

# RENEWING OURSELVES IN THE CHARISM OF EUGENE DE MAZENOD

January 25th, 1995 - Letter to the Oblates in First Formation - Rome

1995, the year of our Founder Eugene de Mazenod's canonization, is an epochal year in the history of our Congregation. It marks our lives, personal and collective. This was the reason for proclaiming a De Mazenod Year for the whole Congregation from May 21, 1995 to May 21, 1996 - the Founder's liturgical feast day.

The present letter, normally written to Oblates in first formation, this year is addressed to all members of the Congregation. I hope it will stimulate not only Oblates but all as well who wish to share Blessed Eugene's charism. I don't want to offer you just a text to be personally read, meditated and prayed over; its purpose is also to be an instrument of sharing, evaluation and discernment at the disposal of communities.

Each Oblate draws from the Founder the spirit which animates him, finds in him a life model. To this end, each of us has his own experience of the Founder, a personal view of him, finds in him a sympathetic consonance with his own vocation and aspirations. For the Founder is part of our lives and experience. To us he is not just a more or less well-known historical personage.

An objective knowledge of the Founder, of his spirituality and understanding of charism is surely important. His canonization should be the occasion for our knowing him better by benefiting from the many studies and publications of recent years. Eugene de Mazenod still remains a living person with whom we have a personal relationship. Since he lived between 1782 and 1861 a life rich in events and responsibilities, he owes his importance not simply to his achievements and intuitions, to the Institute he founded and the movement he created in the Church. To this day he continues to relate to us and we to him through the communion of saints. So, remembering him is not enough. We must develop a personal rapport, always more intimate, with him. That is the reason why I invite you together to focus your attention on the Founder, considering him as

- a saint to imitate,
- a founder to follow,
- a teacher to heed
- a father to love,
- an intercessor to invoke.

In his footsteps and guided by him, we will be able to renew ourselves in the charism transmitted by the Spirit to the Church through him.

## **1. A saint to imitate**

Eugene de Mazenod is being canonized, not because he was a founder or bishop or because he did great things, but because he was a saint. That is to say, he lived in a model way the life of a disciple of Christ in his vocation as Christian, priest, religious, founder, superior general and bishop. It is precisely because he lived the Christian virtues in a heroic way that he is presented to the whole Church as a model to be imitated. He wasn't born a saint - he progressively became one from being influenced by the divine graces to which he responded. He became one with his very typical human character that attracted some and repelled others. He became a saint due to events that

circumscribed his life and in spite of them. The secret of his saintliness rests in his relationship to the Christ with whom he increasingly lived in agreement, in his genuine love for God and neighbour, in his practise of christian virtues and in his apostolic zeal. Driven by the Spirit, he conformed his life to that of Christ Savior and Evangelizer, and he put himself unconditionally at the service of the Church. He thus became gradually a marvel of God's action and a human success - thanks to his personal zeal.

I have asked myself what would be the characteristics of his saintliness that can challenge and attract us Christians at the end of this millennium. I have indicated a few that I find most inspiring. You can complete the list or rearrange it from your own experience and knowledge of Eugene de Mazenod.

What inspires me above all is his relationship with Christ, one that was fresh and direct, personal and concrete. Not a stereotyped relationship that exhausted itself in formal, lifeless exercises. Jesus was a real person he met in multiple ways, above all in the Eucharist and in his ministry as missionary priest. He encountered him in persons such as his Oblates, his priests, the poor. A few experiences of a mystical nature left deep marks in him. But just as true and enlivening was his ordinary relationship with Christ through prayer and ministry. His belief that the purpose of mission was to teach who Christ is came from the fact that Jesus was for him a living person whom he had met and who was at the center of his existence. The Christ he knew was not just a simple truth to have others accept - he was a person to know, to love and in whom to entrust one's life, with whom to take decisions, in whose presence it was good to be. That is why liturgy was central, meditation and especially evening oraison constituted needs. After a long day's work, when he was a bishop, he loved to spend an hour of adoration in the presence of the Eucharistic Christ - wherever he was solemnly exposed in a church of his rapidly expanding diocese.

Our Founder sought the will of the Father and let himself be guided by the Spirit in and through Christ. The Trinity, whom he honored and adored in morning and evening prayers, was the horizon toward which he organized his life. He did so with a practical sense by adapting himself to situations. That is how he accepted to become a priest, to start a missionary community, to be vicar general and then bishop. He was a man of grand desires but more so a man who took courageous decisions after prudent discernment, matured in prayer and in faith. He sought the glory of the living and true God by accepting trials and sufferings - plentiful in his life. For him also, accepting the will of God, especially in certain circumstances, was neither automatic nor easy. It was the road leading to his christian development, often accompanied by unforeseeable turns as, for instance, after his episcopal ordination when he was persecuted by French authorities and felt himself abandoned by Rome.

He was a man attentive to others, sensitive to their needs, ready to intervene to help them. His missionary vocation was born and developed from the challenges he met coming from the people's need for salvation - he perceived them to be calls from the Savior. That is how the presence of prisoners of war in Aix urged him to place himself at their service, the Church's state of abandonment decided him to enter the seminary, the rural populations' need of re-evangelization impelled him to start a missionary community, urgent missionary necessities made him accept foundations in various continents.

For the same reason, when still a young priest, he preached to the domestics of Aix; then as bishop he chatted with the little people on the docks of Marseilles, visited the poor and sick of his city, stayed in regular contact with his missionaries. All this was made possible by his straightforward character and the experience acquired from his contacts with refugees and immigrants in Italy, with the peasants on his mother's property after his return to France, with the poor of his city. He did not

consider this to be philanthropy on his part. His love for others, above all for the very least of the poor, stemmed from the worth of the human person redeemed and loved by Christ. The salvation of souls became increasingly the motivating factor of his apostolic activity and guided his missionary sense.

De Mazenod's response to the Savior's call, as he perceived it through people's need of salvation, was first of all personal; but it very soon developed more and more into an ecclesial response, due to his forming with others a community capable of answering needs by promoting collaboration with other apostolic forces, by intensifying communion with the Church throughout the world.

Impassioned for Christ, Eugene was an unconditional servant of the Church. Not just an institution, the Church was also and above all "that glorious inheritance purchased by Christ at the cost of his own blood... the beloved spouse of God's only-begotten Son... the mother who appeals for help." As he made clear in the Preface, his personal motivations and those of his Institute were intimately linked: "the glory of God, an ardent love for the Church and the salvation of souls." The glory of God and the ardent love for the salvation of souls went hand in hand and expressed "the good and service of the Church." Surely he was able to recognize the ills of the Church of his time and even the limitations and errors of her ministers, while at the same time recognize her divine dimension. For this Church he worked with devotion and suffered with dignity. He also made her known and loved by his Oblates and his diocesan people - one cannot love Christ without loving the Church.

To respond to the urgent calls for the salvation of souls and the service of the Church, Eugene accepted - against his own inclinations - always heavier burdens: superior general, vicar general, auxiliary bishop, Bishop of Marseilles. He progressively understood that the Master of the vineyard was calling him to serve him through these ministries. In doing so he practised virtues always in a more heroic way. His administrative functions became his training ground to give himself to God and the concrete way leading him to holiness.

Eugene saw far, his horizons were limitless and his love for humankind embraced everyone. The exile of his first years, his contacts with persons and peoples in cosmopolitan cities like Venice, Naples and Palermo, his reading on missions while still an adolescent, his contacts made in the seminary with the imprisoned Roman Curia, his presence in Marseilles now a port opening on other continents, the sending of his missionaries to other countries, all these factors constantly broadened his horizons and opened his heart. As a bishop also, he passed on to his faithful an interest in the world's problems and the Church's needs. He was a universal man and a pastor in the broad ecclesial sense. He did not limit himself to writing pastoral letters on liturgy, catechesis and preaching, or on the pope's imprisonment and the rights of the Church; he wrote as well on famine in Ireland, the Anglican Oxford Movement, on opening up to Africa.

His personality makes him sympathetic to us. He was an upright and straightforward man. He knew how to take a stand. It was clear what side he was on. Still he was not stubborn. He knew how to modify his stance, even if it cost him. Thus he accepted various forms of government, freeing himself of his monarchist legitimist positions. He accepted as well certain Roman decisions with which he did not agree. He did so with faith, after having expressed his viewpoint. Thanks to his efforts over a period of years, he found a growing unity in his life between his contemplative needs and his apostolate, between his mystical requirements and his active character, between his duties as superior general and those of a bishop.

The sources of his spirituality

When formulating his spirituality, he was influenced by the French School, especially during his seminary days in Paris – giving him high regard for the priesthood and its demands of holiness. He was influenced also by Ignatian spirituality and that of Alphonsus Liguori. Other sources marked him deeply and always in a more decisive way: Scripture, liturgy and life. Thanks to his faithful daily reading of Scripture, the Word of God shaped his faith vision, his prayer and understanding of evangelization. True also of liturgy. Down-to-earth life with all its human and ecclesial challenges was for him – a positive realistic man – a constant school and source of Christian and missionary growth. He had a few spiritual experiences that left deep marks upon him – particularly his Good Friday experience of 1807; we can consider it as a second conversion, the foundation of all his spirituality and the focal point of his faith experience. A thorough study of these sources could show us an abundance of wealth.

Canonization is recognition of the saint. His sanctity however is not separated from the call to be founder and father of a larger family. The Spirit prepared and led him to be a model to those who share his charism – it had a prototype in him and not solely an initiator and master. As a model of holiness Eugene refers us to Christ, above all in his mystery as Savior and in his ministry as Evangelizer. Just like Mary he leads us to Christ; this is where the Marian character of Eugene and of the Oblate charism is rooted.

## **2. A founder to follow**

A founder is not simply the initiator of a human undertaking. His person and work can be fully understood only within the divine salvific economy, led by the Holy Spirit – first actor of the Church's life and mission<sup>[1]</sup>. The Spirit is the one who raises up founders and through them enriches the Church with religious families. Thus by means of Eugene de Mazenod he gave rise to a religious Congregation dedicated to evangelizing the poor. By him he transmitted to the Church a missionary charism, he fashioned an apostolic corps and launched it on the world's highways.

To understand the charism of one's own institute, it is necessary to understand the founder and enter into harmony with him, his inspiration and project. Thus we perceive the gift that was made through him to the Church. By means of Eugene de Mazenod, divine intervention made its way through the reading of the Church's ills and particularly through an awareness of the faith loss in large segments of society. The enormity of these needs touched him. Moved by the Spirit, he gathered companions to join him in giving a gospel answer – the re-evangelization of the poor, especially in rural areas. Following Christ Saviour and evangelizer

To accomplish this work of re-evangelizing, the model, source and center is Jesus Christ Savior and Evangelizer, who gathered disciples around him to form and send them. "Christe salvator. That is the aspect under which we ought to contemplate our divine Master," he wrote to Father Tempier in July 1816. This intuition, rooted in his Good Friday experience, took shape along his spiritual apostolic way, particularly in his search for an answer to give assistance to the abandoned Church. Starting from the perspective of Christ Savior and Evangelizer, he wanted to give their true weight to various realities: humanity, particularly the poor, the Church and the community. All the spirituality he lived and transmitted is marked by the vision of Christ Savior calling all Oblates, so that they cooperate with him in saving the world by proclaiming the Good News.

Starting from this gospel reading, Eugene formed his Congregation by establishing it on three main values constituting the base and pillars of the whole structure: mission to evangelize the poor, community life, commitment to the sanctifying of the members themselves.

The priority of evangelizing by proclaiming in his native country found expression in the preaching of parish missions - intended to awaken faith and reanimate christian communities made lukewarm by recent cultural and political events. In mission countries this proclamation was directed to transmitting the faith and building new christian communities. This evangelizing was a priority born of needs perceived, whose purpose was to make men of the hearers, then Christians and finally saints.

Community was considered essential from the very start, based on the experience and model of the Apostles. Indeed, community was at the origin of the Institute's growth. Some forty foundations that came into being in France at the same time have disappeared, due to the weakness of community life, the lack of care in selecting candidates and their inadequate formation.

Commitment to holiness resulted from missionary necessities: proclaiming the Gospel demands preachers who are witnesses above all. The choosing of religious life with its practise of vows and ascetic requirements was a logical consequence of this demand.

Our Oblate charism should evidently not be reduced to these characteristics, even if they form the pillars of the foundation and subsequent growth of the Institute. Other dimensions distinguish it, such as the choice of the poor and the abandoned, the priestly character, devotion to Mary, love for the Church, attention given to urgent pastoral needs, commitment to universal mission, closeness to people, apostolic courage, radicalness of oblation, fraternal charity, apostolic zeal, etc. This charismatic outlook was lucidly proposed again by the new Constitutions that had been prepared by consulting the whole Congregation; they received the unanimous vote of the 1980 Chapter and were approved by the Holy See in 1982.

The charism of Eugene de Mazenod was transmitted to the Congregation of Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, but it has reflected far and wide. In various ways it influenced the birth of Religions Congregations, Secular Institutes and groups of lay associates. Each group has developed certain aspects and made its own synthesis. We could in truth speak of a constellation of Mazenod charism, bearer of a rich fruitfulness in its far-flung influence.

### **3. A teacher to heed**

The Council and subsequently the Magisterium invite us to renew ourselves in the spirit of the Founders. The first criterion is certainly that of self-renewal in Christ - to whom each founder refers and of whom he reveals an aspect. For Eugene, Christ is the real Founder of the Institute, the model. In his first Rule he wrote: "What more sublime purpose than that of their Institute? Their founder is Jesus Christ, the very Son of God; their first fathers are the Apostles. They are called to be the Saviour's co-workers, the co-redeemers of mankind."

On the other hand he was conscious of his own role, not only for getting the Institute on the way but also for transmitting and interpreting its spirit, its missionary aims, the details of life in common. Writing to Father Honorat, he disapproved of certain independent ways of doing: Blaming this fault "came to my mind quite naturally when I thought of men to whom I have given birth into the religious life and who allow whole years to pass without giving me a sign that they are alive and without thinking of learning from me the spirit which they must also show, if they acknowledge my fatherhood and the authority that the Church gives me over them"<sup>[2]</sup>.

Eugene has left us no treatises on spirituality. Practical man that he was, he let himself be guided by the Spirit according to circumstances. So it is important to grasp his way of making choices, of

responding to challenges, of translating into practice his intuitions. Nevertheless, he did not omit giving indications on the spirit of the Institute, starting often from real life situations – so many precious pearls, often enough, fruitful intuitions, seeds transmitting life to the charism. Beyond collections already published, it seems to me that some texts have a particular importance. I have chosen five that I offer for your meditation as means of entering into the intuitions of Eugene de Mazenod and for our charismatic renewal.

The most significant text is the Preface to our Constitutions and Rules. Written as a *Nota Bene* is the original Rule of 1818, it has been slightly modified and introduced in 1825 as Preface in the first Rules approved by the Holy See. In the radical re-formulation of the Constitutions made by the 1966 Chapter, it was retained in full and presented as the *Magna Carta* inspiring our Oblate charism. In fact, not only does it recall the historical genesis of our charism but also the methodology for its fulfilment.

It begins with a lucid look inspired by faith at the needs of the Church. These needs of salvation constitute an appeal that touches Eugene and a few priests and impels them to respond generously for love of the Church. They find a way to respond by contemplating Jesus as Savior and by imitating him as Evangelizer. Just as Christ formed a few disciples in his school and way of life to send them later to evangelize the world, so does this group of priests want to be schooled by Jesus in order to be able to evangelize the abandoned populations of the region. They thus follow the ideal of the Apostles called by Jesus to be with him and sent by him (cf. Mc 3,14).

We find in this text:

- a. the genesis of the Oblate charism which is born of the emotion felt when faced with the people's need for salvation and the ills of the Church;
- b. the christological perspective that contemplates the mystery of Christ Savior and chooses the ministry of Christ Evangelizer, by following his pedagogy of formation;
- c. the love of the Church contemplated as mystery but seen as abandoned due to the unfaithfulness of Christians and the lukewarmness of her ministers. By putting themselves at her service, Oblates adopt a form of extraordinary ministry;
- d. the community with Jesus as a school of holiness and of apostolic zeal;
- e. the purposes and stages of evangelization itself: start by making men more reasonable, then christian, and finally help them become saints;
- f. its content: teach who Christ is, pull them from the devil's legacy and show them the way to heaven;
- g. the call to holiness for missionaries and Christians themselves: working seriously to become saints with the requirements of the Kenosis;
- h. the need for rules of life that gather all members in a uniform practice and a common spirit<sup>[3]</sup>.

The radicalness of the Oblate vocation is well described in a text of the 1853 Rule: "Whoever wishes to become one of us must have an ardent desire for his own perfection, and be inflamed with love for our Lord Jesus Christ and his Church and a burning zeal for the salvation of souls. He must free his heart from every disorderly affection for things on earth, and from excessive attachment to parents and native land; he must have no desire for money, but will rather look upon riches as so much rubbish so as to seek no gain other than Jesus Christ; his desire must be to commit himself to the exclusive service of God and of the Church, whether in the missions or in the other ministries of the Congregation. Finally, he must have the will to persevere unto death in fidelity and obedience to the Rules of the Institute"<sup>[4]</sup>.

Charity among ourselves and apostolic zeal have always been emphasized by Eugene, witness the text he wrote in answer to a particular situation. In 1830 he had visited the community of Notre-Dame du Laus. He remained saddened by the lack of regularity that was evident there. In the letter that followed, written in

Fribourg, he returns to this theme and, recalling the observance of the Rules, he indicates the unifying principle of all our life. "There must be a common spirit which vivifies this particular body. The spirit of the Bernardine (Cistercian) is not that of the Jesuit. Ours also is our own. Those who have not grasped this, through not having made a good novitiate, are among us like dislocated members. They make the whole body suffer and are not themselves at ease. It is indispensable that they put themselves back in their place."

To illustrate this spirit he speaks of charity in its triple expression - toward God, toward confreres and toward others. "Charity is the pivot on which our whole existence turns. That which we ought to have for God makes us renounce the world and has vowed us to his glory by all manner of sacrifice, were it even to be our lives. (...) Charity for our neighbour is again an essential part of our spirit. We practice it first amongst us by loving each other as brothers, by considering our Society only as the most united family which exists on the earth, by rejoicing over the virtues, the talents and other qualities that our brothers possess just as much as if we possessed them ourselves, in bearing with mildness the little faults that some have not yet overcome, covering them over with the mantle of the most sincere charity, etc.; as for the rest of mankind, in considering ourselves only as the servants of the Father of the family commanded to succour, to aid, to bring back his children by working to the utmost..."<sup>[5]</sup>

Our spirit of oblation is well indicated among others in a letter of 1817 written in Paris to his community: "We are put on earth, particularly in our house, to sanctify ourselves while helping each other by our example, our words and our prayers. Our Lord Jesus Christ has left to us the task of continuing the great work of the redemption of mankind. It is towards this unique end that all our efforts must tend; as long as we will not have spent our whole life and given all our blood to achieve this, we have nothing to say; especially when as yet we have given only a few drops of sweat and a few spells of fatigue. This spirit of being wholly devoted to the glory of God, the service of the Church and the salvation of souls, is the spirit that is proper to our Congregation, a small one, to be sure, but which will always be powerful as long as she is holy. Our novices must steep themselves in these thoughts, which must sink deep in them and be often meditated. Each Society in the Church has a spirit which is its own; which is inspired by God according to the circumstances and needs of the times wherein it pleases God to raise these supporting bodies or rather it would be better to say these elite bodies which precede the main army on the march, which excel it in bravery and which thus obtain the more brilliant victories."<sup>[6]</sup>

The last text that I present you is dated August 15, 1822, written at a trying time. It relates the marian devotion and apostolate of the Founder and the Congregation with the fecundity of our family. "The ceremony has just finished, very dear and most good brother, silence reigns in the house.. It is broken only by the sound of a distant bell which announces the great procession. Satiated with the sincere tributes that we have just rendered to our good mother, at the feet of the beautiful statue that we have installed as a souvenir of her in our church, I am letting the others take care of honouring her with the external pomp of a parade which would add nothing further to my perhaps over-demanding piety. Let this interlude be used to converse with you, dear friend, in sweet outpouring of the heart. Would that I could share with you all that I experienced in the way of consolation on this beautiful day devoted to Mary our Queen!

"I had not felt for a long time as much joy in speaking of her grandeur and in encouraging our Christians to put all their confidence in her, as during my instruction this morning to the Congregation (Youth Sodality of Aix) (...) I believe I owe to her also a special experience that I felt today, I will not go so far as to say more than ever, but certainly more than usual. I cannot describe it too well because it comprised several things but all related, however, to a single object, our dear Society. It seemed to me that what I saw, what I could put my finger on, was that within her lies hidden the germ of her 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. Only one reason for regret came to diminish and

almost entirely efface the joy by which I would fain have let myself be carried away: it was myself."<sup>[7]</sup>

Besides these texts, I draw your attention again to the Constitutions and Rules that reflect very well the charism of Blessed Eugene in language adapted to our day. The canonization of the Founder will be an occasion for rediscovering them, for meditating them anew and for praying them. On this score I repeat what the Founder wrote to his Oblates after the final revision and papal approval, August 2, 1853: "I would like to sum up my advice by this single recommendation: read and meditate your holy Rules. There you will find the secret of your perfection; they include everything that is to lead you to God. (...) Read, meditate and observe your Rules, and you will become true saints, you will build up the Church, you will honor your vocation, and you will attract graces of conversion on the souls you will evangelize as well as every kind of blessings on the Congregation, your mother, and on its members who are your brothers. Read, meditate, faithfully observe your Rules, and you will die in the peace of the Lord, assured of the recompense promised by God to him who perseveres to the end in the performance of his duties."<sup>[8]</sup>

#### **4. A father to love**

Normally founders consider themselves fathers or mothers of the Institute founded by them. This feeling was very pronounced in Eugene de Mazenod, to the point of becoming an "emblematic example"<sup>[9]</sup>. This attitude ties in with a characteristic of the Oblate charism - fraternal charity<sup>[10]</sup>.

Eugene was quickly conscious of this factor. In his retreat notes of 1824, he wrote, "I can well say of these dear children like the mother of the Maccabees that I don't know how they were formed in my womb"<sup>[11]</sup>. A few years later, he wrote, "I am your father, and how much a father!"<sup>[12]</sup>. In his correspondence during the 1850s, this affirmation was often repeated like a refrain.

It was a paternity that he received from his charism of Founder, "God predestined me to be the father of a large family in his Church..."<sup>[13]</sup>. It entailed a deep love for his Oblates: "I love my sons immeasurably more than any human person could love them... That is no doubt because of the position that he has deigned to give me in his Church"<sup>[14]</sup>. This is a special gift for which he thanks God: "This expansive love which is my own gift and which pours itself out on each one of them without taking anything from the others, just like, I make bold to say, God's love for men"<sup>[15]</sup>. He is convinced that this love relationship between him and the Oblates is not found in other religious families. "I have seen many religious orders. I am in very intimate relations with those that are most regular. Well, apart from their virtues I also give them credit for a great esprit de corps; however, this more than paternal love that the head has for the members of the family, this cordial affinity of the members for their head which establishes between them a relationship springing from the heart and which forms true family ties between us - father to son, son to father - this, I have not come across anywhere else. I have always thanked God for it as a particular gift which he has deigned to grant me... I am saying that it is this sentiment, which I know comes from him who is the source of all charity, which has evoked in the hearts of my children this reciprocity of love which forms the distinctive character of our beloved family"<sup>[16]</sup>.

Death does not put an end to this relationship of paternity. Canonization confirms that Eugene shares the glory of saints, so his communion is with us as well. In 1828 after the recent death of a few Oblates, he wrote to Father Courtès: "We are attached to them by the bonds of a particular charity, they are still our brothers, and we are theirs; they dwell in our motherhouse, our headquarters; their prayers, the love which they keep for us, will draw us one day to them so as to dwell with them in the place of our rest"<sup>[17]</sup>. The Founder is present to us because he is close to God. He continues to love us and expects not only a fraternal love among us but also a filial love for him. This is the love that will make us understand his initial inspiration, share his attitudes to live his charism in today's Church and that will put us in harmony with his spirit.

#### **5. An intercessor to invoke**

Since the time when the Lord called him to his reward, May 21, 1861, Blessed Eugene has not transmitted new orders to us, he no longer reacts in words to new situations and to our choices. But in his paternal

love and as a qualified saint he can intercede for us with the Lord. Graces and miracles granted by his intercession are examples of his availability. I believe that he must be particularly available for the renewal of his Oblates, for the greater incisive missionary quality of his Congregation, for the grace of new and authentic vocations, for the adequate formation of apostles full of zeal - all intentions that were dear to his heart.

In heaven he intercedes for his own as he did before the Blessed Sacrament. He wrote to Father Lacombe: "You could not believe how much I think in the presence of God of our dear Red River missionaries. I have only one way of drawing near to them, and that is in front of the Blessed Sacrament, where I seem to see you and to touch you. And you for your part must often be in His presence. It is thus that we meet each other in that living centre which serves as our means of communication. And your sufferings and work, arduous as they are, can you believe that they are not frequently the subject of my conversation and my admiration?"<sup>[18]</sup>. As in his earthly life, his intercession calls for a reciprocal presence and communion in the Lord.

We can pray with him and not only turn ourselves to him as to our intercessor. Blessed Eugene has left us prayers that he had composed and used. I offer two of them to you: the first, written before his ordination, in which he asks to be able to love Christ, and the other in which he asks for perseverance in his Oblate vocation. We can use them to enable us to be renewed in his spirit and to pray with him with the same formulas.

*Prayer to grow in love for Christ:*

O Lord, my God, double, triple, increase my strength a hundredfold, that I may love you not only to the utmost of my ability - which is a mere nothing - but that I may love you as fully as did the Saints, as fully as your Holy Mother did and still does. And yet, my Lord, this is not enough. Why should I not wish to love you to the extent you love yourself? It is an impossibility, I know, but I can certainly wish it, and do so sincerely from the depths of my heart, with all my soul. Yes, my Lord, I wish to love you as much as you love yourself<sup>[19]</sup>.

*Prayer to persevere in the Oblate vocation:*

Almighty, eternal God, you have called me, your unworthy servant, through no merit of my own but solely out of your great mercy, to serve your divine Son in the Congregation of the Immaculate Virgin Mary.

Humbly I pray, through the merits of the precious blood of our divine Savior, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary conceived without sin, and of my patron saints: grant me the grace to be faithful to this holy vocation.

Grant that I may not weaken in this holy resolve through any effort of the enemy of my soul, nor be deterred by impulses of the flesh, dissuaded by love of parents or counsel of relatives, restrained by fear of difficulties, distracted by the vanity of this world, overcome by bad company; that my passions may not impede me, work not break me, nor the suggestions of Satan pervert me.

You have given me your gift to begin, give me now the power to persevere according to your holy Will.

O God of Love, especially give me the talents I need to reach my goal, as well as confidence in those who are my spiritual fathers. Grant that I may labor unceasingly for my own and my neighbor's salvation, and, above all, to promote your glory. Amen<sup>[20]</sup>.

## **6. Renewing ourselves in the charism**

In recent years theological reflexion and even the magisterium make use of the word charism to indicate consecrated life in general and still more its various forms. It was employed as a privileged category by the Congress of the Union of Superiors General, held at Rome in November 1993. Thus we speak of the founder's charism, transmitted to his Institute.

The word charism, when applied to a particular form of consecrated life, points to four aspects in particular:

- a. a trinitarian aspect underlining the initial and constant rapport with the Spirit from whom come all gifts; configuration with Christ, experienced and expressed according to one of his mysteries and/or a ministry; a rapport with the Father whose love for humankind is perceived and lived;
- b. an ecclesiological aspect, that is to say, a privileged rapport with the Church, for whose edification every gift is made;
- c. an intrinsic aspect unifying the various dimensions of the charism itself, that are independent and comprise the essential values, the meaning and choices of the mission, the spirit of togetherness, the pathways of formation, etc;
- d. a rapport of continuity with the founder. "The charism of founders reveals itself as an experience of the Spirit, transmitted to their disciples to be lived by them, kept, deepened, constantly developed in harmony with the Body of Christ in perpetual growth."<sup>[21]</sup>

The charism is not a notion built up with the play of concepts and wild imaginings. Nor is it an object or an immobile good transmitted automatically or by acquired right. It is a gift of the Spirit and a living experience of Christ, something existential and vital. It can be deformed, weakened and even lost for various motives, above all by the loss of contact with the very source that is the Spirit of God and with the weakening of the Christ experience.

I have asked myself what would be the conditions needed for the charism to be lived, preserved, deepened and constantly developed. Here are the ones that seem to me to be the most important.

The first condition is availability to the Spirit, not only through the prayer of supplication but as well through interior attitudes allowing the Spirit to manifest himself and through ways of doing which allow him to act, such as discernment.

Constantly deepening our personal and communitarian relationship with Christ, through an always more complete knowledge of him, an always greater identification so as to let him live in us and act through us (cf C 2). Active faithfulness to our vows is its privileged and inescapable path. It will lead us to a progressive and transforming experience of Christ, contemplated in his mystery as Savior and imitated in his ministry as evangelizer.  
in harmony with the Founder

Love, knowledge and devotion to the Founder create a syntony with him, in such a way as to help us understand and follow his spiritual and apostolic way, by making us capable and available to the action of the Spirit. For the Spirit has acted in him by giving rise not only to intuitions and initial initiatives but as well by making his undertaking evolve in answer to new challenges. This pedagogy of the early days can teach us to confront new turns to be taken. We must particularly apply ourselves to live the dimensions of the Mazenod charism - they remain clear and current. We must especially live with zeal and creativity the mission to re-evangelize the "degenerate Christians" and carry the Good News to "non-Christians", following the trajectory in depth traced by the Founder himself and well expressed by the Constitutions<sup>[22]</sup>. I believe that on the occasion of the canonization every Oblate unit should develop forms of extraordinary evangelization somewhat like popular missions. This type of ministry is shown to be effective wherever there are people with the courage to make themselves available and to adapt their enterprise to real needs.  
in the Church

There has to be a profound syntony with the Church, mystical body of Christ in the growing process. This means communion with the People of God and with their pastors. It implies assuming in a specific mission

new sensitivities and pastoral orientations like the place of the laity, of inter-religious dialogue, ecumenism, justice and human promotion – all things for which there was little sensitivity in the Founder's time. It also means applying oneself with new ardor and creativity to the new challenges proposed by the magisterium, such as the new evangelization and mission ad gentes – part of the Founder's intuitions and priorities. Our response to this double challenge will be oxygen for the life of the charism.

The community is the site where the charism is understood and lived. Indeed, that is where it is entrusted at its different levels. To this end the Oblates should develop a community life that is truly Christian and truly Oblate, in faith and charity. The directives of the Constitutions and of recent Chapters are very clear, but they have to be translated into practice.

Attention to the needs of salvation of one's own milieu and of the world awakens in us Christ's call and energizes the charism (cf.C1). We have to be attentive to the signs of the times to be able to read their Gospel appeals according to the nature of our charism, and thus be capable of responding to urgent needs. When reading these signs and needs, we should let ourselves be touched like the first Oblates and find the daring to respond effectively.

To live the Oblate charism in all its richness, there remains the need to develop a Marian touch, marked by humility and gratitude. Boasting will get us off track. Let us always remain a small Congregation (parva Congregatio). That is what allows us to be our natural selves at the side of the poor and the little people (cf.C8). Like Mary, when witnessing the marvels found in the Congregation we must recognize that they are the fruit of God's goodness. This is the confidence in the Lord that will make us daring enough to answer new challenges and to tread new pathways (cf.C9). Above all we should, like Mary, constantly welcome Christ in all the events of our lives in order to transmit him in an authentic way to today's world to which we are being sent (cf.C10).

## Conclusion

The charism remains a gift to be welcomed and made to bear fruit. It is a grace to be asked. "Like the Apostles after Christ's Ascension, the Church must gather in the Upper Room 'together with Mary the Mother of Jesus' in order to pray for the Spirit and to gain strength and courage to carry out the missionary mandate. We too, like the Apostles, need to be transformed and guided by the Spirit"<sup>[23]</sup>. In this prayer of invocation to the Spirit are united to us the Oblates in heaven and especially Eugene de Mazenod, whom with the whole Church we venerate as saint and our intercessor.

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[1] Cf Foreword of the Constitutions and Rules, 1982.

[2] September 2, 1851, Oblate Writings, 2, p. 24.

[3] Constitutions and Rules, Preface.

[4] Constitutions and Rules 1853, Chapter 3, XIX.

[5] Letter to Fr Guibert, July 29, 1830, Oblate Writings, 7, pp. 201-202.

[6] Letter to Fr Tempier, August 22, 1817, Oblate Writings, 6, p. 34.

[7] Letter to Fr Tempier, August 15, 1822, Oblate Writings, 6, pp. 92-93.

[8] Circular Letter, August 2, 1853, Oblate Writings, 12, pp. 205-206.

[9] Ciardi, F: I Fondatori, uomini dello Spirito, Città nuova 1982, p. 346.

[10] Zago, M: "Letter to Oblates in First Formation", published in OMI Documentation #197, April 1994.

[11] Notes de retraite 1824, Écrits oblats, 15, p. 205 (not yet translated)

[12] Letter to Fr Mille, January 25, 1831, Oblate Writings, 8, p. 12.

[13] Letter to Fr C. Baret, January 4, 1856, Oblate Writings, 12, p. 1.

- [14] Letter to Fr Mouchette, April 24, 1855, Oblate Writings, 11, p. 266.
- [15] Letter to Fr Mouchette, December 2, 1854, Oblate Writings, 11, p. 252.
- [16] Letter to Fr Mouchette, December 2, 1854, Oblate Writings, 11, p. 253-54.
- [17] Letter to Fr Courtès, July 22, 1828, Oblate Writings, 7, p. 167.
- [18] Letter to Fr Lacombe, March 6, 1857, Oblate Writings, 2, p. 140.
- [19] Oblate Prayer manual, p. 124.
- [20] Oblate Prayer manual, p. 80.
- [21] Mutuae relationes, #11.
- [22] Cf. CC 5 and 7.
- [23] Redemptoris missio #92.