

**Reflection – Animation Material in Preparation for the 37<sup>th</sup>  
General Chapter**

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**BREAKING TRAIL**

For many years, when I was a young adult, I used to work at a summer wilderness camp in the forests of northern Saskatchewan. Part of my job was to take groups on multi-day outward-bound hikes, traversing all sorts of terrain enroute to places of serenity, wonder, awe, and indescribable beauty.

The hikes always began with preliminary planning. We had to decide where we wanted to go; setting out without having a destination in mind guaranteed aimless wandering. We had to ensure that people were committed to getting there, and that they were ready to persevere and encourage one another when the going got tough. And we had to determine what we needed in order to do it – food, shelter, basic supplies, and maps. We brought only what we needed, and only what we could carry.

Hiking boots tied, canteens filled, packs loaded, we would set out on our journey, with spirits high and full of joyful anticipation. The hikes were always relatively easy at the beginning. We could always count on well-traveled paths worn by hikers who had gone before us, and they were rather undemanding – unobstructed, level, and clearly marked. But inevitably, the path would come to an end, and it was always for one of two reasons: the previous hikers decided “here is good enough”, and they would make camp and stay there. Or, the terrain just got too tough, and they would give up on their destination.

Those same choices always confronted us when we reached that point where the trail ended. We could be complacent, and stop because it was good enough. Or we could quit altogether because it was getting too hard. But we also had another option: *keep going*. We believed that the destination was worth it, so we would take out our map, locate our goal, take a bearing on our compass, and forge ahead.

The map and compass always said it was a straight line from Point A to Point B, so one could be forgiven for thinking that continuing the journey should just be a matter of “*look at the compass and keep walking*.” But what the map rarely showed were the barriers and hazards that were between here and there... or the perseverance that was necessary to keep going. Sometimes, going onward meant *big* detours, eventually resuming our proposed path once we had gone well out of our way to get past the obstacle blocking us. But more often than not, the only way forward was, well... forward. “*Can’t go around it. Can’t go over it. Gotta go through it.*” We’d get scratched, cut, and bruised crawling over fallen trees haphazardly piled higher than we were tall. Or we’d get soaked to the skin, carrying our packs – and sometimes each other – above our

shoulders as we waded, chest-deep, through a swamp. It was gruelling work. I knew that the compass was true and that if we kept going in the direction it indicated, we'd get there eventually. But the people with me weren't always so confident. Halfway through the muskeg, a kilometre into the detour, or six feet off the ground on a tangled mess of deadfall, someone would inevitably wonder aloud whether I was sure we were going in the right direction. My answer was always the same: *"Trust me."*

Once we had conquered the obstacle, we'd pause, exhausted, dirty, and wounded, and ask ourselves, "Do we go on?" The answer was always yes. Sometimes the yes was because we weren't so tired, yet, that we couldn't keep going. Sometimes it was because we were stubborn, and we refused to give in. Sometimes it was because we rejected the idea of turning back after having come this far. And always, it was because we knew that the destination was worth it.

We would cheer each other onward, with words of affirmation and encouragement. We'd bind up each other's wounds. Sometimes, we'd even carry someone else's load for awhile, in addition to our own. After countless hours of perseverance in unforgiving conditions, amid injuries, frustrated tears, and even the desire to give up, we'd arrive. Spent, but no less awestruck and overjoyed, we would look around at the people we were with, at what we had accomplished, at the beauty that surrounded us, and know deep down that it was worth it.

This is not unlike our current situation as our congregation prepares for the 37th General Chapter. As an Oblate community, our ultimate destination is God's kingdom, and our goal is to show as many people as we possibly can how to get there. We have been travelling down well-marked paths, following in the footsteps of those before us. These paths have served us well, but they don't take us as far as they used to, as far as they could, as far as they need to. And now we, too, are faced with choices: do we look around, shrug, and decide, "Here is good enough," and get comfortable? Do we decide we don't have it in us, and abandon the journey? Or do we keep going?

Mazenodian audacity, our charism that urges us to leave nothing undared for the gospel, suggests we go on. It's our turn to break trail.

The direction in which Jesus Christ and St. Eugene de Mazenod point us is aimed squarely at our destination. The compass is true, but there is no guarantee that the journey will be an easy one. We know our destination is worthy, but we also know that forward progress will be hard earned.

We will encounter circumstances that force us to take detours. There will be times when, even though we know our destination is close, we will have to take the long way around because of things that stand in our way – processes, procedures, red tape. Even fear.

We will come across swamps – places of decay where water stands still. Spaces that gone stagnant because fresh water, fresh energy, fresh people, or fresh ideas have ceased to flow into them.

We will run into deadfall, where once growing things have died, and have fallen down right where they are. Attitudes like “we have always done it this way”, refusing to give way to new growth.

And our loads will become heavy. We will get tired. Discouraged. Hurt. Frustrated.

But as a congregation of disciples who journey in communion with one another, we urge each other on. We show confidence in the abilities of one another. We bind each other’s wounds. We carry each other’s loads. We forge ahead together, in hope, knowing that our goal, our destination, is worth the effort.

And in doing so, we leave a trail behind us for others to follow.

We have what we need. The Eucharist provides food for the journey. We have a map. A compass. We have companions. And we have a wise and faithful guide. When we are in the wild, untamed beauty of unfamiliar territory, asking ourselves and each other if we’re going in the right direction, Jesus will urge us on with two words: “Trust me.”

For reflection and discussion...

As we journey forth together in hope, daring companions in the spirit of St. Eugene de Mazenod:

1. What sort of ministries are we called to that require us to ‘break trail’, creating new paths to lead others to the Kingdom?
2. What forces us into detours, taking longer and less direct routes to get to our goal than we’d prefer?
3. Where are the swamps? Where (in our congregation, in our mission, in our own lives) do we see a lack of growth and vibrancy, or even decay?
4. What sort of deadfall stands in the way? What attitudes, structures, or mindsets have fallen down in front of us, refusing to give way to growth?
5. What and who do we need (individually, collectively; locally, globally) in order to make the decision to keep going?