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How God uses struggle and pain to form a “missionary.”

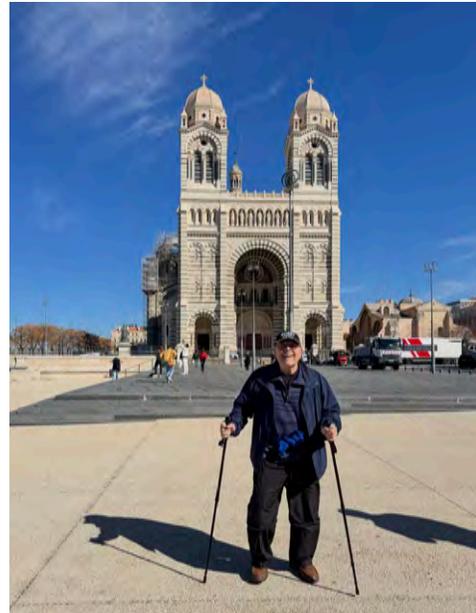
We have heard it said that “Life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved”. This expression has taken on a new and poignant insight for me – as we journey throughout Aix en Provence with our wonderful storyteller and guide, Bonga Thami OMI. The life and formation of little Eugene had certainly been “a mystery to be lived” – yet filled with many “problems to be solved.” It seems that almost from his youth, God was preparing Eugene for a “task” that began as a vague dream, a calling, that resulted into something that has changed the lives of millions of people throughout the world ... Oblates and Associates and “the multitudes” that God has placed into our lives.

Eugene was born into a rich and affluent family, pampered and spoiled as a kid, doted on by many servants, and a special nanny. From her, Eugene learned a second language (Provençal) – a gift that helped to shape and fortify his missionary life in the future.

As a boy, Eugene was also traumatized by violence and heartache – with the outbreak of the French Revolution and the hanging of two of his father’s closest friends. Sent “into exile” he found himself displaced and lonely and abandoned. He also saw and felt the dysfunction of his own parents and extended family – which resulted in the divorce and “ugly settlement” of his parents.

Yet, in it all, God was touching his heart, to notice and respond to the poorest of the poor. One of the highlights this past week, for me, happened “in the cathedral in Aix”. Bonga is telling the story how the back-of-the-church was packed with the street urchins and the un-washed; the front of the church was comfortably seated with the rich and powerful. In Provençal, the language of the peasants, Eugene encouraged these poor people - the rejected and despised and marginalized - that they too are precious and loved by God, without distinction of status or wealth or prestige. In disgust and abhorrence, the Canons and elite walked out of the church.

My imagination and visualization at that moment ran wild as I imagined seeing the poor folks, invited by Eugene, to move into the abandoned seats of the rich elite. What just happened was a moment of “cultural and spiritual revolution” ... now that was “bold and daring!” For me, that was a “God-moment”, a public demonstration that set the stage for the formation of the Oblate charism, our identity as “Missionary Oblates”, our preferential option for the poor! It also affirms my constant prayer for those who have touched and nourished my life, in my call to be a “missionary”. **Wherever you go, go with God; Whenever you go, go make a difference.** Eugene discovered his call to “go with God,” to put Jesus Christ at the centre of his life. It was then that the answer to his call was also to “go make a difference” ... in the lives of the poor and marginalized.



Our visit to Marseille was again another “God-moment” and inspiration for me – to share the Eucharist with my Oblate brothers and sisters at the tomb of St. Eugene, in his cathedral.

As we travelled throughout the city of Marseille and outlying region of Provence, visiting the many places the “new Oblate Congregation” conducted the Parish Missions, I saw and learned how the social influence and impact and presence of Bishop Eugene, the de Mazenod

family and friends, and the Oblate community was significant in the building-up of the city of Marseille and area ... the renewal of the social and spiritual life at that time.



Another gesture that was “bold and daring”: during the Revolution, land, property, holdings were expropriated one from another. During the Parish Mission, Eugene would challenge these people to make amends – to either return the property or to make appropriate accommodations. It was often the experience: during or at the end of the Mission, individuals (standing in the sanctuary of the Church) would make a public act of reconciliation and healing. Relationships were renewed; relationships were healed!

As a boy, as a young priest, as the Bishop of Marseille, as the Founder of a Religious Congregation, Eugene’s life was a constant barrage of “problems to be solved.” However, it was his “life in the Spirit,” his on-going conversions and his innermost relationship with Jesus Christ that empowered him to live “the mystery of life”.

And here we are TODAY, 200+ years later, still striving to live the “mysteries of God’s plan” for each of us ... especially as we continue to discern our preferential option for the poor in the 21st Century. May our openness to “Living the Spirit’s Fire” (the name of the book by Alfred Hubenig OMI) be our focus and commitment to live our own call as Oblates of Mary Immaculate. May the spirit and charism of our Founder continue to touch the hearts of all of us, Oblates and Associates throughout the world ... so that we too can continue to “make a difference,” building the Kingdom of God.

Fr. Mike Dechant, OMI