

Experiencing Mission Hill : The Invitation to Wander, to Wonder, and to Ponder

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Our first invitation this morning is simply to pause, look around and be present. We want to let go of the busyness and chaos of getting here in order to stop and be aware of where we are and who we are with.

As we do so, we want to tune into the Spirit present in us and among us. The deepest reality is that spirituality is INCARNATE: it takes on flesh. In Ron Rolheiser's words, we each are called, 'to skin to God.' In our actions, words, and presence, people should come to know something about God's grace and love.

If it is true that spirituality is incarnate, it is equally true of our Oblate charism. The Oblate charism is not ABSTRACT. It is not simply nice words written in a Rule book. A charism gets up and walks around in people; it becomes enfleshed in persons.

I invite you to look at the people here in this room. What brings us here? What brings you here? What is it that share in common? The answer: as Oblates and Oblate Associates, it is Saint Eugene de Mazenod's charism that brings us here and binds us together.

Each of us has in some way been caught by the same Spirit that moved Eugene, Tempier, and their little band of companions - over 200 years ago and that we encounter in the Book of Life, as Eugene calls the Constitutions and Rules. It has reached over thousands of miles, 200 hundred years and hundreds of individuals to reside somehow in us!

And so, it is a gifted opportunity to come here to the 'holy ground' of Mission Hill where the Oblate charism has been given skin for over 165 years. Lived out in real time, in real people, their presence, if we are ATTENTIVE, can speak to us. So the invitation I extend to us today is to Wander, to Wonder and to Ponder.

As we wander, we might encounter Fathers Lacombe and Leduc, or Bishops Taché and Grandin, or Brother Anthony, or our many Oblate confreres resting in the Oblate cemetery, each of whom enfleshed the Oblate charism in their own particular way. We might wonder at their stories, about what drew them and drove them, and about how they gave skin to the charism. And in that wondering, we might be led to ponder at what that means for us.

I for instance, in my wanderings, have come across Father Albert Lacombe and his towering missionary presence. I wonder at this self-proclaimed, 'le petit sauvage with the itchy feet', who had a taste for adventure and travel west to become a missionary.

I wonder at the fact that he was only 25 years old when he came to Lac Ste. Anne Mission and only 34 when he stood with Bishop Tache and they pronounced, "Here we will plant our church," and the community St. Albert was born.

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But what I especially wonder at is the fact that it is with the Oblates that he, ‘finds a home form his heart.’ It is in his missionary travels through the Canadian West and North where he is ministering in labor camps and among the Metis and First Nations peoples, that he comes into contact with other missionary priests, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. He strikes up a friendship with some of them and discovers he shares so much in common with them that there arises in him a desire to become an Oblate – to walk in the footsteps in the brotherhood of men like himself. In his memoirs, he writes, “I learned to love these religious whose motto applied to me – “Pauperes evangelizantur [He has sent me to evangelize the poor].” Lacombe recognizes in their company a shared spirit and a home for his heart.

I ponder that lovely remark, “Their motto applied to me.” I’m reminded of Eugene’s writing to Tempier: “Happiness awaits us in the holy society which will have but one heart and soul,” and I ponder as to what that means to me now.

In further wanderings, I come across Brother Anthony and I wonder at this simple Polish immigrant who comes to Western Canada as an Oblate brother 1896. I wonder and ponder a particular aspect of his story that speaks to my Oblate heart.

Brother Anthony’s biographer tells the story this way:

Anthony was s a young man in Hamburg, where he had gone to find work, apprenticing as a metal worker but he has a has a heart for God and nowhere to go with it. He can’t find a place or a way to live it out.

As he wanders unhappily through Hamburg, longing for a place where he could practice his faith, he throws himself on his knees in the middle of the street and cries out, “My God, me believe in you with all my heart.”

God answers, “Go to Mulheim-on-Rhine’ and there he finds lodging in the home of a saintly woman, whose son is in the Oblate juniorate. She tells Anthony about the vocation of being a lay Brother and of the exciting work being done especially in the difficult Canadian missions. She lights a fire in his heart and encourages him to apply.

As the story has it, Anthony goes in his humble working man clothes, knocks on the door and the novice master rather roughly asks him, “What are you doing her? I suppose you have come for a job,” and Anthony responds simply, “I come because I was told that here I could serve God.”

“I was told that here I could serve God.” I ponder that sentence. What is Brother Anthony saying to me about serving God and my mission?

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So here is the threefold invitation.

WANDER around and through the grounds. Visit Lacombe's statue, his chapel, go to the cemetery, and the grotto. Read the plaques, take your time and be present to the holy ground of this place.

As you Wander, take time to WONDER. Who were these men? What is the spirit moved them? How were they shaped by Eugene's charism?

And then. . . PONDER. What is this saying to you today? How does their Oblate spirit reach across the kilometers and the years to touch your Oblate heart?

It will be personal to each of us; we incarnate the charism in different ways. But it is one spirit, one charism we share.