

Letter of the Superior General for the Feast of St. Eugene de Mazenod

Thanks to our Senior Oblates

Dear Brother Oblates and all who form part of the Oblate Family,

With joy and gratitude we celebrate the day on which our Founder and Father, Saint Eugene de Mazenod, entered the Father's House. Happy feast day!

The capitulars of the 36th General Chapter addressed a "Message" to all the Oblates and to the brothers and sisters of the Mazenodian family, which states: "We look to the past with gratitude, beginning with St. Eugene de Mazenod and all of our predecessors, including our living elder brothers whom we greet most especially." (ACTS, p.9). The Chapter, imbued with a great sense of fraternal communion, highlighted in a very special way the strong connection to our elders. On this feast day, I would like to express our great love and gratitude to each one of you.

In 2001, the then Father General, Bishop Wilhelm Steckling, addressed a letter to the Senior Oblates of the Congregation. This letter is as inspiring today as it was when written 16 years ago. You can find it on the OMI web page under the writings of the Superior General, Father Steckling, September 8, 2001.

On this feast of Saint Eugene, I too would like to address you who are considered to be our elders. In Leflon's biography, Eugene de Mazenod, he writes that, until December, 1860, at age 78, De Mazenod displayed amazing energy and mental clarity, even with a life of austere penitential practices. "He delighted in boasting that his colleagues were unable to match his youthful vigor..."! (Vol. IV, p. 299) Such vigor was slowly to disappear after the discovery of a tumor, followed by three operations, medical complications, and four months of suffering, until his death on May 21, 1861.

I will use Saint Eugene's age of 78 in 1860, before his illness manifested itself, to make an observation on our present state: there are now 766 Oblates who are 78 or older, out of a total number of 3696 members, about 20% of the Congregation. The number of Oblates under the age of 50 is 1718, around 46% of the Congregation! Let us celebrate this good news: we are blessed by our elders and by our youthful members!

I wouldn't dare to define who among us falls into the category of being "an elderly Oblate." This is a delicate, even dangerous, topic! This expression in fact doesn't exactly sound very nice to many ears and some societies, especially in the West, try to find more pleasant expressions to describe an older person: one of mature years; a senior; one who is in the third age; an elder; a wisdom figure; a golden-ager! Other cultures of the South and East have great esteem and veneration for the aged person who represents wisdom and a full life. It is a great blessing and honor to care for an elderly member. We have much to learn from this approach.

For Oblates, when growing older means withdrawing from ministry, we missionaries have a problem. I have found that there are three main reasons we don't want to let go of ministry: it is our life; Oblates love the people; we want to feel useful.

Mission is our life.

For Oblates, preaching the Gospel is not a job. It is an all-consuming passion to communicate God's Good News through the witness of our life. How often the Founder railed against the showy displays of preaching which exalted the preacher and his ego more than edified the people. It is the life, the witness, the integrity of the preacher that mattered. From the very beginning of his society, Eugene's desire to move toward consecrated life was to ensure that the missionaries would be men of holiness. In this way their preaching would be consistent with their lives.

When I spoke to people of a ministry site from which the Oblates withdrew, I asked how the community was faring. The people told me that they now have "professional ministers" who are only available during established office hours. One can retire from this kind of employment or job. But this is far from an Oblate model of missionary life, one defined by the needs of the people we serve. Although we must learn to monitor our activity as we age, there is no retirement from being a missionary, because it is a way of life.

Oblates love people.

Our love for the people is closely connected to mission as our way of life. A very special aspect of our charism is our deep connection to God's people, especially the poor, and we find it a terrible loss when we can no longer minister to them. True to our charism, we are close to the people with whom we work (C#8) and that relationship is life-giving to us. We are loved by God's people.

Oblate mission consists in relationships, giving ourselves to people and getting tied up in their lives. This is a special element of our charism. The Founder's visit to the elderly lady on the rue de l'Echelle is so poignant for us. His lively exchanges, in the same salty banter used by the fishwives on the docks of Marseilles, inspire our missionary lives. Because mission is a way of life that brings us close to the people, we cannot withdraw from it without a great sense of loss. We need to help each other grieve the loss of these very significant relationships when age or illness forces it to happen.

In many places today, where there is a lack of priests and pastoral agents, Oblates of an advanced age, both priests and brothers, are generously serving parishes, religious communities of Sisters and Brothers, are on call for hospital visits, being with families who have lost a loved one, burying the dead, and ready for any other pastoral service. You are available and generous, even when you have difficulty in getting around and perhaps shouldn't be! Thank you!

Oblates like to feel useful.

We have missionary genes; we enjoy working and we tend to overwork. We are men of action and we want to die with our boots on. This insatiable spirit comes from Eugene himself who possessed a pastoral heart, anxious to respond to the most urgent needs of God's people. Oblates find it hard to slow down, even when we are sick and when the aging process indicates a change must be made. We try to avoid moving to the infirmary or retirement residence at all costs! How many of our residences are built with the cemetery just out back!

Leaving full-time ministry is extremely difficult for us. We don't see ourselves as real missionaries when we don't have a ministerial assignment. Work is important and necessary to missionary life, and it is very gratifying to see our accomplishments and how much the people love us. But active ministry does not determine whether or not we are missionaries. Being a missionary involves something deeper and much more demanding: our oblation, lived through the vow of obedience, defines the real missionary. Perhaps the hardest obedience to accept is to let go of ministry or move to a retirement residence.

Your life, your being, offered to the Father by following Jesus who was obedient, is the authentic sign of your missionary life. I want to affirm that you, our elders, are fully missionary, no matter whether you are presently engaged in any ministry or not. The grace to accept your limitations with serenity and joy is a heroic grace and one to ask for ardently. I will not mention the difficulty to recognize when we can no longer drive a car... One of the most difficult tasks is helping an Oblate realize that he is no longer capable of driving!

“Pulling your weight”

Connected to feeling useful is the question that many of you have written to me about: you are very concerned that you are no longer financially “pulling your weight” in the Congregation. You have a great concern for the sustainability of the Congregation! I want you to know that, when you are no longer able to bring in a salary for the Congregation, we gratefully support you. You are not a burden! Our care for you is an expression of the family bond among us that comes from the heart of Saint Eugene.

In the context of some Units, due to the cost of health care, maintaining Oblate residences for assisted living or skilled care for our older men is now a luxury we cannot always afford. By joining with other religious, priests and lay people in shared residences, we are able to provide good health care at a sustainable cost. This is a new way to live our vow of poverty through a simple lifestyle, and perhaps something we never imagined.

We cherish you.

Dear brother Oblates, our elders, you are very much an important part of the Congregation and the wider Oblate Family. We cherish you and have great esteem for your lives and missionary commitment. You were our formators, mentors, professors, companions... Most of you were very young when the Congregation experienced a robust period of expansion and the sky was the limit! You welcomed the second Vatican Council and its spirit of aggiornamento. You led the Congregation through a period of revolutionary changes, wonderful hopes, and some turmoil. So many Oblates departed from the Congregation, an immense sadness expressed by Fathers Leo Deschatelets and Fernand Jetté. Perseverance is part of the Oblate charism. Is anything more beautiful than remaining faithful? Thank you for your faithful witness!

You helped all of us rediscover the humanity and sanctity of Eugene de Mazenod. You started to articulate the mysterious reality called the Oblate charism. You accented the vision of the Congregation as a missionary body to evangelize the poor and build up the Church through your prophetic missionary options and the inspiration so beautifully expressed in those fundamental documents which continue to guide and challenge us. We are filled with admiration and gratitude!

Your lives matter to us. We probably take you for granted often, and don't say to you how much you mean to us. You might feel placed to the side, out of the loop, and relegated to a forgotten place in the life of your Unit. We have learned from you to value work and action over many other important aspects of life, and it might seem like we forget you. But we don't! The care that the Congregation gives you is a sign of our esteem and affection for you. We often fail in visiting you. Please forgive us.

Your love for the Congregation blesses us.

Your missionary interest in the Congregation stimulates us. Wherever I have gone in the Oblate world, I have enjoyed being with you and reveling in your tremendous missionary spirit. You want to hear about the Congregation and about the missions we are beginning. You call us to respond to the urgent needs before us like the situation of migrants and refugees. Your love for the Congregation is expressed in your concern and prayer for vocations and for the men in formation. This concern for Oblate life and mission is an expression of your love for this wonderful family begun by Saint Eugene.

Your mission is oblation.

As Father General, I dare to suggest to you that your mission now is to accept with love the limitations coming from age or sickness. This is the most perfect oblation you can offer on the congregation's behalf. You live by faith and hope as you welcome each day with a courageous spirit, believing that your life makes sense as you freely hand it over to the Lord. The words of Jesus are so significant: "No one takes my life from me; I lay it down freely" (Jn. 10:17-18). At the present time, you are perhaps able to give a small amount of work to the Lord, but you are giving something much more, your very self. Saint Paul has so many insights to encourage you: "Brothers, I beg you through the mercy of God to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God, your spiritual worship." (Rom 12:1). You are not only giving your ministry to God, you are giving your very being to God, helping to complete the sufferings of Christ (Col. 1:24).

Thank you for your courage and strength in the midst of suffering. I enjoy your spirit of joy and your laughter when I am in your communities. This is a precious gift to us, a sign of the way you are integrating a life of mission while moving deeply into the mystery of God. Please share your faith with us and inspire us with hope. Show us a life that is bringing everything together in joy even where there is pain, a life that has discovered forgiveness and has been nourished by goodness and generosity. So many of you radiate this. Thank you!

Hold us in prayer.

In addition to your primary mission to offer your life to God, I also give you the mission to pray and intercede for the world, the Church and the Congregation. Grow in deep intimacy with the Holy Trinity and hold us in your hearts before the mystery of God. Pray for our faithfulness to the charism, so that we will embrace the calls of the General Chapter and the challenges of our world with DeMazenod's audacity.

We promise to visit you!

The Congregation is committed to pray for you, but we must also do more. I ask all of us to examine our commitment to our older Oblates who are infirm and/or retired. Let us be intentional about visiting them. Our quality presence is a sign of our family bond and an expression of the legacy of charity left to us by Saint Eugene de Mazenod.

Happy feast of Saint Eugene!

Your brother Oblate, with my prayers and love in Jesus Christ and Mary Immaculate,

Fr. Louis Lougen, OMI, Superior General
