

The Oblates

The founder: Mgr Charles de Mazenod

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Introduction

After we were somewhat extensive on the question of the arrival and the apostolate of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Canada during the XIXth century, it is high time now for us to turn our attention to the glorious figure of the founder of this congregation: Bishop Charles-Joseph-Eugene Mazenod. And for this, I made use of the book entitled General Dictionary of biography, history, literature, agriculture, commerce, industry, the arts, sciences, morals, customs, and political and religious institutions of Canada (second volume), written by my Breton compatriot Father Louis le Jeune, and published in 1931 by the University of Ottawa.

Charles-Joseph-Eugene de Mazenod

He was born at Aix on the 1st of August of 1782. In 1790, he followed his parents beyond the Alps. Why? Because the French revolutionary Constituent Assembly threatened the royalist nobles with despoilment and death. In 1802, Eugene returns to Aix where his mother has been living for several years, the women being able to return to France, just after the Reign of Terror. At the age of twenty, he refuses the pleasures of the world, putting all his energy to the service of the poor and the ignorant, the sick in their homes and in hospitals. He contracts at this same period a solid and holy friendship with Charles, son of the marquis of Forbin-Janson: because both had their thoughts inclined toward the priesthood, owing to the moral and religious calamities of the time. His parents eventually authorized him to enter the seminary of Saint-Sulpice at Paris, in October of 1808. He is ordained deacon by Cardinal Fesch, on June 16, 1810, and

receives the priesthood at Amiens (a town in the north of France) on December 21, 1811. As soon as he is back at Aix in 1812, Father de Mazenod devotes himself to preaching and to the works of zeal and of reform of the public morals: his conferences in the Provençal language attracts listeners from amongst the working class and the poor, nearly all doomed to religious ignorance and corrupted by the Revolutionary prejudices.

First Collaborators

Very quickly and urgent becomes the necessity to unite some devoted and generous collaborators to assist the popular Missions, in order to remedy the lamentable state in which the Revolution, in twelve years time, had plunged the rural parishes, of which he knew very little before: this is the beginnings of the plan for his Institute.

In the space of five years, some pious priests hasten to his community, founded at Aix. The group took the name of "Missionaries from Provence" in 1816, electing Father de Mazenod as their superior. Immediately rural missions open up, of which the success was so well appreciated that they needed to accept some from the other dioceses, even outside of the Provence. This unforeseen extension brought about the new name of "Missionary Oblates of Saint Charles", special patron of the family de Mazenod. From 1818, the Constitutions were established and the first vows were pronounced in private.

At the end of 1825, Father de Mazenod, encouraged by the bishops, who were satisfied by the apostolic labor of his religious, goes to Rome,

in order to seek from the Holy Father the Supreme Canonical institution of his growing Institute. Pope Leo XII grants to the Constitutions a papal brief of praise and a formal and definitive approval. The decree was signed on February 17, 1826. And simultaneously, Pope Leo XII, from his own initiative or inspiration, changes the denomination of Oblates of Saint Charles to the appellation of "Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate".



In 1827, the uncle of Father de Mazenod, Mgr Charles-Fortune de Mazenod, bishop of

Marseille, chose his nephew for vicar general, as we was highly and generally esteemed because of his anterior apostolate. On September 30, 1837, the pope named Father de Mazenod auxiliary bishop to his uncle. On April 17, 1832, he succeeded his resigning uncle to the Episcopal see of Marseille, thus assuming the simultaneous government of his religious Institute and of his diocese. He passed away at the Episcopal Palace, on May 21, 1861, leaving to his Oblates this testament: "Charity, charity, charity!"

Oblate spirituality

What is the particular ideal of the Oblate and what must be his spirit? (See the end note) One thing is certain: that he, and only he, will understand the spirit of the Oblate who knows profoundly the spirit of the founder. Now the spirit of the founder is set down first and foremost in the oblate rule. There, and principally in the preface of the fundamental chapter "of the purpose of the Congregation", the ideal and the spirit of the Oblate are clearly expressed.

In the chapter "of the purpose of the Congregation", it tells in the first place (articles 1 and 2) of the principal end: the evangelization of the poor in assiduously imitating the virtues and the examples of Our Lord, in distributing to all the bread of the divine word through missions, retreats, catechisms and other spiritual exercises.

Articles 6 and 7 give as a motive of the foundation the lamentable state of a large part of the clergy, just as Mgr de Mazenod had already said in the Preface. His sons will apply themselves to heal this wound through prayer, counsels, good example, and priests' retreats. The idea of Mgr de Mazenod is clear: the so-called French Revolution had to a large extent destroyed the religious Orders, suppressed their beneficent activity; he thus wanted to found a new institute which would compensate for them, which would be as much as possible the sum of all those lapsed institutions. Its end would therefore be to bring back to life the activity and the primordial zeal of these institutions. Is it different now, after Vatican II?

Mgr de Mazenod speaks of the extensive field that opens up in front of them, of the immense work of salvation which would be the fruit of the labours of the Oblates. He made a listing of

the long series of duties which would be incumbent to his sons.

1. "They will apply themselves entirely to revive the piety and the original fervor of these Holy Religious Orders, to resuscitate their virtues, their diverse ministries, and the holy observances of the ordered life they used to live, namely, the practice of the evangelical counsels..." (Followed right below)

2. "...The love of retirement and of silence, the contempt for the vanities of the world, the banishment of frivolousness which is unworthy of the religious spirit, the horror of riches, the mortification of the flesh and of the will..." And as a later explanation, the paragraphs on silence, on prayer and on the other religious exercises, and lastly, on mortification and corporal penances. Upon reading these paragraphs, one would believe he was reading a rule for contemplatives.

3. Is added therein the Opus Dei of the monastic orders, i.e. the recitation in public and in community of the Divine Office, obligatory for the Oblates. Even manual labor is not forgotten.

4. Finally, the active life of the modern Orders and congregations: the missions and retreats; the extraordinary and the parish ministries; the pulpit and the confessional; the special care given to priests and to the formation of clerics in the seminaries; the directing of the youth; the assistance to prisoners and to the dying; the missions for the infidels and the heretics.

Definitely, it is a sphere of activity and a program of action without limits. Actually, it's a purpose and a mission so vast, that it seems scarcely possible that it be more extensive. Whenever God calls, when there's a question of divine honour, when there are souls in distress, the Oblate needs to be there, he needs to set to work, he needs to devote himself, he needs to sacrifice himself.

This vast and immense extension of the proposed goal is the first characteristic trait of the Oblate. It has to be acknowledged that this end must not be evaluated with the measures of human prudence. No, this end could only be proposed by an apostle, a man who knows no measure when it is a question of the work of God, a soul set ablaze with a fire destined to spread itself over the world to attract it to God.

Men with a caliber

The second characteristic is closely related to the first. This goal, immense in its expanse, could only be realized by men with a caliber and an attitude entirely special. Mgr de Mazenod develops this idea in the Preface of the holy rule. The Oblates need to be:

1. apostolic men
2. ready, when needed, to become victims,
3. saints
4. must have complete abnegation of self,
5. souls with an inexhaustible zeal for attaining perfection,
6. armed with all the virtues,
7. totally detached from self and from terrestrial things,
8. prompt to consecrate all to the greater glory of God.

Thus, these words from the Preface of the holy oblate rule give the second characteristic of the Oblate : A love that does not calculate, but that simply devotes itself without restriction. The name Oblate, "he who offers himself", expresses this idea perfectly. It is a love that blazes towards God like an all-consuming flame, in order to make His glory radiant, first and foremost in the soul and the life of the Oblate himself and then through all creation. This love, consequently, seeks neither personal interest, nor worldly goods, nor anything else on earth, be it what it may – but God above all, God alone. For the glory of God! This glory presents itself to the eyes of the Oblate as the only truly desirable good on earth. The gaze of the Oblate must be fixed on this. It is solely for this that he immolates himself. This must radiate in his soul and in his life. The Oblate must therefore strive toward personal sanctity, practice the renouncement of self, the abnegation, making untiring efforts to achieve the virtues, being willing to consecrate all to Him, even his life. This love makes him leave his solitude in order to win souls for God, souls who will sing the hymn of His glory, so that this song will become ever more powerful on this earth where the glory of God is so often disregarded and scorned.

Thus this divine love, as an ebbing of tide, returns toward the earth and becomes, in the first place, fraternal love: "They will live together as brothers." The brotherly sentiments that unite

our communities have their source in this love of God. Where this love is altogether great, there also the fraternal love will know no bounds, and the houses and the entire Congregation will really only form one big single family. Here is a source of joy and of happiness for the Oblate, also a source of strength in the accomplishment of his serious obligations.

The same love for God returns and pours out its waves on the world under the form of zeal for the salvation of souls, an ardent zeal that knows no limits, neither in extension nor in intensity, an apostolic zeal that embraces the entire world. This is the love of neighbour which rushes wherever souls in distress call for help. It is for this reason that the poor have preference in the ministry of the Oblates: "Evangelize the poor", but also in the world of the infidels, where is found the poorest of the poor. For this reason, the Oblates have accepted the more difficult missions at the North Pole, in Africa, in Asia. There is where the Oblates' specific terrain lies.

The Oblate must therefore be: A religious filled with an unlimited love of God, who gives of himself without reserve to any task that God imposes on him for the salvation of souls; struggling without letting up so as to attain to the perfection of personal sanctity; a Religious dedicated without calculations to the greater glory of God everywhere that – if it is lawful to express oneself thus – the distress of God and the distress of souls call him, with a love that does not calculate and does not hesitate, a Religious who devotes himself magnanimously to God and because of Him to the souls, in the first place, of his brother oblates, that this love may warm them and make them strong for their apostolate; then for all the other souls, with unlimited zeal conducting them to God for His greater glory.

"Amongst you have charity, charity, charity and outwardly have the zeal for the salvation of souls." This testament of Mgr de Mazenod is the summary of what the rule says about the ideal of the Oblate.

Immaculata

A third characteristic results from the name that Mgr de Mazenod has given to his sons: "Oblate of Mary Immaculate", he who is offered to the Blessed Virgin.

The amazing ideal of the Oblate is almost too exalted and too arduous for weak human beings. No doubt Mgr de Mazenod perceived it. For this reason, he had wanted that the life and the flow of activity of the Oblate be guided through the maternal hands of the Immaculate Virgin. There we will find the third characteristic of the Oblates.

It is the Immaculate who must help the Oblate to arrive at the marvelous ideal that is proposed to him. To sing the praises of Mary Immaculate in his soul through his love and devotion towards her, to announce her glories throughout the entire world: here is the important duty of the Oblate of Mary Immaculate.

What magnificent ideal for all times, the ideal of the Oblate! We could say the same thing of the congregation founded by Mgr Marcel Lefebvre. Don't we also find there the same aspirations to sanctity and methods of apostolate similar to those of the Oblates? Yes, what an ideal full of actuality for our times, which strongly requires for dedicated and upright men, which means men who live entirely for a great purpose and who devote themselves to it unreservedly. Let us therefore be the priest who is always and everywhere on the spot where the glory of God and the salvation of souls call him, irresistibly urged forward through charity, which does not calculate nor hesitate, who devotes himself unreservedly to his personal sanctification and to the apostolate, who is animated with an ardent zeal for the salvation of souls and united by the bonds of a profound charity to his brothers in religion, and who, guided by the maternal hands of the Immaculate Conception and supported by them, only recognizes one sole great end: that God be glorified by everyone, He who wants that all men be saved.

Note: These considerations were taken from an article written by Father Robert Becker, O.M.I., assistant general. The article in question appeared at Rome on January 25, 1949, and has been inserted in the Oblate Studies, 1949, volume eight. The Oblate Studies is the quarterly journal published by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate from the Province of Canada.