The Legacy of Eugene de Mazenod, O.M.I.

Yvon Beaudoin, O.M.I.

Charles Joseph Eugene de Mazenod was born in Aix-en-Provence, France, on August 1, 1782. He was the eldest of three children born to Rose Joannais and Charles Antoine de Mazenod. His father was the president of the Court of Accounts and Audits of Provence. The family belonged to the lesser nobility and so, at the beginning of the French Revolution, they had to go into exile. They fled first to Nice and then to Turin, Venice, and finally to Naples and Palermo. Eugene lived in these various places from 1791 to 1802, unable to pursue a regular course of studies except during a brief sojourn in Turin.

He returned to Aix in 1802, where his mother and his sister had been living since 1795. De Mazenod was disturbed and disappointed by the condition in which he found his native city, which was in ruins both materially and morally. After some years of personal crisis, in 1805 he began to take an interest in the abandoned church and to teach catechism and visit prisoners. Then one Good Friday, in a moment of grace, he "wept bitter tears" because of his past life and his human ambitions. Deciding to become a priest, he studied philosophy and theology at the seminary of Saint-Sulpice in Paris from 1808 to 1812 and was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Jean François Demandolx, in Amiens, on December 21, 1811.

Returning to Aix at the end of 1812, the young priest commenced his preaching apostolate to the poor and to the workers in their own Provençal language during Lent of the following year. He founded an association of Christian young people in Aix that, within a few years, grew to a membership of 400. De Mazenod also ministered to the spiritual needs of the seminarians in the local seminary and visited the prisoners in the local jail. In the prison he contracted typhoid fever and spent some months near death.

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The year 1814 saw the decline of the emperor Napoléon, a certain restoration of political life, and a movement of religious renewal in France. In 1816, together with some other priests, de Mazenod began to preach missions in the country parishes of Provence, an area where religious ignorance was widespread. In 1818 the group of apostles formed a religious institute known as the Missionaries of Provence. In 1826 they received papal approval from Pope Leo XII with the new name of Oblates of Mary Immaculate. The congregation developed rapidly, and by 1841 it was sending members to missions abroad.

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In 1823 the Diocese of Marseilles, which had been united to that of Aix during the Revolution, was restored. De Mazenod’s uncle, Fortuné de Mazenod, was appointed bishop and asked to have his nephew as vicar-general. Eugene, ordained to the titular See of Icosia on October 14, 1832, succeeded his uncle in 1837 and continued as bishop of Marseille until his death on May 21, 1861. He was canonized in Rome by Pope John Paul II on December 3, 1995.

Origins of de Mazenod’s Vocation

During his stay in Venice from 1794 to 1797, de Mazenod often visited the Zinelli family, from which two sons had become priests. One of them, Don Bartolo, supervised the spiritual and intellectual formation of the young emigrant. As part of his reading program, the boy was given the book Recueil des lettres édifiantes sur les missions étrangères (A collection of edifying letters on the foreign missions). Bishop Jacques Jeancard, who was a close collaborator of Bishop de Mazenod in the diocese of Marseilles from 1837 to 1861, tells us that this reading “awakened in him a strong desire to devote himself some day to the conversion of infidels.”

A letter from de Mazenod written on October 2, 1855, and addressed to Father Tamburini, O.M.I., professor in the junior seminary of Vico in Corsica, seems to confirm this information. De Mazenod invites Father Tamburini to promote missionary vocations, and in doing so he reveals this secret: “I was only twelve years old when God awakened in my heart the first and most effective desire to dedicate myself to the missions and to work for the conversion of souls.”

During the period 1798 to 1805, while he lived in Naples, Palermo, and again in Aix, de Mazenod seems to have devoted his thoughts to other matters and even to marriage. From the period 1805–8 we have only one indication of his continued interest in the foreign missions. A Miss Julie de Glandèves, in one of her letters to him, wrote: “Yesterday we saw a Capuchin who was coming from the quarantine station. He was arriving from Tunisia where he had been sent on mission: he had remained three years in that country. . . . Really, it is most edifying. Is it not something to arouse your zeal? I know that you have a taste for this type of ministry.” Nevertheless, from 1805 onward he began to return to his former fervor, and a conversion took place that led to his entering the seminary of Saint-Sulpice.

During his years of formation in Saint-Sulpice, de Mazenod was an active member of a missionary circle that had as its animator his friend the impetuous Charles de Forbin-Janson. A number of future missionaries belonged to that group: Henri de Solages, Father de Chazournes, and other seminarians who were to become bishops, Sulpicians, Jesuits, and so forth.

His sharing in the missionary circle did not change de Mazenod’s mind regarding his decision to become a priest so as to return to Provence and evangelize the poor. However, it provided him with material to nourish his interest in the evangelization of non-Christians. He was able to transform that interest and realize it in the course of his life as vicar-general and later as bishop and especially as superior general of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate.
Missionary Initiatives

De Mazenod was appointed vicar-general to his uncle on July 6, 1823. Right from the time of their arrival in Marseille, the new bishop and his vicar-general had established a local work of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith (founded by Pauline Jaricot in Lyon in 1822). The purpose of the society was to collect funds and to promote prayer for the missions. Having himself become bishop in 1837, de Mazenod frequently and warmly recommended the society in his pastoral letters. He often chaired the meetings of the associates, and he corresponded regularly with the directors of the society in Lyon and in Paris.

In 1837, among the dioceses of France, the subscription by the Diocese of Marseilles was the third largest, and in 1838 it was the highest. At the time of the establishment of the society in the diocese, subscriptions amounted to 1,000 francs (1823–24). It had increased to 26,000 in 1839 and to 79,000 in 1861. These figures prove that Bishop de Mazenod, “whose heart overflowed with Catholicism,” was capable of communicating his solicitude for the spread of the faith to his clergy and his people.

From 1838 onward he also asked his parish priests to celebrate the feast of the Epiphany with solemnity. The Blessed Sacrament was exposed throughout the day, and the bishop asked the faithful to pray particularly on that day for the conversion of pagans.

De Mazenod did not promote the Society of the Holy Childhood with the same fervor, although it had been founded by his friend Charles de Forbin-Janson. First, it seemed to him that it took away from the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. When, in 1854, the Roman Congregation of Propaganda Fide recommended the society in his pastoral letters, he often chaired the meetings of the associates, and he corresponded regularly with the directors of the society in Lyon and in Paris.

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Founding of the Missionary Oblates

De Mazenod’s purpose in founding the Missionaries of Provence in 1816 was to evangelize the poor in the south of France, but he did not exclude the possibility of accepting missions abroad at a future date. In the first edition of the Rules in 1818, we find this significant passage: “They are called to be cooperators with the Savior, the co-redeemers of the human race and, even though their present small number and the pressing needs of the people in their immediate vicinity cause them to limit their zeal for the present to our countryside, their ambition should be to stretch out in holy desire to the immense extent of the whole world.”

In 1826, during the procedures to obtain approval of the Rule, Cardinal ponens Maria Pedecini gave the impression that approval was being asked for France only. On January 2 de Mazenod wrote to the cardinal: “I seem to have understood that you think we have requested approval for our congregation specifically for France only. That would be an error that would damage the good that the congregation, with God’s help, hopes to do, and I feel it is my duty to let you know by this letter that one of the main reasons why we have asked for the approval of the Holy See is precisely because of an ardent desire to propagate the good being done by the ministries to which our members are at present devoting themselves in whatever part of the Catholic world they may be called either by the common father of all the faithful or by the bishops of the respective dioceses.”

Basing himself on this principle, de Mazenod awaited the calls of Providence. The first one came when the French army took over Algeria at the beginning of July 1830. Bishop Fortuné de Mazenod, on behalf of his nephew, who had gone to convalesce in Switzerland, wrote to the court chaplain and to the prime minister, Prince de Polignac, offering the religious services of the oblates in Algeria. Some of the fathers wrote to de Mazenod on this occasion, asking that they be allowed to bring the light of the Gospel to Algeria. His reply was that it was necessary “to await God’s hour. The Lord will manifest his will when he pleases; we shall try to aid his plans, but I am alarmed at the smallness of our numbers when considering a colony.”

Shortly afterward, Charles X was overthrown in the July Revolution, and his place was taken by Louis-Philippe. The liberal entourage of the new monarch was little concerned about the evangelization of Algeria and even opposed to parish missions in France. This development was a blow to the heart of the Oblate Congregation in their principal aim and purpose.

It is understandable that, in the September 29 session of the General Chapter of 1831, the following proposal was put forward and accepted unanimously: “that some of our members be sent to the foreign missions as soon as the occasion is considered favorable in the judgement of the superior general.”

Father Joseph Guibert, later archbishop of Paris and cardinal and at this time superior of the Shrine of Our Lady of Laus, did some recruiting among the young people in the Alps region so that the obstacle of the smallness of numbers could be removed and the door could be opened to the foreign missions. He was thinking of missions in Asia and America. “It is indeed a need of the times,” he wrote to de Mazenod. “There must be an incentive to the zeal of a newborn congregation. To rest would be to court death.”

His plans were not followed up, however, because of the opposition of Bishop Arbaud of Gap.

In 1832 and again in 1833 de Mazenod offered the oblates for service in Algeria and the United States, to Cardinal Carlo Maria Pedecini, prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda. His offer was not accepted because, as far as Algeria was concerned, the Oblate Congregation was not recognized by the French government and, according to the then secretary of Propaganda Congregation, Monsignor Castracane, the missions in America were not in need and there was no urgency for sending missionaries to that country.

The Oblates in North America

Bishop de Mazenod was fifty-nine years old when he sent his first missionaries abroad. It was, in fact, 1841 when he judged that “God’s hour” had come. Bishop Bourget, who had been appointed to Montreal one year previously, stopped in Marseilles on his way from Rome. He was looking for priests who would conduct parish missions and, later, evangelize the Amerindians.

He met with de Mazenod at end of June. In July de Mazenod consulted his fellow religious. All were in favor of sending oblates to Canada. A final decision was taken at the beginning of August. On October 20 four priests and two brothers left Le Havre, and they arrived in Montreal on December 2. That was the beginning of what was to be known as the White Epic (l’épopée blanche). Each summer, throughout the remaining twenty years of his life, de Mazenod sent missionaries to North America: three or four each year at first, nine in 1847, five or six each year thereafter until 1861. So well had he formed his sons, and fired as they were like himself with zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, that in ten years they had traveled the length and breadth of North America. Beginning in 1841, they established foundations in eastern Canada and in the United States, in the West in 1845, on the Pacific coast in 1847, in Texas and northern Mexico in 1849–52, on the banks of the Mackenzie River.
Honorat and then Father Guigues, to accept a foundation in himself encouraged the superiors he appointed, Father J.-B. and on the shores of the frozen Arctic sea from 1858 onward. He evangelize "the whole of North America" to extend "from sea to sea."

Ceylon, Algeria, Natal

Many bishops visited Marseilles, given its prominence as an important port on the Mediterranean. One who visited in 1845 was Bishop Horace Bettachini, an Italian Oratorian, who had recently been appointed coadjutor to the vicar apostolic of Colombo (in Ceylon). A former oblate, now a missionary in Kandy, had advised him to approach de Mazenod with a view to obtaining some of his religious for Ceylon. The General Council examined the request on April 4, and again on June 22, 1846, and it was resolved to consult the Roman Congregation of Propaganda. Their reply was that the matter was not urgent, as Bishop Bettachini had obtained some Italian priests. Nevertheless, the latter made another appeal to de Mazenod in 1847. De Mazenod then asked for priests to work in the northern part of the island, in the area of Jaffna (where he was to be appointed vicar apostolic in 1849). After further consultation with Propaganda, de Mazenod chose three priests and one brother. They left Marseilles on September 21, 1847, and arrived in Jaffna in February 1848.

There were many difficulties. Some were caused by the climate, some by misunderstandings with other European or Goanese missionaries, and also by the scattering of the missionaries throughout the different villages of the Jaffna region, which rendered community life impossible. In spite of everything, however, the group of oblates accepted a considerable undertaking in proportion to that of the other apostolic workers in the island. In the fifteen-year period from 1848 to 1861, thirty-three oblates left France, Ireland, and England (where they had been established since 1841–42) for the mission in Ceylon, and two others entered the congregation locally: Father Christopher Bonjean, who later became vicar apostolic of Colombo, and Brother Paul Stephen Poorey, who was the first Ceylonese oblate. Bonjean, who later became vicar apostolic of Colombo, and Brother Paul Stephen Poorey, who was the first Ceylonese oblate. In 1857 the superior, Father Étienne Semeria, was appointed vicar apostolic of Jaffna, and he proceeded to put into action the plans he had been working out since his arrival ten years previously. He organized a team of priests to conduct parish missions, and he founded schools and a seminary for the formation of catechists and priests.

De Mazenod accepted two mission fields in Africa. Bishop L.-A.-Augustine Pavy of Algiers (1846–66) asked him for oblates for his diocese. The missionaries worked in Algiers for seventeen months, from the end of February 1849 to the end of July 1850. Eight of them were sent either to Blida or to Philippeville. Their stay in Algeria was short because, as in Jaffna, the priests had to work in isolation, in villages far apart. Furthermore, neither Bishop Pavy nor the French government gave them any hope of trying to evangelize the Muslims.

In the spring of 1850 Mgr. Alessandro Barnabò, secretary of Propaganda Congregation, asked de Mazenod to send oblates to South Africa. This mission had two advantages: the vicar apostolic would be an oblate, and the mission would be in a non-Christian milieu. The decision to accept was taken quickly. De Mazenod recalled his men from Algeria in order to send them to Natal and appointed as their superior Father Jean-François Allard, who was novice master in Canada. The latter arrived in Marseilles in the summer of 1851. He was ordained bishop on July 13 and left for Africa at the end of the year with four missionaries.

For ten years the oblates worked among the white Catholics in Durban and Pietermaritzburg, then among the Zulus in three mission stations. Their apostolate among the black population was apparently a failure: there were no adult baptisms. This lack of success explains why de Mazenod sent few missionaries there. At his death in 1861 there were only five priests and five brothers in the mission. In 1861, however, the oblates began to follow one of the last words of advice given by their founder, and these words proved to be prophetic. On September 4, 1860, de Mazenod had written to Father Joseph Gérard: "The time will come when the merciful grace of God will, as it were, explode and your Kaffir church will be formed. For that to happen, it will perhaps be necessary to penetrate more deeply among the tribes." In October 1861 Bishop Allard and Father Gérard crossed the Drakensberg mountain range and entered Basutoland, where they found a people who readily welcomed the proclamation of the Gospel.

Conclusion

De Mazenod was inflamed with zeal for the salvation of souls, and yet he spent all his life in the south of France. Nevertheless, his principal biographer, Mgr. Jean Leflon, considers him to be "one of the greatest missionary bishops of his time." It was, in fact, especially as founder and superior general of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate that he was missionary, and it was because of the foreign missions that the oblates became known and attracted vocations. In 1841, twenty-five years after their foundation, their numbers were only about 60; in 1861 there were more than 400 members, of whom 200 were working outside of France.

Not only did de Mazenod send many of his missionaries abroad, but he inspired them with a flaming zeal. He often reminded them that they were walking in the footsteps of the first apostles. Here are a few of his exhortations. In 1851 he wrote to Father Pascal Ricard, a missionary in Oregon: "Foreign missions compared to our missions in Europe have a special character of a higher kind, because this is the true apostolate of announcing the Good News to the nations which have not yet been called to knowledge of the true God and of his Son Jesus Christ, our Lord. This is the mission of the apostles: *Euntes docete omnes gentes* (Matt. 28:19). This teaching of the truth must penetrate to the most backward nations so that they may be regenerated in the waters of baptism. You are among those to whom Jesus Christ has addressed these words, giving you your mission as he gave their mission to the apostles, who were to convert our fathers. From this point of view, which is the true one, there is nothing higher than your ministry." To Father Henri Faraud in the isolated Mission of the Nativity in the far north of Canada, where Faraud struggled with the icy cold, the distance from his confreres, and the languages he had to learn, de Mazenod wrote in 1857: "In spirit I pressed you to my heart, touched to the point of tears by all you have had to suffer to conquer those souls for Jesus Christ, who has clothed you with his power and sustained you by his grace among so many difficulties. But also, what a reward you will have beyond this world, when one thinks of the wonders that have been brought about through your ministry. One has to go back to the first preaching of Saint Peter to find anything similar. An apostle like him, sent to proclaim the Good News to those savage nations, the first man to speak to them of God, to bring them to the knowledge of Jesus the Savior, to show them the way that leads to salvation, to give them rebirth in the waters.
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of holy baptism, one can only prostrate oneself before you so privileged are you in the church of God by reason of his choice of you to work these miracles."

In the Preface of the Rule approved by Rome in 1826, de Mazenod wrote that the oblates should "spare no effort [nihil linguendum inausum] to extend the Savior's empire." Faithful to this guideline, he himself was the first to "spare no effort" to ensure the stability and the progress of the missions entrusted to his sons: recruiting members, forming them, giving them courageous directives for their apostolate among unbelievers, and obtaining the necessary financial help for them, informing Propaganda of the best measures to make their apostolate effective and to create an atmosphere favorable to the fostering of generous dedication, even on occasion pleading the cause of his missionaries to bishops who did not understand them. These are the principal themes he deals with in his abundant correspondence. From these writings it is clear that he was a missionary in both spirit and reality. In the words of one of his missionaries in Sri Lanka:

He possessed that spirit of conquest which impelled the apostles to go everywhere forward to spread the kingdom of God. As head of a congregation dedicated to the missions, he always had clearly before his mind's eye a real concern for the territories entrusted to his sons. The apostolate, the problems of the various missions, the efforts of the missionaries—nothing was foreign to him. He concentrated his attention on every new Christian community that was being born. He gathered information and sought counsel in order to be able to give each missionary appropriate instructions. Unfortunately, he did not have all the data we have today on missionary methods and problems. However, these methods and techniques are not everything in the missionary apostolate. What is essential is the burning concern to preach the message of the Redeemer to the world, the apostolic charity which inflamed the heart of Saint Paul and launched him along the roads of the Roman Empire to win souls over to Christ. This charity also burned in the heart of Eugene de Mazenod... who contributed more than anyone else to creating the missionary spirit of the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

Notes
1. Letters from Jesuits, written from China and the East Indies. Thirty-four volumes were published from 1702 to 1776, with translations in Italian, English, and other languages.
2. Jacques Jeanard, Mélanges historiques sur la Congrégation des Oblats de Marie Immaculée (Tours: Mame et Fils, 1872).
6. He had promised his mother, who was opposed to his vocation, to do so. See letter of April 6, 1809, in Oblate Writings 14, Spiritual Writings, p. 118.
7. He had promised his mother, who was opposed to his vocation, to do so. See letter of April 6, 1809, in Oblate Writings 14, Spiritual Writings, p. 118.
8. See pastoral letters for Lent 1838, 1839, 1847, 1848, 1852, 1856, 1860.
9. See his diary entries for May 18, 1837, January 25 and May 3, 1839, and January 28, 1840. The originals are in the OMI General Archives in Rome, section JM.
11. Diary of Bishop de Mazenod, November 18, 1854, in Missions OMI 9 (1873): 21.
12. See Rey, Histoire de Mazenod, 2:82ff.
13. See Note Bene at the beginning of the Rule; see Missions OMI 78, no. 276 (1951): 15.

Bibliography

24. Letter to Fr. Pascal Ricard, January 8, 1847, in Oblate Writings 1:147.
27. Father Gérard was declared Blessed in Maseru (Lesotho) by Pope John Paul II on September 13, 1988.
28. He made only three journeys outside of France: to Algiers from October 22 to November 13, 1842; to England in August 1850; and again to England and also to Ireland in August 1857.
34. See Oblate Writings 4: 221.

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