

# Why I Became a Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate

There are many reasons why I joined the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate twenty-two years ago. It is not possible to name them all, but I would like to give an idea by expressing some of the major ones. The first reason states the obvious: I felt a profound call to give my life to God as a religious priest. It was vital that it be a missionary order since I come from a province in Canada that still has one of the smallest percentages of Catholic practice in the Western hemisphere. Québec identifies secularity as mission country. It made sense to reflect carefully on how our Church evangelized in the French-Canadian culture.

The Oblates are an engaging band of zealous men, brothers, and priests. Founded two centuries ago, they were not afraid to go to extremes for Christ. They ate whale blubber in the Great Canadian north, rode horses in the blistering heat in the Rio Grande Valley, wrote the first dictionaries and translated missals for many native cultures, created associations of solidarity for workers and people of faith, designed and build churches and taught graduate theology classes. Oblates performed these with distinct fervor in serving the poor in the name of Jesus Christ.

When I read about these men and familiarized myself with excerpts of their private missionary journals, it energized my apostolic desire for adventure. It drove my need for a more profound dedication to the service of the Kingdom of God. I wanted to become one of these men on fire for God and the Church. In hindsight, I realize how the Oblates was the best religious community for me to learn how to be an oblation to God, offering our missionary lives in imitation of the radical “yes” of our patron, Mary Immaculate.

Another reason why I joined the Oblates, was how the Oblate charism resonated with some of my convictions. It is striking how Oblates are close with everyday people while valuing strong intellectual formation. We tend to think that strong intellectual formation creates a distance with people. People are allergic, and rightly so, to priests who hold an elitist clerical attitude unaware or even dismissive of the reality of ordinary people. The Oblates, on the contrary, encouraged all formation to be focused on proximity and service within God’s people. I enjoy studying and working with all kinds of people. As a child, I could not wait to attend school. I was so excited to learn and meet new people. I love reading, writing and studying. This passion for learning and being with others served me well with the Oblates. I felt at home with them.

It was a revelation to find that my religious order could be so close to the poor and support the Church and society in a myriad of ways. We train priests and lay church leaders, create programs in religious education, man gun-free zones in Asia, engage in interreligious and ecumenical dialogue worldwide, run clinics for people suffering from leprosy and for AIDS survivors, work with basic needs for migrants at borders and continue to advocate for social justice through various projects, institutes, and parishes. I am particularly proud of our seven higher learning institutions in the world; in Poland, in India, in South Africa, in Congo, the Philippines, Saint Paul University in Canada and the Oblate School of Theology (OST) in San Antonio, Texas.

The impetuous for this apostolic zeal is the charismatic figure of our founder, a French bishop, Eugene de Mazenod, canonized during my novitiate in 1995. I believe the canonization had three lasting effects. First, it communicated that Eugene belonged to the Church and that his charism was not the “property” of the Oblates. We were called to share it with the Church and with the world. Saint Eugene continues to speak to young people, older people, married, single, and grandparents who feel a profound attraction to live the call to holiness through hospitality, service, social justice, and religious and spiritual formation. Eugene is such an inspiring man and an accessible saint!

Second, it was a relief and a profound inspiration to find in Saint Eugene the ability to progress in holiness through his humanity, his fiery personality, his difficult upbringing and his uncanny ability for human connections and lasting friendships. Today, we would say that he manifested a high degree of emotional intelligence. Infused with the love of Christ and the Church, his heart opened far and wide with an uncompromising passion for the poor. I thought that my background and my dysfunctional family impeded living a life of selfless service. Imagine my surprise when I found that Eugene de Mazenod was declared patron saint of dysfunctional families! Throughout my life and ministry, I asked Saint Eugene to intercede for me more often than I can count. It continues to bring me freedom and a lot of hope.

The third grace of Eugene’s canonization is how it placed hope as the crucial pillar in proclaiming the gospel to the poor. At his canonization on December 3, 1995, John Paul II spoke of Saint Eugene de Mazenod as a man of advent because of his embodiment of gospel hope. Amidst a very troubled and disaffected Church, he founded a community of like-minded priests and brothers to respond to the needs of the poor. He knew Jesus and His love to be a source of profound hope for people who felt marginalized, oppressed, and impoverished. Oblate missionaries, honorary Oblates, Oblate associates, Oblate affiliates, Oblate employees, mission supporters, Oblate benefactors, Oblate partners and Oblate youths; the whole of what we now refer to as *The Mazenodian Family*, experience their respective call to mission in the Oblate charism with the same virtue of hope.

Hope is not blind optimism. Strong willpower does not generate hope. Hope is a way of naming the manner in which our living and knowing invites to radical self-surrender before God. Hope comes from God to lift God’s people to live from His covenantal promises. Hope empowers to preach the gospel with light and joy, even in seemingly dire and desperate situations. Charles Péguy evoked how hope relates to faith and charity in a beautiful poetic image: hope is a little girl who ventures ahead, leading faith and charity by the hand. Saint Eugene and all who know and pray him with the Mazenodian family become people of hope. Saint Eugene, pray for us!



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