

St Eugene de Mazenod as a Young Priest.

Like many young adults, de Mazenod had some profound choices put before him. When he finally decided it was safe to return to Provence, he had decided to marry back into money and revive the family fortunes. Thus, he could play out his proper role in society as a powerful aristocrat.

But God had other plans!

Eugene felt a deep sense of dissatisfaction pursuing his worldly ambition – that restlessness that has led many, before and since, to the brink of a decision. For de Mazenod, it brought him on Good Friday, 1807, to the foot of a crucifix, where he was overwhelmed by Jesus' love and self-sacrifice. This was the moment that changed his life. The following year, he entered the seminary of St. Sulpice, in Paris, and he had a very clear ideal:

..he would be the servant and priest of the poor, to restore the Church so ravaged by the revolution...

When Eugene was ordained to the priesthood in 1811, his Bishop was faced with the dilemma of what to do with this young aristocrat, "so personal and impetuous". He was somewhat relieved when Eugene asked to work with the poor and abandoned of the cities and outlying villages. The young Father de Mazenod also turned his efforts towards youth, founding an association of some 300 who were to share in his mission to the poor, which included an outreach to prisoners, casualties of the Napoleonic wars and a typhus plague.

The language of the Church was French. The language of the poor was a dialect known as Provençal. With a daring and courage characteristic of his whole missionary life, Fr de Mazenod preached special sermons to the poor in Provençal – for he believed passionately that the Gospel must be preached in the language of the ordinary people. Eavesdropping on one of his sermons on early Lenten morning, to a congregation of farm labourers, servants, peasants and paupers, we would have heard him say:

"You poor, what are you in the eyes of the world?.. The world looks upon you as the scum of humanity, intolerable to look at ... beyond pity or contempt.. Come then and learn what you are in the eyes of God!

All you poor of Jesus Christ, you afflicted, unfortunate, suffering, infirm, diseased, .. You are the children of God, the brother of Jesus Christ, co-heirs of His Kingdom, .. You are a holy people, You are Kings, you are Priests, in a sense you are Gods, .. God alone is worthy of your Soul".

By 1815, Eugene realised his overwhelming ambition to serve would not be accomplished, unless he drew others to his cause, to share a common life, and be united by religious vows. On January 26, 1816, Fr de Mazenod and four friends dedicated their lives to bringing the Good News to the Poor in this way. Their new group was approved by Pope Leo XII on February 17th 1826, and took the name of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate.