

Foundation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate

Returning to Aix-en-Provence in 1811, St Eugene de Mazenod did not take up a normal parish appointment, but started to exercise his priesthood in the care of the truly spiritually needy- prisoners, youth, servants, country villagers. Often in the face of opposition from the local clergy, Eugene pursued his course. Soon he sought out other equally zealous priests who were prepared to step outside the old, even outmoded, structures. Eugene and his men preached in Provencal, the language of the common people, not in "educated" French. From village to village they went, instructing at the level of the people, spending amazingly long hours in the confessional. In between these parish missions the group joined in an intense community life of prayer, study and fellowship. They called themselves "Missionaries of Provence". However, so that there would be an assured continuity in the work, Eugene took the bold step of going directly to the Pope and asking that his group be recognized officially as a Religious Congregation of pontifical right. His faith and his persistence paid off- and on February 17, 1826, Pope Leo XII approved the new Congregation, the "Oblates of Mary Immaculate". Eugene was elected Superior General, and continued to inspire and guide his men for 35 years, until his death. Together with their growing apostolic endeavours- preaching, youth work, care of shrines, prison chaplaincy, confessors, direction of seminaries, parishes - Eugene insisted on deep spiritual formation and a close community life. He was a man who loved Christ with passion and was always ready to take on any apostolate if he saw it answering the needs of the Church. The "glory of God, the good of the Church and the sanctification of souls" were impelling forces for him.

A Heart as Big as the World

Whilst he had founded the Oblates of Mary Immaculate primarily to serve the spiritually needy and deprived of the French countryside, Eugene's zeal for the Kingdom of God and his devotion to the Church moved the Oblates to the advancing edge of the apostolate. His men ventured into Switzerland, England, Ireland. Because of his zeal, Eugene had been dubbed "a second Paul," and bishops from the missions came to him asking for Oblates for their expanding mission fields. Eugene responded willingly despite small initial numbers, and sent his men out to Canada, to the United States, to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), to South Africa, to Basutoland (Lesotho). As missionaries in his mould, they fanned out preaching, baptising, caring. They frequently opened up previously uncharted lands, established and manned many new dioceses, and in a multitude of ways they "left nothing undared that the Kingdom of Christ might be advanced." In the years that followed, the Oblate mission thrust continued, so that today the impulse of Eugene de Mazenod is alive in his men in 68 different countries.