

A black and white portrait of a man, identified as Saint Eugene de Mazenod. He has dark hair, a high forehead, and is looking slightly to the right. He is wearing a dark, high-collared garment. The portrait is set against a dark background.

# The Founder of the Oblates

*Saint Eugene de Mazenod*

HERVÉ AUBIN, O.M.I.

**Father Herve Aubin has very generously allowed me to reproduce his brief biography of Saint Eugene here.**

**We offer it to you so that you may deepen your knowledge of this saint, whose writings we explore each day.**

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## Foreword

Very worthy saints have often been left suspended between earth and heaven in an ethereal “no-man’s - or woman’s - land” by a certain out-moded fashion in religious art and interpretation. Saint Eugene de Mazenod cannot be treated thus.

As you read his letters and confidential papers you will understand what he had to do to become a saint. You will better appreciate the efforts he had to make to correct his faults and overcome his stubborn nature. You will admire how he abandoned himself, with all his strengths and weaknesses, completely to Christ once he was seized by Divine Love.

This booklet offers you a brief glimpse of his spiritual journey. There is abundant reason to thank God for what He has accomplished in His servant. To thank Him also for the generosity and courage of this exceptional man. You will be heartened by his story. What God has realized in Saint Eugene He will accomplish in each of us; and He will do it in spite of our frailties.

Eugene of Mazenod was well aware of his complex character. At the outset of his seminary training he penned this self-portrait. He was 26 years old.

*I am quick-tempered and impulsive. My feelings are always intense; I suffer from the least set-back and any delay frustrates me. I tend naturally to be resolute, very determined not to allow myself the least laxity. Nor will I tolerate laxity in others.*

*The mettle of my obstinate, domineering and*

*resolute character is clearly displayed in these childhood incidents. When I wanted something I did not ask for it with a ‘please’, by coaxing or with acquiescence. I demanded what I wanted in an overbearing tone as though it were my due. When I was refused I did not cry. Crying was as rare with me as was laughing. Rather I struck out and tried to take by force what was withheld. Punishment had no effect on me. It was necessary to arouse my pride or touch my heart to get me to do something I did not want to do.*

*It is hard to believe that with such a character as I describe, my heart should be so tender; but so it is, even excessively so. It would take too long to mention all the incidents of my childhood which were recounted to me and which are truly surprising. I would regularly give my lunch to the poor even when I was very hungry myself; I carried wood to those who seemed cold and did not have the means to make a fire; once I was ready to give away all of my clothes to a poor child - and many, many other similar incidents.*

*In general, I love with great ardour those whom I believe love me, but my ardour must be returned. This recognition, one of the other, is the spark which compels my heart.*

This man a saint...? No indeed, not at the beginning of his life. But he would become one with God’s grace and with an inflexible determination which never failed him.

“With patient, life-long discipline he succeeded in subduing his difficult character.”

( John Paul II )

## Childhood and adolescence.

### AIX

Eugene de Mazenod was born on August 1, 1782, at Aix-en-Provence in the south of France. His father, Charles-Antoine, by reason of his public office belonged to the distinguished stratum of society known as the nobility. But since such nobility did not always pay the bills, he married a young woman from a moneyed middle-class family. He was 33 years old and Marie-Rose Joannis was 18. She was rich and beautiful but very much less educated and refined than her husband. The parents of the bride required a pre-nuptial contract with the provision that the dowry - the wealth she brought to the marriage - would be returned to her in case of a legal separation. This precaution would prove to be of immense benefit to the future Madame de Mazenod.

The marriage, not at all unusual for that period, seemed to work well in the early years. But the stress of exile, the financial difficulties of Charles-Antoine and the influence of Marie-Rose's family on her impressionable nature, all contributed to a break-down of the marriage. The Joannis family effectively set the young wife against her husband and his relatives.

Young Eugene grew up in this family of practicing Christians who in their behaviour and values, however, adopted the ostentation and worldliness of their social class. From the portrait of himself which you have just read, emerges a vivid description of the kind of child he was and the forceful character which was already manifesting itself.



**Birthplace at Aix**

In spite of heavy debts the noble de Mazenod family affected the extravagant airs of high society, living luxuriously in a spacious residence, served by twelve trained, uniformed servants. In addition to superficial prestige, members of the nobility enjoyed numerous privileges, among which were honorary, legal, and not least, fiscal advantages which exempted them from most taxes. But in 1789 the French Revolution erupted to destroy the old political and social order. With the abolition of the royalty,

traditional social classes with the privileges attached to them were swept away. No more dukes nor duchesses; no more counts nor countesses. There was but one title for everyone: citizen.

Charles-Antoine seemed not to comprehend the dimensions of the political and social changes which were being established. With other nobles who shared his concerns, he struggled to save the privileges which were being snatched away. For his trouble he lost them all.

### EXILE

For their part, the revolutionaries were very cruel. They hanged many defiant nobles, a fate which Eugene's father narrowly escaped.

In December, 1790, the elder de Mazenod fled to Italy in great haste. His exile would last for twenty-six years. Arriving at Nice, then a part of Italy, Charles-Antoine learned that the revolutionaries were also threatening to kill the sons of noblemen. He sent for Eugene immediately. The child arrived in April. He was 8 years old. In June Madame de Mazenod and Eugene's only sister, Eugenie, came to join them. Soon other family members arrived, Monsieur de Mazenod's brothers and his uncle.

From 1791 to 1802 the child Eugene grew to be a young man of 20 years. The exiled family had to flee several times before Napoleon's armies, seeking refuge in Nice, then Venice, Naples and Palermo.

### VENICE AND NAPLES

The stay in Venice, from May, 1794 to November, 1797, was of great importance for young Eugene. He benefited from the company and the teaching of a young priest, Don Bartolo Zinelli, whose influence would last a lifetime. Eugene would later acknowledge that if he had stayed longer in Venice he would have entered the congregation where Don Bartolo was a religious.

His family noticed that the child was dreaming of becoming a priest. His great-uncle, who was a priest himself, asked him: "Is it true, Eugene, that you want to be a priest?" *Yes, Uncle*, he answered without hesitation. "How can you make such a decision child? Don't you know that you are the only son of our family which would then die out?" *And so, Uncle, wouldn't it be a great honour if the last member of our family would be a priest?*

When relating this incident later, Eugene de Mazenod remarked: *My uncle had been joking. But on hearing a child of 13 give such an answer, delighted, he embraced me and gave me his blessing.*

In October, 1795, Madame de Mazenod returned to France with Eugenie. She sought a civil divorce in order to protect her dowry against the claims of the creditors of her father-in-law and of her husband.

Charles-Antoine with his son and his brothers would stay in Venice until the end of 1797, when they made their way to Naples.

Here Eugene was bored to death: *What a dull life for a young man of 16 to have nothing to do, to have no idea of how to pass his time. We had*

*money to live on which Mother's diamonds had brought us. But we had to economize it.*

In Venice, Monsieur de Mazenod had launched a small business which eventually failed, leaving the family without money and considerable indebtedness. He looked for work but could not find any. He wrote to his wife of this precarious situation, but swayed by her own mother, an aunt and a cousin, she reacted with indifference and little understanding. She did offer some money, but remained aloof from their difficulties.

This misunderstanding between his parents, coupled with the absence of his mother and his young sister, was a very hard experience for the young boy. From Venice Don Bartolo continued to worry about him. In his letters he advised Eugene: "Avoid bad companions! Keep busy! Continue your studies!" Eugene reassured his friend that he was serving Mass, receiving Communion and going often to confession.

Endangered by the arrival of revolutionary French troops, the little family had to make yet another escape. On January 3, 1799, they left for Sicily.

### *THE COMFORTABLE LIFE OF PALERMO*

No sooner had they arrived in Palermo, capital of Sicily, than Eugene was received by the Duke and Duchess of Cannizaro as their own son. What a contrast to the indigence of Naples! Here he was surrounded by immense luxury: elegant living quarters, a manor in the country, countless servants, an exquisite cuisine and other physical comforts. He associated with the aristocrats and nobles of Palermo. It was a heady experience. As

for his father and uncles, they were still living in poverty among the tanners.

Eugene's character was asserting itself. He often showed himself headstrong and free-spirited. It was all or nothing with him. His father, who was himself a quiet and modest man, admonished Eugene to correct his pride and excessive vainglory.

The Duchess of Cannizaro proved to be his guardian angel. She was a fervent Christian who was dedicated to serving the poor. She gave Eugene the responsibility of visiting the sick and of bringing assistance to those in need. Thus, even though living a luxurious life, Eugene came in close contact with poverty and misery.

The priest who had helped him so much in Venice did not forget him. He wrote to Eugene: "Are you studying? Are you keeping busy?" And he reminded the young man of his maxim: "Nothing contrary to God! Nothing without God!"

Even his young sister, Eugenie, wrote: "It seems to me, dear, that you are enjoying yourself a little too much." She added this cutting remark: "You used to be very pious; you would not even give your hand to the ladies, unless of course, they were old ones."

The annual carnival of Palermo was a time of revelry and festivity. Parades, horse-racing and every kind of merrymaking were offered to the population. What did young Eugene think of these events? He would later write in his memoirs: *Strange thing, when I find myself in the midst of this dissipation, this noisy music and these worldly pleasures, my heart becomes heavy and sadness overcomes me. I have to find a hiding place where, apart from this worldliness which seems crazy to*

*me, I can reflect on serious even melancholy thoughts, often being on the verge of tears... I am not at all suited to this life.*

Be that as it may, life in Palermo fascinated him. Much later he would look back on his efforts to maintain his integrity and avoid serious misconduct in the midst of that worldly existence: *I wish to acknowledge the infinite goodness of God, who by His powerful grace, constantly preserved me in the midst of very great dangers by inspiring in me not only the need to withdraw, but also a kind of horror and disgust for every kind of dissipation which leads to the conduct I deplore. It is thanks to God that I was able to cultivate a careful discretion in this regard.*

On May 1, 1802, the Duchess of Cannizaro died. Eugene was deeply grieved: *This wound will never heal. I have not been able to sleep all this night*, he wrote to his father on May 2nd. But strange as it may seem, he made no comment at all on the Christian meaning of her death. It seems that his life style in Palermo had taken its toll on the religious fervour of Don Bartolo's former disciple.

Since the last weeks of 1799, Madame de Mazenod had insisted that her son return to France. The conflict between the de Mazenod family and the Joannis family continued. It was a question of social class and advantage. Having started as a marriage for money, this union was about to be ended. In the ensuing struggle, his mother wanted to have Eugene on her side.

He left for Marseilles, October 11, 1802. He was torn between the joy of seeing his mother and sister and the regret of leaving his father and uncles.

## Back in France

Eugene rejoined his mother and sister in Aix where the Joannis family home was situated. They would live there in the company of his grandmother Joannis and his aunt. Although they were good people, his relatives annoyed the young man. His mother often scolded him: *Is it possible that Mother has no idea of what I am like? She really makes me cross when she screams as if she is being swindled. I am sure her intentions are very good, but she wants me to realize that I am dependant on her and that I must act accordingly. You know me a little. Do you think such an attitude is necessary. Do you think that it is even a good idea for her to assert her position like that. Much more of these tactics and I will rebel.* ( to his father in 1805 )

Although she succeeded in trying his patience, this 20 year old did love his mother; nevertheless, he could not accept her ideas. He recognized that the Joannis family was trying to alienate him from his exiled father. He was stifled in their household and he often felt the need to get away from it. He found diversion in attending the theatre and often went dancing, which he enjoyed very much. And since Aix had many attractions to offer, he was never at loss for entertainment.

But he wearied of these pleasures which left him unsatisfied. At a loose end, he was bored and disillusioned: *This disgust results certainly from my aversion to a life of leisure. I feel that I do not belong here, and I am furious to see my best years wasted in this idle mediocrity.* ( to his father in 1804 )





**Eugene at 23**

### MARRIAGE?

Envisioning a substantial dowry, Madame de Mazenod wanted Eugene to marry a rich young woman. And indeed, he seemed ready to enter into such a marriage of convenience: *The arrangements for this marriage were becoming serious when, suddenly, my intended fell ill with tuberculosis. The disease advanced with such astonishing speed that in spite of some feeble*

*efforts, she finally fell victim to it. I must say she was a good person, but she lacked vivacity and was very ordinary in appearance. In a word, the plan came to naught; let us not think any more about it. ( to his father )*

Although the state of matrimony did not seem to tempt him, it appears that the prospect of riches did have a strong attraction for him: *With money you can do as you please. For some time now I have felt an excessive desire to be very wealthy. I would do so many wonderful things with my money. You would never again want for anything, my poor relatives! ( referring to his exiled father and uncles living in poverty )*

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***I feel that I do not belong here.***

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Since he could not find a very rich wife to suit him, he planned to return to Sicily where he thought to get a senior position in the palace guard at Palermo.

*As long as I can remember I have set my ambition on being famous, with the admiration of people who count. ( to his father )*

How very, very far is our young man from the sanctity which the people of God would admire in him many years later.

At Paris he was refused the passport necessary for his travel. He was obliged to remain in France and get used to the idea of being known simply as "citizen" Mazenod.

## A PERMANENT SEPARATION

The separation of his parents was a constant source of anguish for Eugene. He made every effort to bring them back together but did not succeed. Monsieur de Mazenod, perennially plagued by debt, did not return to France until 1817. He would live in Marseilles and never return to Aix.

Eugene finally had to accept the facts. He saw it happening and he understood: the Joannis family was setting his mother against his father and against all of the de Mazenods. By cleverly regaining ownership of the properties which had belonged to the de Mazenod family, Eugene's mother was assured of wealth and security. She let herself be manipulated by her family, even to the point of turning against her husband.

## Touched by God

During those first years after returning to the city of his birth, Eugene seldom mentioned religion in his letters. By contrast, his father's letters often expressed very Christian thoughts. It would seem that at this point the faith of the father was much more vigorous than that of the son.

In effect, young de Mazenod's fervour slackened somewhat. He spoke more often of money and fame than of God. He did continue to believe and to be faithful to his religious practices, but there was no sign that he was thinking of becoming a priest as he had done during the years in Venice.

Nevertheless, from 1804 he became involved in the life of the Church in Aix. He had discussions on religion and devotion with his mother's Jansenist cousin, Roze-Joannis. To better defend the Church's teaching he did some serious reading. He tried to arm himself with a better understanding of his religion: *Although a simple layman, I am interested in my religion because I consider this study as the first and most important of my duties.* ( to his father )

Little by little, God would reveal Himself and draw the young man to Him. In retreat notes which he wrote in 1814, after a few years of priesthood, he admitted that after his return from Sicily he had let himself be distracted by a worldly life and by influences other than God: *The Lord, who even at that moment had His plans for me, watched over me in order to save me. He seized me at the moment when I was thinking of Him the least. Binding me more by the bonds of His love than by the bonds of His justice, He led me to His side.*

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***God seized me at the moment  
when I was  
thinking of Him the least.***

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Following a profound experience of God's mercy, Eugene began to better understand the Divine goodness shown to him. But conversion does not lead to a change of life overnight. He knew that God was beckoning him. He meditated and prayed; however, he still hesitated. He



delayed answering. He asked a friend to pray for him: *that God might work His adorable Will in me despite the obstruction of my infidelities; pray that He smite me, break and form me until I want only what He wants.*

From Christmas, 1806, he was seeking above all to discover what God wanted of him. He sought advice from priests respected for their wisdom. First, Father Duclaux in Paris. Then, in Marseilles Father Magy told him: "Your vocation is as brilliant as the radiant sun at midday on the most beautiful of days."

Eugene finally understood. He hesitated no longer. He decided to become a priest. On October 12, 1808, he was received in the seminary of Saint-Sulpice in Paris.

## The Seminarian

### THE CHURCH ABANDONED

Eugene de Mazenod became a priest because he loved the Church, *the beloved Spouse of the Son of God*, as he called it. *Because the Church is abandoned by everyone. Every day there are fewer and fewer shepherds. Soon there will be none left to care for the sheep. Who could remain unmoved seeing this good Mother in such desperate straits.* ( to his mother, February 28, 1809 )

There was widespread suffering in the Church of France as a result of the Revolution. Hostility against religion became systematic and violent. The revolutionaries worked at destabilizing the Church and destroying her influence. First they

attacked the clergy, aiming to take over the formation of the young.

*I devoted myself to the service of the Church because she was persecuted, because she was abandoned. It seemed to me that God would give me all the strength I needed to defy all dangers. I was so convinced that we were close to enduring a cruel persecution that in leaving for the seminary in Paris I packed a suit of lay clothes which I might have to use as a priest. These are the reasons which motivated me; there are no others. With the kind of character which God gave me, there could be no other possible explanation of my action. If I had wanted honours I would certainly not have looked for them in the Church. Certainly not at that moment when the best that was in store for her was the gallows.* ( to his father, December 7, 1814 )

### MATERNAL OPPOSITION

Madame de Mazenod did not want her son to become a priest. She invented all sorts of reasons to dissuade him. Anticipating that he would change his mind, she did agree that he remain in the seminary for a trial period.

The many letters which Eugene wrote to her, especially those dated 1809, give evidence of his strength of character, the depth of his convictions, the esteem in which he held the priesthood, his love for the Church and his affection for his mother.

The seminarian was both tender and resolute: *Mama, I have been thinking about this for three years. I know what I am doing. Why would you want me to still wait to commit myself to the*

Eugene was ordained on December 21, 1811, in the Cathedral of Amiens. He was bursting with joy: *I am a priest of Jesus Christ! I am a priest! You have to be one to understand what it is. I think I am dreaming when I realize what I am. If I think of what a sinner I am, my love becomes even greater. There is only love in my heart.*

To his mother just fifteen days after his ordination: *Oh how long it seems from one Mass to the next. The time will come, dear Mama, when we will offer the Mass together. What happiness! You gave me life and nourishment from your own body. Now I am able to give to you a nourishment that my priesthood prepares for God's children, hungry for the holy bread which alone is able to give life.*

## The Young Priest

In the autumn of 1812, Father de Mazenod returned to Aix. The plan was for him to live with his mother in the Joannis mansion. However, he set conditions: absolutely no frivolous visiting; he wanted no pampering; lavish meals were out of the question. And even if it meant appearing uncivilized, he would not allow any interference with his apostolate.

His intention was to devote himself to the poor and to the youth. With this in mind he asked his bishop not to assign him to a parish nor to any other specific ministry. The bishop, with confidence in the young priest, allowed him wide scope in exercising his ministry.

Father de Mazenod did not lose any time. Moved by an ever increasing love for the Church, he regarded in a new light the needs and suffering of the Church in Provence. He was shocked and troubled by the ignorance of religion among the poor and uneducated. And there was nothing being done about it. Either the traditional ministry did not reach them, or certain priests would not "lower" themselves to do so.

Lent of 1813 was fast approaching. *During this holy season there will be more than sufficient instruction for the rich and educated. Will there be any for the poor and unlearned? Should not the Gospel be taught to everyone, and should it not be taught in such a way that it will be understood. The poor, those most precious members of our Christian family, must not be abandoned to their religious ignorance. Our Divine Saviour valued the poor so much that He Himself undertook their instruction. As proof that His mission was divine He would point to this: the poor are being taught.*

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***The Gospel must be taught  
to everyone, and it should  
be taught in such a way  
that it will be understood***

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Thus, hearing that the young preacher was waiting for them in the Church of the Madeleine at 6 o'clock in the morning, the poor people and servants would gather around him. None of them spoke or understood the French language. Their

language was Provençal. Father de Mazenod had learned it as a child by listening to the servants in the de Mazenod household. He was quite capable, therefore, of giving his instruction in Provençal.

Just listen to this former "nobleman" who had been so proud, so haughty, even disdainful of those in the lower class. Marvel at how much God has changed him and made him able to see others with the eyes of Christ.

First he describes to his congregation how the rich and learned disdain, mistreat and exploit their employees and the poor in general. He concludes with these words which will ever resound to his honour:

*Poor of Jesus Christ, afflicted, unhappy, suffering, sick, covered with sores, all of you whom misery crushes! Come now, learn what you are in the eyes of the Faith my brothers, dear brothers, my brothers worthy of respect, listen to me!* (He underlines these words in his text)

*You are the children of God, brothers of Jesus Christ, heirs to His eternal Kingdom, chosen to become His elect. You are, according to Saint Peter, a holy nation; you are kings, you are priests, you are, in a certain way, gods: "You are gods, all of you, you belong to the family of the Most High God." (1 P 2; Ps 82, 6)*

His original expression in Provençal would have been much less polished than is its translation

The leading figures in society, the most important ladies and gentlemen, were stunned, disappointed, indignant even; this son of a noble family was betraying them. Did he want to be known as the priest of the poor and outcasts? He even went so far as to speak to them in Provençal, think of it! Certain priests who were upset by his

effrontery heaped harsh criticisms on him. The poor, for their part, were delighted that a priest would speak to them about God in a way that they could understand. "He talks like us", they said among themselves.

Each day of Lent saw the early morning congregation in the Madeleine become more and more numerous. His critics in society and among the clergy would finally have to admire and praise what the young Father de Mazenod was doing.

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***Our Divine Saviour  
valued the poor so much  
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#### APOSTOLATE TO YOUNG PEOPLE

As he was with the poor, Eugene was distressed with the condition of young people. Many of them who had grown up after the Revolution lacked any kind of religious instruction. Younger ones were now being exposed to the harmful influence of the social order established by Bonaparte.

*Napoleon thinks he can succeed in corrupting France by perverting the young. This is where he is directing his efforts. Very well! I, too, will devote myself to the youth. It is a difficult undertaking, I am not fooling myself. Neither is it without danger, since I intend nothing less than to oppose with all my strength the evil intentions of a paranoid government which persecutes and*

*destroys anyone who does not agree with it. But I am afraid of nothing. I place all my confidence in God. I seek only His glory and the salvation of the souls He saved through His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. To Him alone belongs all honour, glory and power for ever and ever.*

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***I am afraid of nothing  
because I place all  
my confidence in God.***

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It was the "Association of Young Christians" which grew out of Father de Mazenod's vision. In order to counteract the loose morals of society, he set down rules meant to be a safeguard against worldly attractions and a means to escape corruption by avoiding temptations. He was very strict with the young candidates, thus insuring that the young people who joined the movement were motivated and sincere. And behold, more than 300 boys from Aix eagerly sought to become members. They would grow to admire Father de Mazenod, who by his example introduced them to the beauty of a generous and fervent Christian life.

For himself he laid down these rules:

*Be friendly and kind to them. It is in this way that I have won them over to God. Do not often scold them and never be harsh. Pray very much for them. Offer to God the good they are doing.*

## ***HIS PRAYER LIFE CURTAILED***

Eugene de Mazenod was never idle. Although his work with the young required much of his time, he continued to devote himself to preaching. Thus his pastoral ministry totally occupied him to the point that he was no longer following the prayer life he had planned for himself on leaving the seminary.

During his personal retreats he often reproached himself for failing in his spiritual exercises, prayer, meditation and particular examination: *It is plain to me that in working for others I am forgetting myself.* ( in 1814 )

This reaction was perfectly natural given that during his seminary training the image he had formed of the ideal priest was more contemplative than pastoral. Based on this ideal he had composed a rule of life; a rule better suited for a monk than for a priest engaged in pastoral ministry. Thus he suffered, devout as he was, and blamed himself for not following his rule to the letter.

At times he would ask himself if he should become a monk, able to devote all of his time to prayer. But towards the end of 1815, he understood that his vocation was not in a monastery living apart from the world. God was calling him to continue to work among the poorest of His people. Therefore, as he confided in retreat notes, his life-long commitment was to love God and to devote himself to making Him loved by others.

## Founder of the Oblates

Faced with this immense field to harvest, Father de Mazenod soon realized that he would need help. He appealed to certain priests who might be ready to work with him in conducting parish missions. But their collaboration was not forthcoming. Some hesitated to become involved in such an undertaking. Others considered that it would be too difficult to work with Father de Mazenod, who was seen as a rigid taskmaster. But the young priest was not discouraged. He continued his efforts to attract worthy workers.

### THE IDEAL CONFRERE

Finally he found the man who was needed: Father François-Henry Tempier, assistant priest in Arles. The letters which Father de Mazenod wrote to him are among the most inspiring of all his writings.

The letter dated October 9, 1815, begins like this: *My dear friend, read this letter at the foot of your crucifix, disposed to hear only God and what the interests of His glory and the salvation of souls require from a priest such as yourself. I tell you, my friend, without going into detail, that you are necessary for this work which the Lord has inspired us to undertake.*

*We want to choose men who have the will and the courage to walk in the footsteps of the Apostles. It is not easy to find men who are dedicated and desire only the glory of God and the salvation of souls, without any other recompense in this world than hard work and*

*fatigue and all that the Saviour has promised to his true disciples.*

Father Tempier answered him: "I understand what is most important in your search for collaborators; you want priests who do not fall into mediocrity and routine. Priests who are ready to walk in the steps of the Apostles. By God's grace I have this desire, or if I do not have it, I desire ardently to have it. With your help it will become easier for me. You can count entirely on me."

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***We want to choose men  
who have the will and the courage  
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The Founder had not made a mistake. Father Tempier would become the ideal associate: *Praise be to Jesus Christ. My heart told me, my dear friend and brother, that you were the man whom the good God had destined to be my comfort.*

The following passage reveals the spirit which animated Eugene de Mazenod as well as the lofty concept he had of the proposed mission:

*If it were only a case of half-heartedly preaching God's word diluted with much human weakness, of wandering through the countryside with the intention, if you wish, of rounding up souls for God without putting much effort into being spiritual, truly apostolic men, well, in that case I would not have any difficulty in replacing you. But do you really think that I could tolerate such*

*mediocrity? ( You can hear him exploding in his vigourous Provençal accent! ) It is imperative that we are ourselves genuinely holy men. This is the last word on the subject.*

### FIRST STEPS

The enterprising young priest took possession of the former Carmelite convent in Aix, with the little church adjoining it. Near the end of January, 1816, the bishop approved the "Missionaries of Provence" as a simple society of diocesan priests. On January 25th the three members of the team moved into the poorly furnished dwelling. Father de Mazenod could have had all the furniture they needed from his mother. But he had refused, wanting to live as poorly as do the poor: *We have never had the joy of being this poor since we made our vow of poverty. I assure you that we have lost nothing of our good spirits. On the contrary, there is such a contrast between our former life and this new existence that we often have to have a good laugh at ourselves.*

The missionaries celebrated Holy Week, 1816, in their little church which became known as "the Church of the Mission". During the night of

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***We have never had  
the joy of being this poor  
since we made our vow of poverty***

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Holy Thursday, before the Blessed Sacrament, Father de Mazenod and Father Tempier made reciprocal vows of obedience. The spiritual

friendship and mutual support which they vowed to each other would be both the leaven and the cement to assure the future of the young community.

Father Tempier knew how to be firm with his superior, who for his part was ready to trust the judgement of his assistant. Sometimes this was not easy for Father de Mazenod. On one occasion when he was overworked and had exhausted himself with preaching and fasting, he obediently went to recuperate in the country.

Although he had himself been inclined to youthful imprudence the Founder wanted a balanced life for his missionaries. He gave great importance to what is today called "continuous formation": *On their return from their apostolic excursions, the missionaries will have a place in the community to rest from their exhaustion. They will engage in a ministry which is less strenuous. By meditation and study they will make their ministry even more fruitful when they will be again called to new work.*

### OPTING FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE

Father de Mazenod's first idea was that the priests would live together in one house. His plan was altered when in 1818 he was asked to minister to the sanctuary of Our Lady of Laus in the High Alps. He did not want to give up his first inspiration: to evangelize the poor and those who were estranged from the Church. If, however, it would become necessary to open other houses, then a specific rule of life would be needed to assure the unity of the community.



He discussed this with the five priests and the five theological students. All were in favour of accepting the responsibility of the Marian shrine. And they agreed also that he should complete the formulation of the rules<sup>1</sup> which he had already begun.

The Founder made a decision to embody principles of religious life in the rules, complete with the religious vows which are associated with it. At first this unexpected development did not please everyone. Only two of the priests were enthusiastic. When Father de Mazenod then asked the students to vote on the matter they expressed willingness to embrace the religious life. By a vote of 6 to 4 the articles in question were accepted.

The texts of the Rules of 1818 embody the ardour and missionary zeal of Eugene de Mazenod:

*If the priests, to whom the Lord has given the desire to unite in community to work more efficaciously for the salvation of souls and their own sanctification, wish to do some good in the Church, they must become profoundly convinced of the importance of the vocation to which they are called.*

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### **Partners with Christ**

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*Their founder is Jesus Christ, the Son of God Himself; their forefathers, the Apostles. They are called to be partners with our Saviour. And*

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<sup>1</sup>rules: a set of principles expressing the spirit and goals specific to a religious community

*although for the moment, because of their small number and the urgent needs of our own people, they must limit their zeal to the poor of our countryside, their ambition must embrace by holy desire the immense expanse of the whole world.*

### **DO AS CHRIST DID**

*With zealous priests, unselfish and of solid virtue, very soon you will bring back the stray sheep to the practice of the Faith. In a word, use the same methods which our Saviour used when He set out to convert the world; you will have the same results.*

*What did Our Lord Jesus Christ do? He chose a certain number of apostles and disciples whom he formed in devotion, and filled with His spirit; then after having prepared them by daily instruction and guidance and in the practice of every virtue, He sent them out to conquer the world, which they would soon bring under His holy rule.*

*What must we do in our turn to successfully bring back to Jesus Christ those souls who have turned away from Him? Work seriously at becoming saints, ready to sacrifice our possessions, our talents, our sleep, our very selves, our lives for the love of Jesus Christ, for the service of the Church and for the salvation of our neighbour. Then, full of confidence in God, to enter the arena and engage, even to our last breath, in the struggle for the greater glory of God. ( Rules of 1818 )*

*This is the goal to which we must dedicate all of our efforts. To the extent to which we will not have committed ourselves totally and will not*

*have shed the last drop of our blood to reach this goal, to that extent we will have no excuses. This spirit of total dedication to the glory of God, the service of the Church and to the salvation of souls is the characteristic of our community. Small though it is, it will always remain strong as long as it will strive to be holy. ( to Father Tempier, August 22, 1817 )*

Eugene de Mazenod! Here is a passionate man, burning with a great love for the Church. At his beatification in 1975, Pope Paul VI will characterize him as “single minded” for the Church. Listen only to the affectionate terms which Father de Mazenod uses in speaking of the Church: *The Church, precious inheritance from Christ our Saviour; the cherished Spouse of the Son of God bought at the price of all His blood; this Church cruelly ravaged in our time. In a most deplorable state, the Church is now calling for help to her ministers, those to whom she has entrusted the most important interests of her divine Spouse ...*

#### VICAR GENERAL OF MARSEILLES

In 1823 Father Fortune de Mazenod was named bishop of Marseilles. He asked for his nephew to be named as vicar general of the diocese. Reasoning that the support of the bishop of Marseilles would be very useful for the new community, Father Eugene accepted. But this caused an uproar among the Missionaries of Provence, as they were still called. Some accused him of abandoning them, while others just left the group. The Founder took the matter in hand and

succeeded in convincing them that his decision was a good one for the community.



**Father de Mazenod's crucifix, with the text of the vows he made and signed with his own hand, November 1, 1818.**

#### PAPAL APPROVAL

The Bishop of Marseilles and his nephew set about assessing the development of a city in the process of rapid expansion. Father de Mazenod had two burdens to shoulder: to plan for the adaptation of the diocese to new situations and at

the same time to inspire and to guide his community of missionaries.

The community was spread out in four houses, established in more than one diocese. In this circumstance it seemed desirable to seek papal approval. Father de Mazenod hesitated. He was uneasy at the prospect of having the title of founder. The eighteen life members and eight novices all strongly encouraged him to make the move; thus, he left for Rome and arrived on November 26, 1825.

Father de Mazenod placed all of his confidence in Divine Providence. Nevertheless, he realized that in Rome, as everywhere else, God acts by means of human instruments. He undertook, therefore, a number of initiatives which brought him in contact with persons who were the most sympathetic to the new community and were the most influential. He visited many Roman churches and spent long hours in prayer. Pope Leo XII received him with open arms. Then some days later he made known his decision: "This society pleases me, I know what good it is doing. I wish to further its mission." The Congregation was officially approved on February 17, 1826.

The Founder wrote to his Oblates: *Marvel at the goodness of God and join me, all of you, in thanking Him. Let us make every effort to live up to the expectations of the Supreme Head of the Church; it is the way to draw upon ourselves and upon our holy ministry new blessings. Let each of us renew himself, above all in devotion to the Most Holy Virgin, in order to make ourselves more worthy to be the Oblates of Mary Immaculate.*

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*Let each of us renew himself,  
above all in devotion  
to the Most Holy Virgin,  
in order to make ourselves  
worthy to be the  
Oblates of Mary Immaculate.*

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### OBLATES OF MARY IMMACULATE

You have just read these words, "...*Oblates of Mary Immaculate.*" On December 8, 1825, just a few months earlier, Father de Mazenod was inspired to change the name of the community. Excited and elated with this prospect, he wrote to Father Tempier on December 22nd: *Oblates of Mary Immaculate: why it is a passport to heaven. How come we did not think of it before? Don't you agree that it would not only be illustrious but would be a great encouragement for us to be consecrated in such a special way and to bear her name. Oblates of Mary! This name pleases the heart as well as the ear.*

At the close of the General Chapter<sup>2</sup> in the same year, he would exclaim: *The glorious name of the Most Holy Mary Immaculate has become ours, for it is to the Holy Virgin that we are consecrated!*

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<sup>2</sup>General Chapter: a meeting of members to decide the business of the community

## Bishop of Marseilles

Eugene de Mazenod was named bishop of Marseilles in 1837. He was 53 years old. *I must devote myself to these people as a father is devoted to his children. All of my existence, my life, my very being must be dedicated to them.*

This new appointment would hold no surprises for him. He had been intimately involved in the workings of the diocese since 1823, as the right arm of his uncle, the previous bishop: *In the face of so many difficulties which pile up, it would be easy to become discouraged or give up! However God has given me this responsibility and it is imperative that I forge ahead. Let us have courage and rely on His help. To that end, before all else, I must make every effort to become holy. This new stage of my life must be a period of total renewal. I have failed so many times in the past to live up to my resolutions. Now I must not let this excellent opportunity slip away without profiting from it.*

### CLOSE TO THE PEOPLE

Bishop de Mazenod remained a dedicated missionary. He was ever visiting the poor and the little people, always careful to speak to them in Provençal. He did this with joy and a certain amount of pride: *These people listen to me because they understand me*, he would say. To deliver an elegant homily in perfect but incomprehensible French was not his way. He knew how to improvise and adapt his words to a broad range of listeners, using comparisons and experiences taken from their lives: *All I can say is*

*that my method must be a good one, since I always have the undivided attention of old and young alike.*

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***Before all else,  
make every effort  
to become holy.***

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The industrialization of Marseilles, while producing increased wealth for many, brought only misery for countless others. Bishop de Mazenod made himself available to everyone. Whether fishwife, longshoreman, lawyer or doctor, the poor and rich alike, always found his door open. *I must give advice as well as help; each person has the right to be heard by his pastor.* But as hard as he tried, he could not relieve the troubles of everyone. And that distressed him. After a particularly exhausting day, he wrote in his journal: *What a tiring day, what a steady stream of misery, abject misery. It is easy enough to give money, but to see oneself unable to improve their condition, that is beyond my strength. I really am at the end of my rope. After witnessing all of this suffering how can you sit down and eat your supper!*

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***Our mission is to the poor;  
it is with them that  
the heart is at ease.***

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The solidarity which he saw among the poor always amazed him: *For the third time this week I went for Confirmation in the worst sections of the city. Always I come away from these poor dwellings edified at how the wretched misery of some is served by the most zealous charity of others. It is truly admirable to see so many good, generous people coming to the assistance of the sick in their neighbourhood.*

Even when he had reached old age, the bishop of Marseilles insisted on visiting the poor and the sick. A true pastor, he was always faithful to his Oblate motto: "He has sent me to bring the Good News to the poor." ( Luke 4, 18 )

*I am just back from administering Confirmation to a sick woman who lives in Echelle Street. All the neighbours were gathered to greet me. The woman was delighted to see that the bishop was not disgusted with the misery of her hovel and would come there to visit her. She did not know, the good woman, that I was as delighted as she was at this opportunity for me to be near to the poorest of my children and to fulfill the responsibilities of my ministry for these unhappy people who are more attractive in my eyes than the richest and most powerful of the world. ( in 1859 at 77 years of age )*

**NEEDED: PRIESTS, ADAPTABLE AND GENEROUS**

Knowing what an exalted ideal of the priestly vocation inspired Bishop de Mazenod, it is no surprise to learn to what extent he demanded generosity, discipline and a great spirit of faith from the clergy of his diocese.

Before taking the responsibility of the diocese of Marseilles, he had noted: *Concerning the parish priests, everything goes by routine, the big point being not to change anything. In other words, they do as little and do it as badly as those who preceded them; the ordinary humdrum is enough. But is that not the attitude of mercenaries? Should the bishop of the diocese tolerate such abuses? Certainly not!*

Some priests were very glad to have a strong leader. Others criticized his initiatives, and were unwilling to follow his orders. They felt their old habits threatened when the bishop urged them to study and to improve their preaching skills in order to be better able to instruct the people.

He deplored and denounced the carelessness of some preachers: *The faithful are disgusted with these Sunday sermons which they do not understand at all. Who could blame them if they become so bored that they avoid the churches altogether for fear of having to endure such preaching?*

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***Preach in a way that shows  
we have meditated  
in our heart the words  
which we announce with our lips,  
and that we have begun by practicing  
what we are teaching.***

---

The strength of his personality and the intensity of his convictions would eventually win over the majority of priests. In addition, he relied

heavily on young priests to bring about change in the diocese. For this reason he concerned himself with the formation given in the seminary, choosing with great care those who were charged with the spiritual development of the seminarians.

### *EVERYTHING AT ONCE*

In the face of a rapidly increasing population Bishop de Mazenod recognized the need to reorganize the pastoral service of the diocese. He established twenty-two new parishes and began the construction of several new churches. Among these were the cathedral and the sanctuary of Our Lady of the Garde, overlooking the city of Marseilles.

On the political front, it was widely recognized that in matters of principle which touched on his responsibilities as a pastor, the Bishop of Marseilles would never budge an inch. Neither senior civil servants nor the Emperor himself could intimidate him or make him change his mind. Notwithstanding, his relations with most civil authorities were excellent. His habit of speaking out honestly with conviction and skill, gained attention and respect for the rights of the Church in post-revolutionary France. There were, however, those bitterly anticlerical officials who did not spare the bishop in their reports to the authorities in Paris. His vigorous personality, penetrating arguments and decisive reactions did nothing to smooth ruffled feathers. But anyone with the least amount of good will could admit to his candour and honesty.

In conjunction with his episcopal obligations, the bishop managed to be directly involved in the

development of his community of missionaries. He knew each of the Oblates by name and was concerned with each one personally. The incredible number of letters which he wrote prompts the question - where did he find the time? By curtailing his sleeping hours, is the most likely answer.

### *DISAPPOINTMENTS AND SORROW*

Besides the successes he experienced, the bishop also had many disappointments and great sorrows. While there were a large number of young men entering the novitiate, there were also very many who left. Everyone did not have the stamina and generosity needed to follow this Founder. Twenty years after its foundation, his Congregation had only forty-two Oblates, although, during those years there had been 205 novices.

Death claimed certain of his sons for whom he had great affection. Father Marius Suzanne, for one, died at 30 years of age. Father de Mazenod had been very proud of this young Oblate who embodied for him the ideal missionary and Oblate priest. He was profoundly saddened by this death: *If I showed outwardly all that I am suffering, I would be considered crazy*, he confided to his journal.

In Nancy another young Oblate died suddenly of typhus. When he received this news, the Founder hurried to the chapel, where in front of the tabernacle, his head on the altar, he burst into tears: *My God, what do You want me to do? You load us with work and then You snatch away our Oblates in the flower of their youth. Could You*



*not leave them on this earth with me for twenty or thirty years, or even longer, where they could do so much good? Then after a long moment of silence, he concluded: I have told You what is on my mind! You are the Master, Your Will be done.*

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***I have told you  
what is on my mind!  
You are the Master,  
Your Will be done.***

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#### **A GREAT JOY**

One of his greatest joys would be the proclamation by Pope Pius IX of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary on December 8, 1854. Remembering his enthusiasm when years earlier it was decided that the young community would be renamed Oblates of Mary Immaculate, it is easy to understand his happiness on this momentous occasion. He also had the great satisfaction of having intervened personally, first in petitioning and then supporting this official recognition of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of the Saviour. Already in 1849, when it became known that such a proclamation would be made, he had written to the Pope: *The members of the Congregation of Oblates of the Most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary on hearing this news feel an immense joy which it is impossible to describe.*

In February, 1855, he told the people of his diocese: *Our hearts have not deceived us. What we all have desired so ardently, what we have*

*begged for in public and private prayers, God has literally and entirely accorded us.*

On August 1st of that Marian year, 1854, his seventy-second birthday, Bishop de Mazenod made this addition to his last Will and Testament:

*I invoke the intercession of the Most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of God, daring to remind her in all humility, but with confidence, of the filial devotion of my whole life and of the desire I have always had to make her known and loved, and to foster devotion to her in all places by means of the ministry of those whom the Church has given me as sons and who are themselves joined with me in this solemn promise.*

#### **The Oblates to Canada**

Already in 1818, as we have seen, the Founder had written in the Oblate Rules: *And what if for the moment, because of their small number and the urgent needs of our own people, they must limit their zeal to the poor of our countryside, their ambition must embrace by holy desire the immense expanse of the whole world.*

At the general meeting of 1831, there was a unanimous resolution directing the Founder to send members of the Congregation to the foreign missions in order to "bring to the ends of the earth the knowledge and love of our Lord Jesus Christ." The timing was left to his discretion.

Clearly Father de Mazenod was in agreement with this proposal. Ten years later the dream would become reality. The bishop of Montreal, Bishop Ignace Bourget stopped in Marseilles on June 20, 1841. He was requesting Oblates to

preach parish retreats, to visit the lumberjacks in their bush camps and to work among the native people. The Founder discussed this with the members.

*It is a matter of a faraway mission. It would require dedication to undertake it. I could entrust it only to zealous men of great determination. I must be sure of their commitment.* (note in his journal)

Taking into account that the Congregation numbered only forty priests, six theological students and eight brothers, Bishop de Mazenod had to have a prodigious amount of confidence in God to even consider accepting such a mission. Prophetically the Founder wrote: *Perhaps Montreal is the door through which our little family will pass to win souls in many countries.*

Future events would prove him right. The Oblates of Mary Immaculate experienced an extraordinary development. Several generations of young men were drawn to the community by its mission to the Amerindians and Inuit. The one and only novitiate was soon full. A second novitiate was opened in 1847.

#### ***"TOWARD THAT BEAUTIFUL MISSION WHICH IS BECKONING YOU"***

Six men were chosen for the Canadian mission: four priests and two brothers. Their average age was thirty-two and a half years. They left Marseilles on September 28, 1841, for Le Havre, France's sea port in the northwest. From there they set sail for Montreal. They reached their destination on December 2, 1841.

Before they left France the Founder wrote to them on October 9th: *Dear Father Honorat and all of my sons who are making their way toward that beautiful mission which is beckoning.* The father of the family is excited to see them going so far away; he speaks to them as to young children: *Remember all the advice I have given you. When you embark and when you are at sea, be careful not to fall overboard. While disembarking when the sea is rough it is easy to miss your step and be drowned.*

*You know that the reputation and honour of the Congregation is in your hands. To the extent that you will be holy, exemplary and disciplined, then will the good you do be multiplied. You are responsible for implanting it in those vast regions. Farewell! my dear children. Remember that in the beginning all eyes will be fixed on you. You will be judged on appearances; remember it is hard to erase first impressions. Again I wish you a good trip and I give you, with an outpouring of affection, my paternal benediction.*

#### ***"WITH UNBOUNDED CONFIDENCE IN GOD"***

The new missionaries in Canada were full of energy and initiative, never afraid to take risks. In the short space of six years they had travelled across the continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans. That represents thousands of kilometers in canoes with many hazardous portages to cross, carrying boats and supplies. A proud Bishop de Mazenod would bring out a map of Canada to show his visitors, pointing out the far-flung missions where his sons were working.

From that time on the Founder of the Oblates showed unbelievable daring in accepting new missionary commitments: Oregon and Sri Lanka (1847); Texas and Algeria (1849); Natal, Lesotho and the Transvaal (1850); Mexico (1858). Eventually missions among non-Christians became his priority: *This is the real apostolate; to bring the Good News to peoples who have not yet been called to the knowledge of the true God and of His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.*

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***All that is necessary  
is a little courage  
and confidence in God,  
Who will show us the way and  
Who will never abandon us.***

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"The harvest is great ..." From the Oblates in Canada came repeated and urgent appeals for reinforcements to their numbers. Bishop de Mazenod answered Father Guigues in December 1844: *Please believe that my heart bleeds when you tell of all the good you could do if only you had more workers. We are a very small family which is just now depleted because of having pitched our tents in America. Everything in Europe is on hold and I am accused daily of having been much too generous in making such big sacrifices in number and in quality. All that is necessary is a little courage and confidence in God, Who will show us the way and Who will never abandon us.*

He would do everything he could to send more missionaries to work among the Amerindians: *It*

*will never be as many as I would want to send, for the simple reason that we could never meet all of the needs. There is another reason also; for your missions you need men of extraordinary good health and endurance. These qualities are not common among our young priests or theological students. But I will choose the best, not only in regard to their health, but also for their zeal and dedication. I know that this is important for the good you will do among your Amerindians and for survival in your harsh climate. ( to Fathers Maisonneuve and Tissot at Lac la Biche, December 13, 1859; Bishop de Mazenod was 77 years old. )*

#### NEAR TO THOSE IN FARAWAY PLACES

He was always worried about his sons in Canada: *Do not undertake work that is beyond your strength, or else very soon you will be overburdened. You must not aspire to do more than that for which God gives you strength. ( to Father Honorat, March 26, 1842 )*

To the missionaries working among the Amerindians at Athabasca in 1859: *I must tell you that you are always in my thoughts; sometimes it is to rejoice at all the good your noble ministry is accomplishing; sometimes to lament, humanly speaking, all the suffering and privations that you must endure.*

*I know that you are offering all of your suffering to God for the salvation of those indigent souls so totally abandoned, whom you are leading, by the grace of God, to the knowledge of the truth, to the love of Jesus Christ and to eternal salvation. This is what gives me*

*the greatest consolation; when I consider that you have been chosen as the first apostles to announce the Good News to those nations who without you would never know God. It is glorious, it is magnificent to be able to apply to ourselves in a very real sense, those beautiful words of the Master:*

*"I have chosen you to go forth and bear fruit."  
( John 15, 16 ) What a vocation!*

He wrote often to his missionaries. He expected them to do the same. He was interested in everything and wanted to hear the details of their lives, of their ministry, of their difficulties and joys. He was deeply affected by the distance which separated them. To bring them nearer to him he brought them in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament: *You cannot imagine how many times when I am kneeling before God that my dear missionaries of the Red River are in my mind. I have only this way to be close to them. There in the presence of Jesus Christ, before the Most Holy Sacrament, it seems that I see you, that I touch you. Certainly, you too, are often in His presence. It is there then that we meet in this Living Centre of communication.* ( to Father Lacombe, March 6, 1857 )

## The Harmony of Maturity

As a young priest Eugene de Mazenod threw himself ardently and generously into his pastoral ministry. He had given himself totally to God and to the Church and had decided never to spare himself. You will remember that at one point he had abused his strength. Father Tempier, his

faithful companion, had to reason with him to take time off and rest himself.

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***It is glorious, it is magnificent  
to be able to apply to ourselves  
in a very real sense,  
those beautiful words of the Master:  
"I have chosen you  
to go forth and bear fruit"  
What a vocation!***

---

Father de Mazenod did take time to reflect and was not so stubborn as to continue the same austerities: *I recognize that I would be guilty if I did not change my practices, since my unfailing good health has already suffered very much from them. The example of the saints attracted me, but apparently the good God does not ask the same thing from me, since He seems to be warning me with my weakening strength and trouble with my health. From now on I will have to get seven hours of sleep every night. That will be hard, I agree, but what can I do if the good God and the doctors demand it.* ( 1816, a few months after having founded the Missionaries of Provence )  
And thus was resolved the imprudence concerning his health.

He still had to find a balance between his prayer life and his ministry. In order to make sure that he did not grow lax, the young Father de Mazenod had adopted a rule of life that was practically impossible for a priest engaged in the ministry to observe. Very soon he experienced a

deep uneasiness. There was a serious tension between the demands of the ministry and the rule which he had imposed on himself.

Throughout his life Eugene de Mazenod remained generous, driven by the desire to be a saint. Eventually, experience and the Holy Spirit taught him to recognize that his vocation was that of priest and missionary and not that of a monk or a hermit.

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*The example of the saints  
attracted me, but apparently  
the good God does not ask  
the same thing from me.*

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**"TO LOVE MORE AND MORE WHAT IS  
CONFORMED TO THE WILL OF THE  
MASTER"**

During his retreat in 1819 he had noted:

*Above all I must **convince myself** that I am doing God's will when I devote myself to the service of my neighbour; when I am concerned about the material affairs of our house and so on. I must then do my very best without worrying that I am not able to do some other things which I might prefer to do and which might seem to me more useful for my own sanctification. I will make every effort to love more and more what is conformed to the will of the Master, Who alone must guide not only my actions but also my affections. If I succeed in this, all will be won.*

With time, and especially once he was bishop, other factors dominated his life. It was no longer a question of choosing "penances" for himself. His duties and the functions of his office took care of that. Only consider his double responsibility as bishop of Marseilles and as superior general of his community; the variety of ceremonies he had to preside over; the official and pastoral visitations he made; the countless visitors he received; the innumerable personal letters he wrote to his Oblates - and on and on.

#### WISE AND SERENE

By this time in his life, Eugene de Mazenod had achieved a state of harmony and maturity, free of the scruples and conflicts from which he had suffered as a young priest. He was able to write to Father Vincens, master of Oblate novices, on August 1, 1853: *Young men of dedication and commitment, you will not succeed in giving me scruples, as remorseful as I might be because I am not able to do more. When a person gets up at five o'clock in the morning, having gone to bed close to midnight; when a person does not have even a half hour for a walk; when a person is at the service of everyone from morning until night; when all the free time that remains is passed in his office, pen in hand; well then, this person cannot blame himself for not doing his duty. Anything more that he might want to do is simply an impossibility.*

The same wisdom is evident here: *All that I ask is that you do not think you have to do more than your strength permits. You must pace yourself and your missionaries. If something is left undone it*



At age 78

*will not be your fault... Start with this principle; that you are not obliged to do more than can be reasonably asked of a man. ( October 10, 1857, to Father Semeria named bishop of Sri Lanka )*

*Life had taught him many things about human nature. He gave this advice to the same Oblate. My experience with men obliges me to warn you against surprises and to enlighten your natural*

*goodness so that you do not let yourself be fooled by appearances in believing that people are better than they really are. Indeed, I love the simplicity of the dove, but I would never separate it from the prudence of the serpent.*

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***The working of Providence  
is a great mystery to me.***

---

More than once the Founder of the Oblates experienced the truth of these words: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways." (Isaias 55, 8) Following the death of a priest and the departure of another, he had to give a new assignment to Father Aubert. He wrote to him: *Do not think that I am changing my mind on a whim. But what else can we do in the face of the totally unexpected? We must see this as the Will of God. The working of Providence is a great mystery to me. Nevertheless, it is our duty to accept this Providence even if it is difficult and painful. Let us not be upset or frustrated with the trouble and inconvenience it causes us.* ( September 26, 1836 )

### COMPASSION AND STRENGTH

It is well documented how Bishop de Mazenod fought to gain respect for the Church and to assure its rights so seriously threatened in the decades following the French Revolution. It was due to his personal involvement, his ideas and energy, that the diocese of Marseilles grew and



adapted to the changing needs of the time. His initiatives upset many people. It is not surprising then that he was the target of personal attacks and crude harassment.

These experiences helped him to be compassionate with his missionaries who were suffering similar treatment: *I do not worry about our Fathers if they are suffering a little persecution. That is good for them. They are obliged to examine themselves carefully. And persecuted by men they will draw closer to God, Who is our only help and our true strength.* ( to Father Semeria, July 10, 1855 )

The Oblates, who in their difficulties sought his advice, would receive the benefit of his long experience and wisdom. To Father Mille, discouraged by failure, he wrote: *I share, my dear friends, the pain which the indifference of the people you are evangelizing causes you. But I do not approve of the discouragement into which I believe you have fallen. Discouragement is a weakness. If you analyze it carefully, you will find that it is caused by pride. The Lord has given you the sublime mission to sow, to plant and to water. He reserves to Himself the growth and the harvest, when and how it pleases Him. Do, then, what you are charged to do and leave to God what can only belong to Him.* ( December 13, 1840 )

The young firebrand of the early years has learned patience and he is able now to counsel others: *Perseverance is necessary; things cannot always turn out as we want, nor when we want. We must follow where grace leads and do nothing to force it.* ( to Father Honorat, July 18, 1844 )

He who as a young priest had abused his health, at age 74 gives this instruction: *When one*

*does more than one is able to do, one does not act according to reason. God does not bless imprudence or excess.* ( to Father Richard, August 22, 1856 )

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***Perseverance is necessary;  
things cannot always turn out  
as we want, nor when we want.  
We must follow where grace leads  
and do nothing to force it.***

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And finally, a true disciple of Christ will always forgive offenses: *As for the personal insults and contempt that you told me about, five minutes of prayer at the foot of my crucifix is sufficient to make me forget them. And it doesn't take that long to forgive them.* ( to Father Viala, March 5, 1849 )

### HE IS A SAINT

On December 3, 1995, the Catholic Church officially recognized that during his life Eugene de Mazenod had faithfully followed the will of God and thus in his virtues came to resemble Christ. During the celebration of his sainthood, Pope John Paul II declared: "With patient, life-long discipline he succeeded in subduing his difficult character and in governing his diocese with discerning wisdom and firm goodness. Bishop de Mazenod taught the faithful that to live fully their vocation as children of God they must receive Christ with a faith steadily growing in

generosity. His entire ministry was animated by a conviction which he expressed in these terms: 'To love the Church is to love Jesus Christ and vice versa.'

For close to forty years, his was an extremely fruitful ministry. Such long service could not have been possible nor conceivable without a deep love for the Church. Even when difficulties beset him he never lost hope."

### **"I want to die knowing that I am dying."**

In spite of his advanced age, Bishop de Mazenod was in quite good health. He was still able to travel and managed to keep a busy daily schedule. As well, he would often keep a penitential fast. But in December, 1860, he began to feel pains in his chest. The doctor diagnosed a tumour which proved to be much more serious than anyone suspected. Pleurisy set in, manifested by a violent fever accompanied by nervous spasms.

At the end of January, 1861, he received the Sacrament of the sick. His strong constitution helped him to overcome the pleurisy. But the tumour would follow its course. During four months his suffering was intense, but it could not weaken his resolute spirit. He saw himself on the Saviour's cross. The sentiment he expressed was not surprising to those who knew him well: *When you are on the cross you must hang on to it. It is a gift.*

Throughout the last days, one thought

preoccupied him - the desire to die with full awareness: *How much I want to know that I am dying so that I am able to fully accept God's will.* During the last twenty-four hours he asked those at his bedside: *If I doze off and become worse, I beg you, waken me; I want to die knowing that I am dying.*

### **WITH HIS OBLATE CROSS AND ROSARY**

*My friend, it is over, I am going to die,* he said to one Oblate who came to see him.

"Your Excellency, said this priest, we all still need you very much. God is good, and if you ask Him He will not refuse to leave you with us for a little longer."

*Oh, no, no! I will never ask that. There is only one thing I pray for; that the holy will of God be accomplished. Now say with me the prayers for the dying. But first, give me my missionary cross and my rosary, these are my defence; I do not want ever to be without them.* Then he took his cross in one hand and his rosary in the other.

Several Oblates were gathered round his bed. One of them asked: "Your Excellency, please say a few words which we can repeat to our absent brothers to lighten their hearts."

*Tell them that I die happy. That I die happy because the good God deigned to choose me to found the Congregation of Oblates in the Catholic Church.*

"Father, please tell us what is the last desire of your heart?"

*That you practice towards each other, charity ...charity...charity; and towards others, zeal for the salvation of their souls.*

In the morning of May 21st one of the Fathers said to him: "Your Excellency, I am going to celebrate Mass. What do you want us to ask God for you?"

*Oh! Ask Him that His holy Will be done. That is the only desire of my heart.*

### ***"I die happy."***

In the evening of the same day, the Oblates who were present recited the SALVE REGINA (Hail Holy Queen). Fully conscious, the Founder followed the prayer. At the end he opened his eyes a little and breathed his last with the following words: *"After this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb Jesus. Oh clement, oh merciful, oh loving Virgin Mary."*

He would have been 79 years old on the following August 1, 1861.

### **His Example: an Inspiration**

On a certain day Saint Eugene de Mazenod answered "yes" to the call of Christ. From that day on he gave himself totally to the Lord Jesus Christ and refused Him nothing. With complete confidence in God he became a saint by resolutely doing God's will in everything.

### ***"NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR GOD"***

If this man, with his domineering temperament, his stubbornness and pride became a saint, should not we be encouraged in our quest for sanctity. God chooses us and calls us just as we are, whatever our family background, our character, our strengths and our weaknesses. "How can that happen? How can I ever be a saint?" Remember, for God "nothing is impossible". His will for us is that we be "holy and without blemish in His sight, thanks to His love." ( Ephesians 1, 4 ) He can and He will work such a wonder in each of us.

### ***LOVE FOR CHRIST AND THE CHURCH***

Eugene de Mazenod loved Jesus Christ passionately. The Founder of the Oblates could say with St. Paul, "It is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me. And the life that I now live in the flesh, I live in the faith of the Son of God, Who loved me and gave His life for me." ( Galatians 2, 20 )

In the light of this experience of Christ's personal love for him, Bishop de Mazenod understood how precious in the eyes of the Saviour is His Church. Christ loved His Church so much that He gave Himself that it might be holy and without stain. Throughout his life Eugene was single-mindedly devoted to the Church. He became a priest when he realized that the *dear spouse of the Son of God* was abandoned by a great number of its children. He was affected profoundly by the plight of the poorest members of the Body of Christ. He spent his life teaching

them how great is their dignity as human beings and their value as children of God.

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***To love the Church is  
to love Jesus Christ, and vice versa.  
We love Jesus Christ in His Church  
because she is His immaculate spouse  
who came forth from His side  
opened on the cross.***

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The condition of our Church today - disparaged, belittled, depreciated - evokes images similar to those which so moved Saint Eugene. His insight into the situation of the Church and the world of his time, invites us to look at our own society with the eyes of Christ on the cross. We learn from him that we must attach ourselves first to Jesus Christ and then we must love the Church *as the dear Spouse of the Son of God, as our Mother*.

The next step, following the example of our Saint, leads each and everyone of us to a personal commitment according to our individual vocations, opportunities and talents. It is no good to groan, criticize or remain discouraged over how bad it is, without taking the trouble to get involved. He teaches us not to be discouraged and certainly not to give up in the face of the troubles of our Church today.

Now, as never before, our Mother the Church needs sons and daughters who try to live as true disciples of Christ, dynamic, dedicated, and above all, holy.

## ***RECOGNIZE THE DIGNITY OF EACH PERSON***

One of the great graces of his life was to recognize the immense value which every human being has in the eyes of Christ. Seeing others as Christ sees them, radically transformed the Founder of the Oblates. As a young priest and then as bishop, Eugene de Mazenod devoted himself to the service of all his children, caring with special affection for the poor, the disadvantaged and the outcasts. He invites us, in our contacts with others, especially the poor, to respect the dignity which the most precious Blood of Christ has bestowed on each and every one.

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You have encountered, however briefly, the man whom Pope John Paul II on December 3, 1995, declared worthy of our honour, devotion and imitation. You have seen what he was and what he became with God's grace. To all of you who guard a secret desire for holiness, look to the life of our Saint - especially listen to his words - for inspiration and encouragement.

Very simply, Saint Eugene de Mazenod made these choices to prepare his soul for God's mercy:

- to be totally committed to Jesus Christ
- to make Him known to all who have never heard His name and to those who have forgotten Him
- to care for those who are not reached by the ordinary pastoral activities of the Church
- to respect the dignity of every person and to recognize the value that each one has in the eyes of Christ
- and finally, the cornerstone of our Christian life, to be more and more faithful to the will of God

A big order?

Yes, but Saint Eugene de Mazenod accomplished it. Certainly not alone. He used the means of grace which God gave him and, above all, he allowed God to work in him, to make him holy as the Heavenly Father is holy.

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### SAINT EUGENE DE MAZENOD

**passionately in love with Jesus Christ  
and loving son of His Church,**

**we beg you:**

**obtain for us the grace  
to follow the Saviour  
faithfully**

**and to cling to Him  
with our whole being.**

**May we have the courage and faith  
to answer His call  
to be His witnesses  
to those who do not know Him  
or who have forgotten Him.**

**Teach us to love  
the Church, our Mother;  
to be united with her  
in her joys and her pains,  
each of us sharing her mission  
according to our personal vocation.**

**You received the gift  
to love  
the poor and the lowly,  
to stoop to find them;  
show us how to love and respect them.  
Teach us to look at our world  
with the eyes of Christ on the cross,  
confident that the power of His Resurrection  
will overcome all of our  
difficulties and sufferings.**

**Amen**