buddhism and has been adopted by the Moslems. Thus the rosary can be seen as a symbol and a means of unity among all who are in search of God.

By means of repeating the prayers of the Our Father and the Hail Mary, we are invited to meditate the mysteries of Christ's life with Mary's heart and outlook. Such an exercise helps us to deepen our consecration to God through Mary's patronage. It can also be a prayer of contemplation and communion for us. By praying with Mary and by sharing her attitudes in regard to the mysteries of Christ, we easily open our hearts to the needs of the human race, the Church and the Congregation. In the course of my long trips visiting Oblates, I often say the rosary with the provincial or another Oblate who is guiding me. As I have often experienced, after such prayer my outlook on people and situations is more serene. The rosary is the prayer of the poor and it helps us to be simple and welcoming, just as Mary is.

Mary also creates a family atmosphere. Her example and community devotion to her facilitate simplicity in our relationships, mutual trust, charity toward each other, as well as love for the poor and apostolic dynamism. My hope and wish for all the Congregation's formation communities is that, during this Marian Year, they bring, like John the Apostle did, Mary into their house and that she may transform them so that they become her own family. «By growing in unity of heart and mind, we bear witness before the world that Jesus lives in our midst and unites us in order to send us out to proclaim God's reign» (C.37).

In concluding, I want to tell you that I share the Founder's conviction which he expressed in writing to the Congregation:

«Under the patronage of our good and most holy Immaculate Virgin Mary, our Mother, the Congregation of the Oblates will continue to be a tree planted beside a stream of living waters. It has certainly produced an abundance of fruit already; it will produce yet more and will continue to prosper if it remains faithful, if it does not falter, and above all if it burns with a most ardent love for Christ, in the unity of the Spirit who «is the bond of perfection.»[23]

Nourished by this hope that springs from faith, I greet you with all my heart, in Christ and Mary Immaculate.

[1] Leo DESCHATELETS, «Our Vocation and our Life of Intimate Union with Mary Immaculate», in *Circulaires Administratives*, no. 191, p. 347.

[2] Eugene de MAZENOD, «Journal», 5 December 1854, in *Missions* 1873, p. 39.

[3] Fernand JETTE, «The Oblate and the Virgin Mary», in *The Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate*, Rome, 1985, p. 123.

[4] Cf. Eugene de MAZENOD, *Notes de Retraite 1814*, Postulation Archives OMI, DM IV, 2.

[5] Cf. Henri GRATTON, «La devotion salvatorienne du Fondateur», in *Etudes Oblates* 1942, pp. 158-171.

[6] Eugene de MAZENOD, *Pastoral Letter of August 8, 1849*.

[7] «Abrégé du Règlement de vie de MM. les Congreganistes de la Jeunesse Chrétienne», in *Missions* 1899, p. 10.

[8] Eugene de MAZENOD, *Pastoral Letter of February 8, 1855*. It is remarkable that the Founder gives each one of us Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate the same title in the famous text of the Rules of 1818. Cf. *Prima Pars*, cap. 1:3, N.B.

[9] Cf. Eugene de MAZENOD, «Letter to his Mother», May 1, 1810; Louis BOUTIN, *La spiritualité de Mgr de Mazenod*, Montreal, 1970, p. 66.

[10] Eugene de MAZENOD, «Letter to Father Tempier», August 15, 1822, *Letters to the Oblates of France 1814-1825*, p. 93.

[11] Cf. Kazimierz LUBOWICKI, *Maria nella vita del Beato Eugenio de Mazenod e della sua Congregazione*, pro manuo, Rome, 1987, pp. 120-148.

[12] Cf. Fernand JETTE, «Essai sur le caractère marial de notre spiritualité - I», in *Etudes Oblates*, 1948, p. 25. Two other studies follow this one: Roger GAUTHIER, «Essai sur le caractère marial de notre spiritualité - II», in *Etudes Oblates*, 1948, pp. 169-195, and Jacques CROTEAU, «Essai sur le caractère marial de notre spiritualité - III», in *Etudes Oblates*, 1948, pp. 237-262.

[13] Eugene de MAZENOD, *Pastoral Letter of February 16, 1860*.

[14] Fernand JETTE, «The Oblate Charism», in *The Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate*, Rome, 1985, p. 70.

[15] Eugene de MAZENOD, «Letter to Father Tempier» of April 13, 1826, *Letters to the Oblates of France 1826-1830*, p. 85.

[16] Eugene de MAZENOD, «Letter to Scholastic Brother Saluzzo» of December 8, 1831, *Letters to the Oblates of France 1831-1836*, pp. 47-48.

[17] «Directoire des novices», published by *Etudes Oblates*, 1958, p. 5.

[18] «Directoire du Noviciat de Notre-Dame de l'Osier», 1853, pro manuo, General Archives OMI.

[19] Cf. Kazimierz LUBOWICKI, *Maria nella vita del Beato Eugenio de Mazenod e della Congregazione*, pro manuo, Rome, 1987, pp. 12-120.

[20] Roger GUINDON, «Le caractère marial de la formation cléricale chez les Oblats de Marie Immaculée», in *Etudes Oblates*, 1955, pp. 133-147.

[21] Cf. JOHN PAUL II, encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 48.

[22] Hymn *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, (natura mirante); cf. also *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 103 (on the liturgy), Vatican II.

[23] Eugene de MAZENOD, *Letter Convoking the General Chapter*, March 19, 1860.

