

The Kusenberger Lecture for 2018

The Oblate Charism Today: Its Essence, Modesty, Vitality, Struggles, and its Urgency

Introduction

As the title suggests, this lecture will not focus on the founder or his personality, rich as they are. Rather it will attempt to articulate his charism, the Oblate charism, in simple and clear terms so as to highlight its vitality, modesty, and its urgency for today. Honesty demands that we also include its struggles. Any gospel-based charism, no doubt, also includes some agonies in Gethsemane.

In simple, contemporary language, how might the Oblate charism, the charism that Saint Eugene de Mazenod left us, be defined today?

The Oblate Charism Today – Its Essence

The Oblate Charism can be seen to be made up of five interpenetrating elements: *Being Missionary; an Option for the Poor; the Cross as Central; Apostolic Community as an Ideal; and Mary as Patroness.*

In trying to tease out what is contained in each of these elements, I will use the following methodology: I will introduce each with a Gospel text, relate that text to the founder, and then use the text to articulate the Oblate charism – along with its struggles.

But before doing that, for flavor, I begin with a story which gives an individual face to the charism:

While serving as a Provincial in Western Canada, I was much inspired by something shared with me by one of our young Oblates. He had been ordained for just three years and had been sent to minister in a small town in the woods of Northern Saskatchewan. One Sunday evening, just as he was having his dinner after a full day of ministry, there was a knock on his door. It was the police. They were going door-to-door asking people to evacuate the village within the hour because a forest fire was moving rapidly towards it. Initially the young priest panicked: He had just one hour to pack up whatever he deemed valuable, knowing that the rest would in all likelihood be destroyed by the fire. He hurriedly began to throw things on the back of his truck when suddenly he came to a certain realization and stopped his panicked activity. He asked himself: What's so important that it may not be lost in this fire? His answer reflected both his faith and his Oblate commitment. With his panic subsided, he took his overnight bag (always packed and ready for his rounds in the missions), he took the parish records (the irreplaceable recordings of decades of baptisms, marriages, and the like), he took the Blessed Sacrament out of the tabernacle, and he took

his Oblate cross. Within minutes he was driving away from the village, consoled that he had all that was not ultimately replaceable. Among those things he deemed most valuable was his Oblate cross.

The cross is central to the Oblate charism; but what, within it, does the Oblate cross more particularly signify?

1) We Are Missionary

In his farewell discourse in Mark's Gospel, Jesus gives his disciples this mandate: "***Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to all creation.***" (Mark 16:15)

Jesus sends his disciples out as missionaries. Eugene de Mazenod took those words to heart and founded his congregation precisely to be missionary. How is this to be understood? What makes someone a missionary? A missionary might be characterized by two interpenetrating elements:

The word *missionary* can be contrasted to the word *maintenance*: A missionary is *someone who goes out from established centers of faith*, establishes new communities of faith, sets up the resources to sustain them, and then moves on to where new communities need to be established.

And missionaries are badly needed today. So much ministry within our churches is necessarily focused on maintenance, on maintaining our ecclesial and sacramental structures and ministering to people through them. A missionary, by contrast, goes to where these ecclesial and sacramental structures do not yet exist (or have been neglected) and works at establishing an ecclesial community. And this is no easy task. Kenneth Cragg, an Anglican Bishop who wrote extensively on Christian-Islamic relations, once commented *that a missionary is someone who goes where he or she is needed but not wanted, and who leaves when he or she is wanted but no longer needed*. The former Superior General of the Oblates, Marcello Zago, adopted that expression and asked the Oblates to challenge themselves with it, accepting that being a missionary will bring with it the loneliness of always having to move on once things are established and comfortable.

Second, a missionary is a *risk-taker*, that is, someone who rolls the dice on the truth of the Gospel. This is the challenge that the Gospels give us in the story where Jesus asks the disciples to feed a crowd of five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. The story which is recounted with some variations in all four Gospels has this at its heart: Jesus had been preaching to a large crowd in a deserted place and they have been together for a long time. The crowd was hungry. The disciples come to Jesus and ask him where they can get food to feed so many people, asking him (in one version of the story) whether they should go into the neighboring towns and buy food for the crowd. Jesus tells them instead that they should feed the people themselves. The disciples protest: "We have only five small loaves and two fish – and how can that be adequate to feed five thousand people!" Jesus, for his part, blesses the five loaves and two fish and asks the disciples to set them out for the

people. The people all eat as much as they want and afterwards the disciples gathered up the scraps and filled twelve baskets.

What happened here? What is the deep teaching within this story? Some contemporary interpretations would have us believe that the real miracle here (and moral of the story) is that people had stashes of private food and Jesus' teaching convinced them to share it. That's a nice moral interpretation, but misses the point of this story, that is, that *the equation is hopeless*. It is impossible to feed so many people with so little food!

The disciples had come up to Jesus and asked him whether they should go into the surrounding villages and farms to buy food to feed the crowd. What's ironic about this? The Gospels want us to pick up a huge irony here: *The disciples are with the Bread of Life – and they're asking where they might go to buy bread!* Yet their question is legitimate. They have only five loaves and two fish with which to feed a crowd of five thousand. That's a hopeless equation – a tiny bit of food and thousands to feed. But, and this is the key to the story, they are with the Bread of Life and when you are with the Bread of Life you lack for nothing. All the resources you need are there and there will be baskets of extras left over.

This incident mirrors the story in the Jewish scriptures where David fights Goliath. Goliath is a giant whose physical strength dwarfs David, a mere boy. The mismatch is so great that Goliath thinks it's a joke, a mere boy being sent out to fight a giant. But God is on David's side and when God is on your side, you will always have all the resources you need to meet any situation, no matter how great the seeming mismatch. So the challenge in this story is this: We stand before the Bread of Life so we don't need to go anywhere to buy food or anything else. All we need is already here, no matter how hopeless the equation. We can safely roll the dice when we stand before the Bread of Life. We can risk.

It's with this in mind that Saint Eugene coined the challenge which has become a virtual motto for the Oblates: *Leave nothing undared for the Gospel*. The Gospel works if you work it! And he himself modeled that. When he had very few men in the ranks, against common prudence and the advice of others, he sent missionaries to both Canada and Sri Lanka, believing that if he trusted the Gospel and took a risk on it, the Gospel would prove worthy of that trust. It did.

Some years ago, while I was serving as a Provincial Superior of an Oblate Province in Canada, our community held its annual congress, a gathering each August where we spent time making major decisions together and working at forging a common missionary vision. One year at this congress, we had a unique (and welcome) problem: The government had expropriated some land from us which we did not really know that we owned and had paid us several hundred thousand dollars for it – money we hadn't budgeted for. The community was discerning as to where we might spend this money when one of our younger, idealistic members stood up and suggested that we give the money to the local Native Band because, in effect, we (our country) had unfairly taken that land away from the Native peoples to begin with. But he voiced a still deeper challenge: We should do this, he suggested, not because the Natives were asking for it or because they needed it, but simply as a Gospel gesture, as statement that we believe in the Gospels and take them seriously. He

was voted down by a chorus of voices, sincere voices, who praised him for his idealism but then, without noticing the irony in what they were saying, went on to say “but this is real money” that we would be giving away – as if faith wasn’t as real. He was voted down, but he had a last word. As he sat down, he said: “They didn’t understand about the loaves,” a quote from the Gospel of Mark. After the crowd of five thousand had been fed, they appeared again the next day, expecting to be fed again. But Jesus was saddened by this because, in Mark’s words, “They hadn’t understood about the loaves.” (Mark 6:52).

A missionary is someone who can roll the dice and risk real life on the truth and fecundity of the Gospel.

But this comes at a cost. To be someone who founds churches rather than maintains them means perennially moving away from comfort and from the familiar into the new and unfamiliar. To be a missionary is to be forever having to move on, leaving loved ones and satisfying achievements behind. Like Jesus, he will sometimes feel that he does not have a rock upon which to lay his head. A missionary is essentially homeless, though the grace in that is that eventually every place becomes home.

I grew up in Western Canada. The Oblates have a proud history there. With the exception of two smaller dioceses, the Oblates started every diocese in that huge vast region, built its Cathedrals, and were its initial bishops. Today there is a thriving church in Western Canada but with very few Oblates still ministering there. However the Oblates can be proud of what they did there. The churches they started are thriving as diocesan churches. Our child is doing well. But, that being said, it still must be admitted that it’s hard to be marginalized now. That is the pain of being a missionary.

2) The Option for the Poor

As Jesus begins his ministry in Luke’s Gospel, he begins them with these words: ***“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.” (Luke 4:18)***

This, in essence, is Jesus’ mission statement and it is clear enough: Our preaching is meant to be good news to the poor and any proclamation of the Gospel that is not good news for the poor is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our founder took those words literally and he took them to heart. They ground the Oblate charism and are constitutive of its essence. We are called to minister to the poor.

After his ordination, Saint Eugene returned to his diocese in Aix-en-Provence and began to work with the poor – servants, domestics, fish-cleaners, and others who were not being ministered to by the structures of the church that existed then in Aix. He even learned their language, a *patois* dialect that was spoken mostly only among the poor. The poor became the focus of his ministry. In that, he mirrored the great Jewish prophets who affirmed unequivocally that God favors the poor. Moreover he also mirrored Jesus who affirmed that

not only does God favor the poor, but *God is in the poor*, so that whatever you do to the poor you do to God. (Matthew 25)

Since the Oblate charism has an option for the poor at its very heart, it is important to ask the question: Who are the poor? Is it primarily the economically disadvantaged? Immigrants? The unborn? The elderly? Looking at the founder's option for the poor within his particular historical context – Southern France in the late 19th century – we might draw this conclusion (which is in essence how the Gospels also define the poor): The poor are the “excluded ones.” As Gustavo Gutierrez, the father of Liberation Theology, puts it, *“The poor are those who don't have the right to have rights,”* of whom society is saying today (echoing the words that Caiaphas, the High Priest, said of Jesus before the crucifixion): *“It is better that one man should die for the people.”* Of whom is this being said today? The unborn? The refugees? The persecuted? The economic and socially disadvantaged? The victims of prejudice? The sick? The mentally ill? Victims of suicide? Those on the edges rather than at the center?

It is being said about all of them. They are the excluded ones; they are the ones in whom the cross of Christ is being lived out today. They are the poor; and moreover they are also where the Kingdom is being built: *“The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone.”* (Psalm 118:22)

And they are also where the Oblates have been found ministering through the two hundred years of their history and where many Oblates are found ministering today. The Oblates today can be proud of the fact that, in so many places, they are found on the margins of society. For example, if you were to go into the inner city in cities like Leeds, Dublin, Edinburgh, Lahore, Vancouver, Edmonton, Laredo, or Mexico City (to name just a few places), and go to those parts of the city where the police are afraid to go, you will find the Oblates, ministering there.

Of course that comes at a cost. When one ministers with the marginalized a number of tensions will perennially be part of that ministry:

1. The struggle to be with the marginalized and not end up being ourselves marginalized.
2. The struggle to make a vow of love and not of alienation.
3. The struggle for vocations and financial resources.
4. The cost of never being at the centers of power and prestige – where influence can be very helpful for the poor.

3) The Cross as Central

As Jesus is trying to explain his mission to his disciples, he tells them: ***“To you has been given the [deep] secret of God's Kingdom; but to those who are outside everything comes in parables.”*** (Mark 4:11)

What is the “deep secret” which is the key to understanding Jesus and his message?

The Gospels tell us that, in following Jesus, we can be either “in” or “out,” depending upon whether or not we understand a certain secret. Those who “get it” are genuine disciples and those who “don't get it” remain on the edges, outside. But what is it that they, the disciples, and we, need to “get”? What's the secret we need to grasp? In essence, it is the cross. We need to grasp the wisdom of the cross, the brokenness of Jesus on the cross; and we need to accept the invitation that is inherent inside the cross and be willing to live that invitation out. The Gospels contain the idea that if you understand the cross then you will understand everything else as well – you will know the deep secret. Conversely, if you do not understand the cross, you will not understand the Gospels at all. The cross is the key that unlocks the understanding of everything else. If you understand it, you are “in”; and if you do not understand it, you are “out”. Moreover, you are never forever “in” or “out”; you can step in and out on this. For example, when Peter betrays Jesus, the Gospels tell us that “he went outside.” They are speaking of much more than him stepping outside the door of a house. In betraying Jesus, Peter, at moment, went “outside” the understanding of the Gospels.

Eugene de Mazenod clearly grasped “the secret.” The cross was central to his personal spirituality and he made it central to the Oblate charism. In his diaries, he writes of a foundational religious experience that left a brand on his soul forever. Praying before a crucifix one Good Friday, he was touched to the depth of his soul by the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross and what that death meant in terms of forgiveness both in his personal life and in the life of the world itself. After that experience, like Saint Paul who had a similar experience, he too could say: *I preach nothing but Christ crucified.* (1 Corinthians 2:2) This now lies at the very center of the Oblate charism and ethos and is the very antithesis of any prosperity gospel; namely, spiritualities and preaching which imply that if we follow Christ we will be specially rewarded with good fortune in this life. The cross offers us a share in Christ’s life, ministry, and suffering – not special favors in this life. The cross of Christ, like Jesus’ other saying about the disciple having to endure all that the master endures, suggests, as Daniel Berrigan so poignantly puts it: *“Before you get serious about God, first consider carefully how good you are going to look on wood.”*

Of course there is a cost to this, beyond what sharing the cross of Christ means in one’s personal life. An emphasis on the cross, on the cost of Christian discipleship, on accepting pain and humiliation in this world, draws a sparse audience in most affluent circles. It is radically anti-cultural in most places within our world and can, as a consequence, leave the Oblates culturally marginalized.

4) Community as an Ideal

“The congregation of believers was one in heart and soul. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they owned.” (Acts 4:32)

Scripture scholars today agree that this text expresses the “ideal” of the early Christian community as opposed to its actual reality. The first followers of Jesus struggled, just as

we do today, to live this out. But what this text expresses, and what we see in Jesus who, when he began his ministry, immediately started forming a community with others, is the necessity of community for effective ministry and, indeed, the necessity of community as a very constitutive part of Christian discipleship. Christianity is something you do with others! You are not a disciple of Jesus by yourself.

Saint Eugene recognized the vital place of community within both Christian discipleship and within ministry. Partly he learned this through experience rather than in his seminary training. After being ordained as a diocesan priest, having studied under the priests of Saint Sulpice, he returned to his home diocese, Aix-en-Provence, and began to work with the poor. He was so dedicated to serving the poor that eventually his health gave out. Working through this illness, which almost took him in death, he came to the realization that, had he died then, his work would have ended. He realized then what Jesus realized immediately in his ministry: that to be more effective in his work and to ensure that his work would thrive outside of his own personal efforts and continue long after he died, he needed to gather a community around this ideal. He did. One by one, he persuaded some of his priest-colleagues to join him in this work, and the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate were born – out of the idealism and commitment of a group of diocesan priests.

Hence it is no accident that central to the Oblate charism is the vital place of community. The 1992 General Chapter of the Oblates took up a line from the Dutch theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx, and made the line its own ever since: *“What you dream alone remains a dream, but what you dream together can become a reality.”* The Oblate charism is predicated on the fact that, in the end, compassion must be collective to be effective. Alone, no one can change the world; only a community can do that.

However there are different ways in which apostolic community can be validly lived out. For the Oblates, beginning right from the founder, the ideal has always been to live out what is often called “one-roof” community, namely, that unless circumstances within the ministry demand it, Oblates are meant to live together within a common house, sharing daily prayer, daily meals, and daily fellowship. It goes without saying that this is not an easy task. Idealistic conceptions break down quickly within the grind of life, the clash of personalities, the demands of ministry, and the legitimately different needs of various individuals. One-roof community lived out by adults of the same sex is a test of Gospel fidelity. It is for this reason that many religious communities today no longer enshrine this as their ideal for community and define religious community for themselves in ways that do not necessitate living under the same roof. As well, the ideal of “one roof” community is not necessarily dictated or mandated by Scripture. Indeed, sometimes the opposite seems true in the early Christian Church. For example, in the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Luke writes that, immediately after Jesus’ ascension, the believers were all huddled in one room (out of fear) and shared the same space but did not have community with each other. Then Pentecost happened, the Holy Spirit descended upon them, and they left that shared space and scattered to the ends of the earth and, now, in geographical distance from each other, they were in community with each other. A strange paradox but, understood biblically, living under a shared roof

does not necessarily make for community and distance does not necessarily break down community. Apostolic community happens on the basis of a shared spirit, not a shared roof.

So why then the initial and present emphasis within the Oblate charism on a shared roof since that ideal is not necessarily mandated by Jesus? For this reason: Living together concretely in the same house can be a great aid to fidelity. Simply put, we tend to be more faithful in our commitment to prayer and to our vows when we are daily and visibly accountable to each other. One of the great spiritual figures of our generation, Henri Nouwen, in a disarming humility, once wrote that he preferred to have someone travel with him when he was on the road giving lectures. Why? Because when he had someone with him he was less likely to give into various temptations that beset him. As he so humbly admitted: "If I am in a hotel room by myself and the television channels offer pornography, the temptation can be to watch that. When you are with someone else, it's easier to be faithful."

Still, sometimes the demands of ministry dictate that an Oblate live alone. The founder, knowing this, left the Oblates his own formula for how to stay in community with each other across the distance. He recommended a practice termed "*Oraison*" that each Oblate community and each Oblate individually is asked to do each day; namely, once a day, for half an hour, to sit by yourself, or together with others if you are more than one in community, in silence, ideally in front of the Blessed Sacrament, and just be there, not alone (even if you are alone) but in solidarity and oneness with all other Oblates around the world. This has always been and remains a cherished practice among the Oblates, their way of being in community with each other – across geographical distance and across personality differences.

5) Mary as Patroness

“Standing near the cross were Jesus’ mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary (the wife of Clopas), and Mary Magdalene.” (John 19:25)

Karl Rahner once made this comment on the various Marian apparitions that have taken place in history. Looking at all the apparitions of Mary that the church has deemed credible, be that in Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe or elsewhere, one sees this common denominator: Mary has always appeared to a poor person and never appeared to a pope, a wealthy businessman, or to a theologian in his study. She has appeared to small children, a poor peasant, and to a young woman of no status. Mary, as she so eloquently states in the Magnificat, favors the poor and is the patroness of the poor. Much of the piety and devotion that surrounds her might aptly be termed “the mysticism of the poor.”

Our founder, when he was searching for a patron under which to put the congregation, was initially intending to name the congregation, the *Oblates of Saint Charles*, after Saint Charles Borromeo whom he much revered. However, as he was reflecting on this, he came to realize that since this is a congregation founded to serve the poor, the most appropriate person to have as a patron would be Mary, since she is pre-eminently the patroness of the poor.

But how is this to be conceived? Beneath the crust of piety, healthy and unhealthy, that surrounds Mary, what inside of her life and inside of her person most makes her the patroness of the poor? What ultimately endears her to the poor is not her singular dignity as being the mother of Jesus. Not that. What, at the end of the day, endears her to the poor and makes her their worthy patron is her poverty and her helplessness – qualities with which the poor identify. But even this should be carefully understood.

In John’s Gospel, as Jesus is dying on the cross, Mary is standing under the cross. What is contained in that image? This is a mystical image and it is anything but pious. What is Mary doing while standing under the cross?

On the surface it appears that she is not doing anything at all. She does not speak, does not try to stop the crucifixion, and does not even protest its unfairness or plead Jesus’ innocence. She is mute, seemingly passive, overtly not doing anything. But at a deeper level she is doing all that can be done when one is standing helpless, under the weight of the cross: she is holding and carrying the tension, standing in strength, refusing to give back in kind, and resisting in a deep way. How so?

Sometimes well-intentioned artists have painted Mary as prostrate under the cross, the wounded mother, helplessly distraught, paralyzed by grief, an object for sympathy. But that does not honor what happened there nor teach its lesson. Prostration, in this situation, is weakness, collapse, hysteria, resignation. In the Gospels, “standing” is a position of

strength. Mary “stood” under the cross. She was strong there. Still, why the silence and why her seeming unwillingness to act or protest?

In essence, what Mary was doing under the cross was this: Her silence and strength were speaking these words: “Today I can’t stop the crucifixion, nobody can. Sometimes darkness will have its hour. But I can stop some of the hatred, bitterness, jealousy, and heartlessness that caused it – by refusing to give it back in kind, by transforming negativity rather than retransmitting it, by swallowing hard, in silence, and eating the bitterness rather than giving it back in kind.” Had Mary, in emotional and moral outrage, begun to scream hysterically, shout angrily at those crucifying Jesus, or physically tried to attack someone as he was driving the nails into Jesus' hands, she would have been caught up in the same kind of energy as everyone else, replicating the very anger and bitterness that caused the crucifixion. What Mary was doing under the cross, her silence and seeming unwillingness to protest notwithstanding, was radiating all that is antithetical to crucifixion: gentleness, understanding, forgiveness, peace, light, courage, and not least a helplessness that draws upon faith and hope, the helplessness of the poor who are being crucified everywhere.

The poor understand this because they experience it in their lives. There are times when all they can do is to stand helpless under the cross, that is, absorb poverty and injustice. And in those moments, they recognize their patroness, Mary, the exemplar of how faith stands inside of helplessness.

The Oblate charism, under this aspect, invites us to stand with Mary, with the poor and helpless, trusting that God will eventually “lift up the lowly.”

But there is a second aspect as well to honoring Mary as the Patroness of the poor and the Oblate congregation. Mary is also the voice of the poor.

In John’s Gospel, Mary’s name is never mentioned; she is always referred to as “the mother of Jesus.” This is significant because in John’s Gospel, unlike the Synoptic Gospels where Mary is portrayed as the exemplar of faith, Mary is presented as the mother of all humanity, as Eve. As well, in John’s Gospel, Jesus is always portrayed in his divinity, never in his humanity. Hence, in John’s Gospel, conversations between Jesus and Mary always have a double dimension, namely, they aren’t just talking to each other as mother and son; they are also talking to each other as “Eve” to “God.”

Thus, when we look at the famous story of the Wedding Feast at Cana (John 2: 1-11) we see that it is a story that is as much about Mary as it is about Jesus. Note the initial words of the story: “There was a wedding feast at Cana and the mother of Jesus was there and Jesus and his disciples were also there.” As we know, at a key part of this story Mary goes to Jesus and says: “They have no wine!” At one level this speaks simply of Mary’s sensitivity, her wanting to spare her hosts some embarrassment. However, in John’s Gospel, since this is also a conversation between “Eve” (the mother of all humanity) and “God,” we see that Mary’s role here is that of *giving voice to human finitude*, as she does in the Synoptic Gospels in the *Magnificat*. Indeed, that wonderfully expresses what ministry to the poor and the Oblate charism are meant to do: Help give voice to human finitude.

Finally, one last thing about Mary, Marian devotion, and the poor: In the Americas, both in the North and in the South, most of the indigenous tribes are now baptized Christians. However there is a notable difference among these various tribes in how they, at one point, understand Christianity. In North America, for the main part, even though most of the indigenous peoples are Christian, they still understand Christianity to be a non-native religion, something that is foreign to them in its origins. Significantly this is not true for any of the indigenous peoples who have been touched by Our Lady of Guadalupe. For them, Christianity *is a native religion*. It is for reasons like this that our founder chose Mary as the Patroness of the Oblate Congregation.

The Oblate Charism Today – Its Urgency

As we have seen, the Oblate charism might be summarized in seven words: *Missionary, the Poor, the Cross, Community, Mary*. When we look at the Church and the world today we see an urgent, critical need for each of these elements:

Missionary: Recently I was challenged by a bishop who asked me why I was not more directly catechetical and doctrinal in my writings. “Why,” he asked, “don’t you write more directly about doctrinal things? Because that’s what people today need.” I answered him this way: “I write the way I do because I am a missionary and as a missionary I am focused more on evangelization than on maintenance. I went to World Youth Days when they were held in Toronto in 2002. I loved what I saw; a million young people enthused about their faith and wanting to know more about their faith. But, as a missionary, I was conscious too of the fact that while there were one million young people there, there were fifty million young people who weren’t there.”

The church today knows how to do maintenance better than how to be missionary. For the most part, we know what to do with a person who walks through our church doors. But today we struggle to get people to walk through the doors of our churches. And, not least, certainly in the secularized world, the people who struggle to find our church doors are our own children, family members, friends, and relatives. Each of the last three popes has called for us to focus on a “New Evangelization.” That, clearly, is a missionary task.

The Poor: We live in a world in which the gap between the rich and the poor is widening rather than narrowing. And this is true everywhere. In our world, millions of people are, in effect, deemed disposable. So much of our world is blind to the poor, from the unborn, through refugees and migrants, through the millions upon millions of people caught up in poverty, hunger, disease, discrimination, violence, trafficking, and countless other injustices. Less than 10% of our world owns more than 90% of the wealth of our world – and the situation is worsening.

As we know, any preaching that is not good news for the poor is not the Gospel of Jesus. The call to discipleship today asks that we put our talents and our lives at the service of the poor. As Daniel Berrigan, so challengingly, puts it: “*How can we honor ourselves if we allow*

others to be dishonored?" Issues of poverty and justice are, today, the most important issues in our world, and the poor have few advocates.

The Cross: Inside our secular culture today we see, more and more, the prevalence of various gospels of prosperity. Religion and spirituality have become too identified with personal flourishing, the Church has frequently become the church-compliant, and social justice issues have too often morphed into "lifestyle" issues rather than concern for the poor. In much of the world, we have lost the asceticism of the cross and Christianity and our churches have become comfortable, resisting, as did Jesus' first disciples, Christ's walk to Jerusalem and the cross that awaits them there. Our culture needs prophets again, disciples who can challenge us with the centrality of the cross within life.

Community: Our world today is struggling with community at every level: Individuality is breaking down community, neighborhood, and family; more and more people are espousing that they are "spiritual but not religious" (meaning, "I want God but not community"); there is an ever-growing bitter divisiveness within our countries, Churches, and families; and more and more of our youth are struggling to build genuine community beyond the "virtual" communities they construct through social media. More and more, we are becoming the adult children of Rene Descartes, whose lonely cry ("I think, therefore, I am") is becoming all the more powerful now, five hundred years after he first uttered it. There is a deep longing for community most everywhere in the world today, and too few are the laborers working towards a harvest.

Mary: Devotion to Mary, while a rich food that nurtures the lives of millions of Christians, has also too often encrusted Mary in a piety so saccharine that it turns off millions of other sincere believers. Our world and our churches need Mary more than ever today: as an exemplar of mature faith, as a voice that keeps praying the Magnificat so as to give advocacy to human finitude, as faith that stands helpless but strong under all the crosses where the crucifixion is still happening, and as mysticism for the poor so that someone can religiously touch their affective center. Our world, more than ever, needs Mary, not as an object of piety, but as an advocate for the poor.

A Poem to the Founder – Saint Eugene de Mazenod

I conclude with a poem, written by a Canadian Oblate, Jerome Harry Hellman. The poem was originally written to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of Saint Mary's Province in Canada in 1986.

Here are Father Hellman's thoughts as he addresses the founder:

*I've looked upon your various pictures, seen your statue:
I've stood beside your tomb in France, prayed before your relic on the 21st of May.
I've read your preface to the Rules, some of your letters, all of the constitutions, I think.
I've been variously moved, touched to the bone, bristled, smiled at times, even rebelled, I think,
That you could be – had no choice but to be – so radical.
Radical to the point of Gospel folly,
And, what's even harder, I've felt that you ask the same of me.
You, who as far as I know, entered heaven without fanfare, and there – even there, you can't refrain
from guiding, yes, cajoling, scolding, wooing and caring.
Caring's a word describes you well.
Caring enough to weep, to honest-to-God weep, or "chastise us with the valor of your pen,"
a goose quill.
For all I know
You might have used a goose quill to write red rage or deep red love for the Savior and his poor.
Had I met you in Southern France in 1816 or in '26, when you spilled out and spelled out our Rule,
I'd have fled you by a continent or two, and surely would have told you that I'd rather take my
chances with the Lord himself than have you call me to account.
The kingdom of heaven makes strange pen pals.
You've written your share for my benefit.
I think it's only fair to have my turn.
All I want to do is ask
What in heaven's name made me, called and compelled me to be a Missionary Oblate of Mary
Immaculate?
There are titles unlikely enough for me, but this!
Oblate – offered, poured out, spent – Oblate?
Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate.
You could have rounded up a regiment of angels to do such things as pour out their blood and guts,
except that they had none.
And so you turn to men, the likes of us, each and every one endowed to illustrate
all the sins and virtues in the book.
Well, if that's what it takes, then that's what you've got.
Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.
It does have a lovely ring to it.
Eugene de Mazenod, Saint!
Bishop, Founder and Father,
We both know that I was no more your choice than you were mine.
I'd have fled you, as I said,
but him, Jesus? and his mother, Mary?
Who can turn his back on them?
No, I'm named and claimed with my brothers here assembled;*

*with all our spots and wrinkles, called to love each other ...
You've told us to form community with Jesus and with each other,
and then we're sent, driven and drawn to bring the Good News to the poor.
God only knows, and I hope he doesn't tell all of it to you, how well or how miserably poor we've
done it.
But this I must say: Your charism works!
and we've caught it, some more, some less,
but we've caught it!
It comes upon us, not exactly like a summer's cloud,
more like an anointing, an unseen wave of warmth,
to love,
to touch,
to empty out ourselves,
to speak, to sigh,
to try and try
to pray, and thus to know your charism works.
By heaven it works!
Pray God, my founder and my father,
pray God,
as long as there are poor,
it always will.*

**Cedara, South Africa
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The Kusenberger Lecture for 2018
Ron Rolheiser OMI**