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## **To the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate: Be men of Advent and guide brothers along the pathways God opens in the Church and in the world**

The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, specialists in “difficult missions”, as they were defined by Pius XI, are commemorating two hundred years since their foundation by St. Eugène de Mazenod (1782-1871), bishop of Marseille, France, and at the time of the institution of the congregation, a young priest who revived the faith among the poor peasants of the region of Provence following the French Revolution. A few decades later the Oblates were present in all five continents, continuing the journey initiated by their founder who loved Jesus with passion, and loved the Church unconditionally.

The Oblates have also celebrated their General Chapter and have just elected a new superior. On account of both their bicentenary and the celebration of the Chapter, they were received in audience this morning by Pope Francis, who urged them to renew St. Eugène de Mazenod’s dual love for Jesus and the Church in the Holy Year of Mercy, recalling that the Oblates were born precisely from their founder’s experience of mercy before the Crucified Christ on Good Friday. “May mercy always be the heart of your mission, of your evangelising effort in today’s world. On the day of the canonisation of Fr. de Mazenod, St. John Paul II defined him as a ‘man of Advent’, docile to the Holy Spirit in reading the signs of the times and following the work of God in the history of the Church. May these characteristics be present in you, his sons. May you too be ‘men of Advent’, able to grasp the signs of new times and to guide brothers on the ways that God opens in the Church and in the world”.

“The Church is living, along with the world as a whole, in an age of great transformations, in the most diverse fields. She needs men who carry in their heart the same love for Jesus Christ that dwelt in the heart of the young Eugène de Mazenod, and the same unconditional love for the Church, who increasingly endeavours to be an open house. It is important to work for a Church that is for all, ready to welcome and to accompany! The task to be fulfilled in order to achieve this is vast, and you to have your specific contribution to offer”.

He went on to mention that the history of the Oblates is that of many consecrated persons who have offered and sacrificed their lives for the mission, for the poor, to reach distant lands where there were still “sheep without shepherds”. “Today, every land is a land of mission, every dimension of the human being is a land of mission that awaits the proclamation of the Gospel”, he affirmed. “The field of the mission seems to enlarge every day, always embracing the new poor, men and women with the face of Christ who ask for help, consolation and hope in the most desperate situations of life”.

Therefore, there is a need for missionary boldness and readiness to bring forth the Good News that liberates and consoles, accompanied by the joy of the Gospel, as joyful witnesses. "Following the example of the founder, may charity among you be the first rule of life, the premise of every apostolic action; and may zeal for the salvation of souls be a natural consequence of this fraternal charity".

These days of work in the General Chapter, have "broadened the outlook and the heart of the congregation to a worldwide dimension". The Pope added, "May this fraternal experience of prayer, exchange and discernment as a community be an impulse for new missionary zeal, a starting point for new horizons, for meeting new poor, to take them with you to encounter Christ the Redeemer. It is necessary to seek adequate responses, evangelical and courageous, to the questions posed by men and women in our time. For this, you need to look to the past with gratitude, live the present with passion and embrace the future with hope, without letting ourselves be discouraged by the difficulties you encounter in the mission, but strengthened by fidelity to your religious and missionary vocation".

"As your religious family enters into the third century of its life, may the Lord grant that you write new, evangelically fruitful pages, like those of your brethren who, over the last two hundred years, have borne witness, at times with their own blood, to a great love for Christ and for the Church. You are Oblates of Mary Immaculate. May this name, defined by St. Eugène as a 'passport to heaven', be for you a constant commitment to mission. May Our Lady support the steps you take, especially in moments of hardship".

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