

Eugene De Mazenod

Founder of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Priest, Missionary, Bishop.

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Australian Catholic Truth Society No.1675a (1975)

[Eugene de Mazenod was canonised in 1995.]

I.

Missionary of Provence.

It was a moment of decision. A very few hours earlier, on the morning of 21st December, 1811, Eugene de Mazenod had been ordained a priest, at Amiens. And now the Bishop of Amiens had offered the newly ordained priest the post of Vicar General of the diocese. It was an appointment, which carried with it the promise of episcopal succession.

To Eugene de Mazenod, then in his twenty-ninth year, the proffered appointment gave the promise of fruitful years of priestly service at a moment when the Church, so lately emerged from the darkness and terror of life in France under the Revolution, faced the problems and uncertainties of existence under the rule of the Emperor Napoleon.

It was, too, an appointment which promised the young Father de Mazenod a dignity of rank and place in keeping with the centuries old traditions of his family in the service of France. But to Eugene de Mazenod, his duty seemed elsewhere, his life's work of a different kind. He returned to his native Provence, to the city of Aix.

For just under 300 years, the family of de Mazenod had put their roots deep in the soil of Provence. As long since as 1529 a de Mazenod had established himself at Marseilles and had laid the foundations of a family fortune in the pharmaceutical trade. By the mid-eighteenth century, a de Mazenod had become one of the leading notabilities in the legal profession in Marseilles. In 1789, that year in which the storming of the Bastille had thrown open the flood gates of revolution in France, the father of the nine-years-old Eugene, Charles Antoine de Mazenod, was Chief Justice of the High Courts at Aix and, by right of office and of election, one of the Nobility of Provence and a delegate to the Estates-General, the Parliament of France.

It was Charles de Mazenod's very brilliance as a lawyer, which brought the family's fortune to destruction in the storms of violence out of which came Revolution. When, in 1789, King Louis XVI summoned for the first time in 175 years the Nobility and Clergy and Commons, the three Estates or groups which comprised the French Parliament, and decreed that the Commons should have as many delegates as the Nobility and Clergy together, the Provincial Assembly of Provence at once protested. Hitherto each Estate had had an equal voting strength; any change, protested the Provençals, would be a violation of the Constitution of Provence solemnly guaranteed when the province was annexed to the Crown of France under Louis XI.

To the lawyer de Mazenod was assigned the task of arguing the Provençal case before the King. He pleaded his cause with so great a measure of success that he earned the furious enmity of Mirabeau, that strange man of genius and of violence, about whom gathered the turbulent forces of revolt in Marseilles and throughout the Midi. No man could stand against the fury which it was in Mirabeau's power to unleash by the flamboyant fevour of his oratory and the sheer magnetism of his personality. Against Charles de Mazenod, that fury was unleashed in all its terrifying violence; by a hairsbreadth, the spokesman of the Provençal Assembly escaped the death which had overtaken four of his colleagues at the hands of Mirabeau's followers. He fled into exile.

For the child, Eugene de Mazenod, there began then those years of exile during which — as is so often the way of exiles — he put down his roots spiritually into the soil of that homeland from which he had been physically driven. In Nice, in Turin, in Venice, in Palermo, he grew to young manhood, remembering Provence. In exile, he attained, out of the piety of adolescence, to a faith and fervor, which were to be the twin keystones of his spiritual life.

Vocation.

He was in his twenty-first year when, with Napoleon's election as First Consul for life in 1802, it became possible for him to return to Aix. The city of Aix to which he came home was a city on which the years of turmoil and revolution had laid a blighting shadow. Napoleon's reconstruction-of the country's civil institutions had restored the Church, but in Aix, the returned exile found the church in which he had been baptised a shattered ruin and the parishes of the city without priests to replace those done to death or banished into exile. Spiritually, the city was a desert, the faith of its people dead or dying. And side by side with spiritual poverty went material hunger and destitution, which appalled the sensitive mind of the young de Mazenod. The Aix he had known and treasured in memory during his years of exile had been warm and bright with the ease and elegance of wealthy family life. Now the reality was of a poverty of soul and body that cried out for aid. To Eugene de Mazenod there seemed here to his hand a cause more urgent and compelling than the task of restoring the ruined fortunes of his family. He had found his vocation.

In the October of 1808, he entered the seminary of Saint Sulpice, in Paris. In the December of 1811, he was ordained a priest at Amiens. And within the year, he had returned for a second time to Aix. In the decision to return was the foreshadowing of his life's work.

In the pattern of Eugene de Mazenod's life story, that deliberate return to the Midi, to the Provence out of which his family had come, has its illuminating significance. "If grace would make a saint of him," said the Abbe Bremond, "it would in the strict sense of the word make him a Provençal saint." That southland of France, sun-warmed, yet with its own rock-ribbed ruggedness, gives its sons a warm humanity, a quick sensitivity, a vivid imagination, a ready tongue. In the young priest, returning to a homeland spiritually and materially impoverished, these qualities of the true Provençal were allied to a tireless drive and dynamic energy, to a rock-firm purpose, which would carry him forward against all opposition in any cause to which he had dedicated himself.

The cause which transmitted the warmth of his Provençal nature into a flame of purpose in those spring and summer days of 1812 was the cause of the forgotten men of the Midi, of the workers, artisans, servants, slum-dwellers and beggars of Aix; the cause of the common people whose common bond was a starvation of soul and body.

Because he was himself a Provençal, Eugene de Mazenod instinctively sensed one of the greatest stumbling blocks which lay across the path to spiritual regeneration of the common people of Aix.

This instinctive understanding went back, perhaps, to Lenten days shortly after he had first returned from exile.

During those Lenten days, Eugene de Mazenod was one of the congregation which crowded a church in Aix to hear a famous preacher. Renowned for his oratory, the preacher chose such themes as the story of the creation, of the deluge, of the plagues of Egypt, subjects which moved the imagination of his almost wholly aristocratic audience without unduly stirring its conscience.

The grandeur of the preacher's themes was matched by his language. He was an orator in the grand style. He spoke with an elegance and grace and colour, which charmed his listeners whose common language was French, whose pride was in their familiarity with the classic poets and romantic novelists of France. He spoke in French of outstanding clarity and accent. But to the ordinary people of Aix, to the little shopkeepers and tradesmen and artisans and labourers and servants, he did not speak at all; for their native tongue was Provençal, and of French, they knew no more than a stray word, an occasional mispronounced phrase.

"Here are people in dire need of the word of God, and the Gospel is not preached to them in a language they understand," the youthful de Mazenod told himself, moved to a full-hearted indignation by this deprivation of a people whose fate seemed always destined to be spiritual and material starvation. "One day I shall fill this need."

His First Sermon.

And now the time had come to redeem that promise. In the Lent of 1813, eager to put his plans to the test, but as yet unsure of his capabilities, he began a series of Lenten talks at the church of the Madeleine, in the heart of a working-class parish, to a congregation of housemaids, washerwomen, domestic servants, porters, unskilled workers from the kitchens, the stables, the warehouses and the warehouse yards. His opening words foreshadowed his life's mission:

"During this holy period of Lent there will be many talks for the rich. Are there to be none for the poor? The Gospel must be taught to all men, and in a fashion easily understood. The poor are precious members of the Christian family and cannot be abandoned. The poor of Christ, all you whom misery disheartens, my brothers, my dear brothers, my esteemed brothers, listen to me. You are the children of God, the brothers of Jesus Christ, the co-heirs of His eternal kingdom..."

So began his first sermon, spoken in the Mother tongue of those who listened to him — in Provençal, the language of the congregation, which crowded the vast church in the six o'clock half-light of that Lenten morning.

And the crowds did not dwindle or fall away after that first morning of heart-warming discovery by a people who had found their pastor — as that pastor had found his people. The poor of Aix had found a pastor who spoke a language they understood, not merely the rich, vivid language of the tongue, which was their dearest heritage and proudest badge of individuality — but also a language of the heart which spoke to them in love and charity and without patronage or condescension.

Mission to the Poor.

Success brings its own problems, and the great problem, which the success of those Lenten lectures of 1813 brought to the young priest, was that of meeting the demands of the many who were eager to share the joy of those who had crowded to hear him preach those first sermons.

Ragged, often hungry, poor in soul and body, they thronged to the Missions he preached. But in a city and its hinterland where five out of every ten citizens had fallen away from the Sacraments and had ceased to hear Mass; where children grew to young manhood and young womanhood without making their First Communion; where so few priests laboured amongst so many, that thousands had not the opportunity of even speaking to a priest from one year's end to the next: the single-handed work of one preacher was not enough. More was wanted.

To Father Eugene de Mazenod — a realist whose sense of realism always expressed itself in seeing not the magnitude of the obstacle but the straightforward methods which would help to overcome that obstacle — what was needed was plain enough: if more Missions were to be preached, then he would need more helpers to work with him in the preaching of them.

When he obtained the permission of his episcopal superiors to find helpers to assist him in the preaching of Missions, Eugene de Mazenod had no immediate plan or intention of founding a new religious society, bound by vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. He looked first for companions to share in his work; and, out of that original intention, came the grouping together in community life of those priests who were to become known as "The Missioners of Provence."

Father Missioners of Provence.

The Curé of Arles, Father Tempier, was his first helper and associate; their first community house — an old Carmelite convent, shabby and gone to seed, within a stone's throw of the graceful and elegant town house of the de Mazenods in which Father Eugene had been born.

Indeed, there is something almost comically grandiloquent about the use of so dignified a term as "community house" for the shabby, one-time convent of the Carmelites to which Father de Mazenod and Father Tempier came to live. Part of the old building served as a lodging house of the cheaper sort; and the portion reserved to the use of the two priests was no more than a single large room.

It was a room of such stark and pitiless poverty that, in some odd way, it somehow conveys in description less a picture of the bare, austere simplicity of deliberate asceticism than the unrelieved outline of desperate and utterly comfortless destitution and want. A smouldering fire in a yawning fireplace belched smoke back from faulty chimneys until all the room was filled by a sooty fog that turned brightest day into the perpetual twilight of a fox's den. For a table the two priests made do with a plank supported by two barrels; but in later years, when Eugene de Mazenod recalled that makeshift table, it was to remember with characteristic cheerfulness that from it they "used to eat with relish the small share of food that fell to each one."

As for Father Tempier, when he recalls that room of their early beginnings, it was to remember with brisk satisfaction that the two first tenants of the room did not long have it to themselves. Within a month — in the February of 1816 — they were joined there by Fathers Mye, Deblieu and Icard. And now, a team of five priests strong, they were ready to start their apostolic work.

For their first combined missionary operation, they chose the town of Grans. It was a market town of some 1,500 inhabitants, and the pattern of its spiritual life — or lack of spiritual life — was one which the "Missioners of Provence" were to see repeated again and again throughout the Midi.

Of its fifteen-hundred people, scarcely a score had fulfilled their Easter duties. So few of the parishioners ever bothered to cross the threshold of the parish church to pray, to confess or to assist at Sunday Mass, that episcopal decision to close the church for lack of use seemed unlikely to be

long delayed. The town was a centre of spiritual paralysis; to revive it, spiritually, was a task to appall the imagination of any but the most dedicated of men.

Yet it was the very magnitude of the task, which seems to have spurred Father de Mazenod and his companions to efforts straining human strength and endurance to the very limits — and beyond.

Again, as in Aix, the church was thronged, but not only for sermon and lecture. Almost from the very first day of the Mission, lines and queues of men and women began to form about the confessionals. Virtually all the penitents were working people; great numbers of them worked from dawn to dusk and so would not be free to join the queues until late evening, when crowds would already have gathered, or in the hour after the first of the morning Masses when, again, the crowds would be so great that many would have to leave for work before their turn came.

Here was the kind of difficulty which Eugene de Mazenod, down through the years, was to deal with in a fashion so forthright and decisive that once he had acted, people scarcely remembered that there ever had been a problem to solve.

At three o'clock in the morning, each one of the confessionals in the church at Grans was occupied by a confessor. During twenty out of the four and twenty hours that followed, confessors remained at their posts. There were Masses and sermons and lectures; there were visitations to the sick; and all through the day, penitents came in long unending lines. And this pattern was repeated day after day, week after week, for the full month of that Mission in Grans.

That year of 1816 was a year of beginnings. Two further Missions were preached that year. In the half-dozen years that followed, four and twenty Missions were preached. Missions were preached in Arles and Marseilles and Aix, cities with which Father de Mazenod and some of his associates had strong connections; but for the most part, the Missioners of Provence laboured in the rural districts and in the country towns, areas in which their work was amongst the poor and the peasants. And everywhere the pattern of work which was established at Grans was repeated; so, too, was the pattern of reward which showed itself, in varying degree, in crowded churches and besieged confessionals.

A Life of Hardship.

It was a life of hardship. The hardship was not merely a matter of rough living and poor lodging, as when, at Rognac during the bitter days of a winter long memorable for its harshness, the Missioners, Fathers Tempier and Mye, were given, through either the poverty or the inhospitality of their hosts, only a pile of straw to sleep upon and fare so frugal that their Superior was moved to alarmed comment. It was the hardship of ceaseless, unrelenting toil; and even though new labourers joined the little band, the task of preaching, of confessing, of visiting, for month-long after month-long spell imposed crushing burdens on the willing backs of the Missioners of Provence.

In that life of labour — a life sweetened by the unmistakable signs of a reawakening faith amongst the people of the Midi — Father de Mazenod played a leader's part. His was not merely the leadership of dynamic action, although his sheer activity set a standard that spurred his colleagues to unremitting effort. He undertook personally the direction of almost every one of the Missions during those early fruitful years. His leadership created, too, an inspiring model for those to whom the preaching of a Mission was a new thing.

The Born Orator.

He was a born orator, whose gift of oratory was fired and forged and tempered in the ardent flame of his belief that he had found the Divine purpose in his life — the bringing of the Gospel to the poor.

All his gifts and talents seemed to be shaping themselves towards that end. When he spoke to a congregation of Provençal peasantry, he seemed to put himself unhesitatingly and directly in communication with his listeners, speaking face to face, as it were, with each individual man and woman, making the message that was for all a message charged with significance for each single soul.

They came, these people of the poor, to the churches of the Midi to hear a great preacher. He was a great preacher, but with a greatness that owed nothing to the fashions and conventions of the oratory of his time. He did more than speak the dialect that was their own, he spoke it with the vividness and colour and fire of one to whom this tongue was, as it was to every one of them, a warm and living tongue.

There was much, too, of their own quicksilver temperament in the style and manner of a preacher whose sermons had the light and shade, the swift interplay of mood, of thundering sternness and sunny persuasiveness that were warp and woof of the Provençal character.

Sermon after sermon he preached, never from prepared and remembered texts or from notes, but always spontaneously, improvising with a fluent and easy grace that allowed no barrier to stand between him and his listeners. Hearing and watching him, his fellow workers found a model and learned something, but not all, of the gift that won men back to God.

The Inner Life.

Something but not all; for the power of preaching sermons and the talent for directing Missions were no more than the outward signs of the inner life which made Eugene de Mazenod the “fisher of men” he had become. “It was not upon his natural gifts that Father de Mazenod relied to convert souls,” says his latest biographer, “but rather upon the strength of prayer and penance. Though he slept but five hours a night, he rigorously kept the days of fasting and abstinence even when the Mission took place in Lent.”

He himself showed his full awareness of the gifts that were truly needed by the preacher and missionary who would bring the Gospel to men when, at the very outset of their missionary work, he talked with Father Tempier.

“If it were only a matter of preaching well or badly the word of God,” he said, “to run about the countryside without going to the trouble of making ourselves interior men, really apostolic men, I think it would not be too difficult to replace you. But, do you believe that I want that rubbish?”

He wanted more, very much more from his co-workers than willingness, however eager, to follow the routine and humdrum life of preaching in town after town, very much more than the uncomplaining acceptance of the grinding labour of pulpit and confessional. In the words of Father Tempier, he wanted men “ready to follow in the footprints of the Apostles, to work for the salvation of souls without expecting any other reward on earth but pain and fatigue.”

Such men he sought, and many such he found. But a further step forward on his path of purpose was not made until the autumn of 1818. In the August of that year occurred an event, which made

him reconsider the composition and standing of his group of helpers: he was offered the gift of a house in the Upper Alps, at Notre Dame de Laus.

All through the early days of their work together, the group of priests who became known as “The Missioners of Provence,” returned after each season of work in the Mission field to the old Carmelite convent, where Fathers de Mazenod and Tempier relished those frugal meals, eaten from makeshift table of rough planks in a sulphurous fog of smoke.

Here they rested and recuperated after the weeks of grinding toil that each Mission entailed. Here they lived a community life; here they prayed, studied, officiated in the convent chapel, devoted regular hours to recollection and meditation.

They lived in community in that one-time community home of the Carmelites; but they themselves were not a community united by any vows. Unity of ideals, the influence of Father de Mazenod, who became their Superior by common consent; mutual charity; a simple agreement; these were the only bonds that bound the Missioners of Provence.

A Community Rule.

And now, with the house of Notre Dame de Laus ready to become a community house, Father de Mazenod and his helpers prepared for that step which they had long pondered and meditated and prayed for. The Superior was called upon to formulate a rule, a code of laws by which the community should live.

So it was done. In the October of that year, 1818, Father de Mazenod placed before his fellow workers the Rules and Constitution, which were to transform the group of Mission workers and preachers into a religious Congregation in the fullest sense.

Not all of the priests who had joined with Father de Mazenod for the primary purpose of preaching the Gospel to the poor of Provence were convinced of the wisdom or the desirability of making their simple federation of Missioners a new religious society, fully and duly constituted and demanding by its rules and vows a far greater and more definite engagement than had been entailed by the simple agreement which had hitherto bound the band of preachers. But when, in the closing days of 1818, the little community met to deliberate and vote upon the Constitution which would bind the future Missioners of Provence, all but two of the ten priests and scholastic brothers consecrated themselves to God by perpetual oblation.

II.

Missionary of Mary Immaculate.

Yet another half-dozen years were to pass before Eugene de Mazenod took the next great step forward in the progress of the work which had begun so humbly and unostentatiously in that stark, poverty-marked room in the old house of the Carmelites.

Time and again, he had pondered the possibility of seeking for the new Society, its work and Rules and Constitution, the solemn approval and approbation of the Holy See. At first, a prudent realisation of the many difficulties involved in such a formal application made him put off the final decision. But by the winter of 1825, he had become convinced that the seal of Papal Approbation must now be sought if the Society he had founded was to achieve stability and strength. The first days of November saw him on his way to Rome.

Visit to Rome.

Out of the formal journal of his days in Rome which he later wrote, but even more warmly in the letters which he sent by almost every post to Father Tempier, comes a vivid picture of those momentous days in the history of the Society — and an even more vivid picture of the founder of the Society.

Not many days in Rome were to pass before he discovered how very right he had been in thinking that the task of obtaining Papal approbation for the Society would be a lengthy and difficult one, calling for unlimited patience and pertinacity in enduring the delays and postponements and refusals that are an inevitable part of the delicate process of considering pleas and passing judgment on them.

“I called on Cardinal de Gregorio,” he wrote, “and presented letters from Turin which recommended me to him in glowing terms; he received me in a most friendly way, invited me to dinner and was exceedingly courteous. But, he assured me, he does not believe that the Pope would grant us a formal approbation.”

Here was disappointment indeed; but neither then nor later was there the least hint of complaint or regret in Father de Mazenod’s letters. In that very letter, he is content to state the Cardinal’s adverse opinion; and then he goes briskly and cheerfully on to detail the steps he is taking to turn temporary defeat into lasting victory. The Cardinal Vicar is visited, and a promise extracted to have the case of the Missioners of Provence specially mentioned to the Holy Father. Friendly relations are established with the Secretary of Propaganda. The Master of the Chamber has to be reminded to arrange the all-important audience with the Pope. And in the midst of all this ceaseless activity, Father de Mazenod summons up sufficient sardonic humour to welcome the rigorous Black Fasts of Quarter Tense (the demanding fasts formerly observed during ‘Ember Days’) in Rome, since fasting makes it possible for him to dine on a morsel of fish and half a lemon, and so avoid allowing his hosts to realise his typically French opinion of Roman cooking, the Roman use of “the detestable oil which people from Provence find it absolutely impossible to stomach.”

A Critical Day.

For a little while, it seemed that all his ceaseless and exhausting activities were not bringing Father de Mazenod closer to his goal. Five days before Christmas, he woke one morning to realise that this day was the last day of the year for audiences. Something would have to be done quickly if his visit to Rome were not to be extended indefinitely. And something was done. Let Father de Mazenod himself tell us what it was:

“One fine day I made up my mind. Having borrowed the doyen’s carriage, I arrived at the Vatican, in full dress. The first person I met — a minor prelate — advised me not to wait; it would be quite impossible for me to see His Holiness that day; a whole flock of Cardinals would arrive, and Ministers and goodness knows who else; it would be better to put off my visit to the beginning of the New Year.

“As he withdrew, Monsignor Barberini arrived and I explained my position to him and reproached him for having put me in a difficulty by his forgetfulness. Somewhat embarrassed by my gentle rebuke, but admitting its justice, he invited me to enter the salon. Having the status of both a prelate and a gentleman, I forthwith went into the room next to the Pope’s office, the room where Cardinals, Bishops, other prelates and Ministers wait their turn for audience.

“I was in good heart that day, although I was fasting. Monsignor the Secretary of Briefs was the first to be called, but I was not dismayed by his huge purple bag. Nor by the satchel, equally well filled, of Cardinal Pacca, Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. Alas! I thought, some day it may be our turn to be shut up in that satchel.

“Each of these spent an hour with the Pope. The Bishop Almoner, who distributes the Pope’s charities, and the priest who is Master of the Sacred Palace had appointments for that day, but the interviews were short.

“Who would be called next? The Father General of the Dominicans — the poor man was ravenously hungry — would have wagered it would be his turn. But not at all! I was called. You know how dignified I am? Well, I maintained my dignity till I got to the door, but I dropped it then, and did not assume it again till I came out.

“The Pope received me in his small bedroom. He was seated on a couch, and before him was a desk on which he leaned. On entering, I made the first genuflexion, as is the custom; but between the door and the place where he sat, there was not room to make a second one. So, all at once, I was kneeling before him...”

With that vividly evocative and warm-hearted introduction to the story of his first audience with Pope Leo XII, Father de Mazenod goes on, in high delight, to tell Father Tempier how far from the pessimistic forecasts of his advisers, who saw little hope of the Sovereign Pontiff granting his request, was the kindness and courtesy which the Pope showed to him in an audience which was extended to last nearer a full hour than the allotted time of half an hour.

The Pope’s Reaction.

He tells of the Pope’s interest in his account of the founding of the Missioners of Provence and of their work during the years past. Then, with joy, he tells of the Pope’s reaction to his request for formal approval of the Rules and Constitution of the Society. He writes:

“It almost seemed as if he wanted to apologize for not granting by a stroke of the pen what I knew well could only be given after lengthy formalities were complete.

“Yes, ‘One knows,’ he said, addressing me all the time in the third person, ‘one knows the customs of the Holy See. The procedure today is the same as was followed a hundred years ago. The Secretary of the Congregation will make a report to me on this matter. I shall appoint a Cardinal to examine it; he will report to the Congregation; each Cardinal will give his vote...’

“Lest I should forget the name of the Secretary he had mentioned, he was kind enough to get me a sheet of paper, and he gave me a pen and dictated;

“Yes, ‘Call on the Archbishop, tell him one comes from me, and that he is to make his report on Friday’.”

This was success beyond Father de Mazenod’s most optimistic dreams. But it was only a beginning. The project had been set in motion, but there was much yet to do before the seal of Papal approbation would be finally set upon the Rules and Constitution of the Society.

The winter of 1825 was to give way to the spring of 1826, Christmas to Lent, Lent to Easter, and Whitsuntide (Pentecost) to be no more than days away before Father de Mazenod had completed,

single-handed, the tremendous task of piloting the project through the maze of protocol and legal formality designed to save final decision from any chance of error.

From Cardinal Major Penitentiary to Cardinals of Congregation, from Archpriest to Auditor, he went, discussing, planning, interviewing, preparing voluminous replies to multitudinous questions. There were days when even the weather of a Roman Spring seemed to conspire against him, striking down with illness a Cardinal whose attendance was vital to the investigations ordered by the Pope. There were days when all progress was held up because some major domo or house servant could not be bothered to attend to the instructions of this plain priest from Provence in his shabby soutane and mended boots.

But Father de Mazenod did not allow himself to be discouraged, disappointed or deflected from his purpose. He had sources of patience and of strength.

“I spent last night before the Blessed Sacrament,” he wrote to Father Tempier, “which remains exposed during the two nights of the Forty Hours devotion.”

Cheerful Poverty.

His cheerfulness during those tiring days was inexhaustible. He could, in his letters, find the humour to conjure up a wry smile at the poverty, which added to the worries of delay.

“I did not dare approach Tarlonia for so small a sum as one hundred Roman crowns,” he wrote, “so I drew it from Monsieur Curani. I shall ask my uncle to settle this.

“I used this money to pay my debts; I owed two months board and lodgings to the people with whom I stay. Clothes are my real worry. You should see how I try to make them last. I take advantage of the dry weather to wear out my old breeches; there are holes in them, here, there, and everywhere, but my soutane covers all. But, if it rained, I would have to gather up my soutane, and then my raggedness would be only too visible. If I hadn’t to appear so frequently before Cardinals, I would wear my old soutane all the time, for its wrinkles would be hidden by my coat.”

But in the end, all the pains and penalties and poverty, all the exasperating delays of protocol, all the incivilities of stewards and servants were gloriously made good to him.

On February 15th, the Cardinals of Congregation met in the palace of the Cardinal Prefect to complete their deliberations. That morning, in the Church of Saint Mary in Campitelli, Father Eugene de Mazenod heard nine successive Masses. In the early evening came the decision of the Cardinals: the Rules of the Society had been unanimously approved. Three days later, Father de Mazenod wrote:

“My dear friend, my dear brothers: Yesterday evening, the 17th February, 1826, the Sovereign Pontiff, Leo XII, confirmed the decision of the Congregation of Cardinals, and gave specific approval to the Institute, the Rules and the Constitution of the Missionary Oblates of the Most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary.”

Even after the Papal approbation of the Society, and the choice by the Pope himself of the name by which the Society would henceforth be known, Eugene de Mazenod’s work in Rome was not ended. It was mid-May before all the necessary formalities were completed — formalities which entailed further rounds of calls and interviews, long periods in session with secretaries of Committees, periods of actual transcribing to save the cost of a professional copyist. It was more than half a year

after his departure to Rome before Father de Mazenod was re-united with his brothers of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

III.

Missionary Bishop.

“Rome’s unhopd for approbation was a cause of intense joy for Father de Mazenod,” writes a recent biographer. “It sanctioned his most cherished and valued project. Through a series of circumstances, whose meaning he did not even suspect, he had to abandon the missionary career and enter another field of Apostolate.”

Abandon seems scarcely the apt word; for Eugene de Mazenod’s close ties with and abiding interest in the Society which he founded were to last till the end of his days. But in the six years following the Papal approbation, it is true that a further dimension was added to his labours; his life’s work was woven in a pattern, which found its ultimate form in his elevation to the Episcopacy.

The year of that elevation was 1832. Pope Gregory XVI was on the throne of Saint Peter, and from him came the summons, which brought the founder of the Oblates of Mary again to Rome. He was summoned to Rome so that the Holy Father might personally judge the fitness of the one who had been recommended as a suitable auxiliary Bishop of Marseilles.

The judgment was favourable. Nominated Titular Bishop of Icosie in North Africa by Pope Gregory, Eugene de Mazenod was consecrated in Saint Sylvester’s Church in Rome on October 14th, 1832.

A Difficult Situation.

The manner of Monsignor de Mazenod’s elevation to the episcopacy was to have repercussions, which threatened the very existence of the See. The new rulers, who had come into power in France in 1830, had claimed the right to alter and redraw the boundaries of the French dioceses. In fact, a Concordat existed between France and the Holy See by which it was agreed that the candidates for bishoprics in France would be presented by the State. But there were special considerations attaching to the appointment of a Bishop to the See of Marseilles.

After the revolution of 1830, the municipal authorities appointed under the new regime claimed that the Bishop of Marseilles and his clergy had opposed the revolution and favoured the overthrown government. In retaliation, they called for the suppression of the See of Marseilles and, indeed, a resolution to this effect was passed by the local District Council of Marseilles in 1831 and submitted to the central government in Paris. In these circumstances, it was thought that there was little likelihood of the French Government looking favourably on the appointment as auxiliary Bishop of Marseilles of Eugene de Mazenod, a nephew of Monsignor Fortune de Mazenod, the Bishop so very much out of favour with the authorities.

So the need for secrecy arose. The choice of the North African territory of Icosie was made deliberately so that it could be claimed that Father de Mazenod was not raised to a French See in flat defiance of the French Government. As a further precaution, the announcement of the consecration of the new Bishop was not made known for almost a year.

But none of this saved the new Bishop from envenomed attack. He was accused of having accepted a bishopric without the approval of the State. He was charged with being leader of a political group opposed to the Government. Charges were laid against him through diplomatic channels at the

Vatican. But the Holy Father, having heard the Bishop's defence, dismissed all the charges as unfounded. Once again, Eugene de Mazenod returned from Rome, heart-warmed by the friendship and confidence of a Pope. Once again, he could remind his brethren of the Society he had founded that: "The Oblates are the Pope's men."

With his elevation to the episcopate, the life story of Eugene de Mazenod becomes woven in a two-fold strand. He himself sets down in homely words his conception of a Bishop's duties:

"In these days," he wrote, "one rarely finds any true idea of what it is to be a bishop according to the teachings of our Faith and the institutions of our Divine Saviour. Nowadays, a bishop is shut up in his study, writing out dispensations or answering letters. If he sometimes makes his appearance in a parish, it is because he alone can give Confirmation. If it were not for Confirmation he would hardly be seen among the people; and it might happen that during the whole course of an episcopal career not a soul had ever given an account of duty fulfilled or neglected to the representative sent by Jesus Christ to dwell in the midst of His people."

A Long Episcopate.

During the nine and twenty years of his episcopate, Monsignor de Mazenod did, indeed, dwell in the midst of his people of the See of Marseilles. He became their only bishop in 1837. He, who loved the quiet of the study and the library, now gave himself to the public life of his diocese. He was there in the churches of Marseilles at all the solemn functions of the Church. In the streets of Marseilles, and particularly in the poorer streets and alleyways, he became as familiar a sight in his comings and goings as any priest on the rounds of his parish duties. High on the fifth floor of some quayside tenement a child is dying, and through the winter night and the darkened streets, the Bishop comes to baptize the child. Through lanes of hovels and cabins, the Bishop makes his way to the bedside of an aged woman who has asked to receive the Last Sacraments from his hands. At Easter, in a busy parish to which a new pastor has yet to be appointed, the Bishop comes to undertake the distribution of Communion to the sick. During the many epidemics of cholera, which swept 19th century Marseilles, Monsignor de Mazenod was to be found in hospital and fever ward, by the bedside of the dying. And when those about him implored him to husband his strength and to leave such active work to other and younger men, he had a ready answer:

"I find my happiness in pastoral work. It is for this that I am a bishop, and not to write books, still less to pay court to the great, or to waste my time amongst the rich. It is true," he added with a smile, "that this is not the way to become a Cardinal; but if one could become a saint, would it not be better still?"

And always Eugene de Mazenod remembered that early resolve of his that the poor amongst his people should have the Gospel preached to them in a language they could understand. He preached in all his pastoral visits to the city churches; at Confirmations he preached to the children and to their parents and god-parents; he preached each Monday in his own chapel, and in all churches where he said Mass or presided at religious functions. And when on visitation throughout the Midi he remembered that long-ago preacher of shining phrase and Parisian eloquence and preached his own sermons in Provençal.

The value of a bishop's episcopate is not to be measured in figures and statistics, but it is a fact that illuminates Monsignor de Mazenod's work for his people that in the years between 1823 and 1861, the year of his death, no fewer than twenty-two new parishes rose up in the diocese; twenty-six other churches, including the Cathedral itself, were reconstructed, enlarged or repaired. And

towering over the waterfront and harbour of Marseilles there began in his episcopate the building of the Basilica of Notre Dame de la Garde.

The Foreign Missions.

The spirit of Eugene de Mazenod was not to be confined within the limits of a diocese, devoted to that diocese though he was. Soon other work was opportunely offered to the man whose favourite boyhood reading had been the story of the Chinese missions.

During the summer of 1841, there came to Marseilles the Canadian Bishop, Monsignor Bourget, of Montreal. He had come to Europe to find missionaries to work in the vast mission fields of North America, amongst the Red Indian tribes in Canadian territory. By good fortune, Monsignor Bourget's search brought him to Bishop de Mazenod. The Canadian Bishop explained his need to the French Bishop.

"Missionaries to work amongst the Indian population?" Monsignor de Mazenod said. "But the foreign missions were not in our plans; and besides, I have so few priests whom I could send as Missionaries..."

"And I have so many, both white and Indian, who are poor and destitute in soul and body; so many crying out to hear the word of God..."

It was the appeal which Eugene de Mazenod had never been able to resist. Once again, as in those days amidst the poor of Aix, a quarter of a century before, the call had come to him from the forgotten men of the world; and once again, he remembered his long-ago resolution to bring the Gospel to the poor.

That day he put Bishop Bourget's request before his Oblates. Of the forty-five members of the congregation, every one volunteered. But six only were chosen. They embarked at Le Havre on 22nd October, a contingent of four Fathers and two Brothers. It was the beginning of long years of fruitful work in the prairies and wildernesses of Canada.

IV.

Missionary to the World.

The work which began in that October of 1841 with such few numbers, soon began to assume larger proportions. Four years later, in 1845, the Bishop of Saint Boniface in Manitoba, Canada, offered the Oblates a territory as large as Europe, in the North-west of Canada. Without hesitation, Eugene de Mazenod accepted the enormous task of finding Missionaries for that territory.

Alaska and Canada.

"I cannot permit of any hold up," he declared and that firm declaration was the signal for the beginning of the Oblates' epic work in this new land. Slowly at first, and then more quickly as new helpers joined their ranks, the Oblates spread across the prairies, moved onward to the dreary wastes of the Hudson Bay territory, established themselves amongst the Eskimo. By the August of 1859, Father Grollier had reached the Arctic circle at Fort Good Hope, and had gone on to the mouth of the Mackenzie River to become, in the words of Pius IX, one of the first of the "Martyrs of Cold". Sioux, Cris, Blackfeet and many other tribes had come to know the missionaries whom they called the Oblate Black Robes and the Oblate Bishops whose name amongst the tribes was Great Chiefs of Prayer. The work done by these sons of de Mazenod is, perhaps, aptly summed up

by a traveller who visited the western territories in the eighteen-nineties, fifty years after that first band of missionaries had sailed from Le Havre.

“The prairies are left behind, and the fastnesses of the mountains are entered. The Canadian Pacific railway cars thunder through the passes twice a day; but ten years ago, they had been trodden by the feet of no white men with one exception. As the train winds through the magnificent valley of the Frazer, here and there on mountain tops, may be seen, black against the sky, a rude cross, which marks an Indian burying ground. At each stage of the journey, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, the Church Universal is seen justifying its title by its adaptability to the nature and needs of each varying community. She observes precisely the same ritual, framed in identical language [Latin], for a little band of Blackfeet Indians, kneeling in a log hut in the Far West, as she uses for a French congregation in the Basilica at Quebec, or for the Irish immigrants who worship in Toronto Cathedral.”

From that success the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the Missioners of Provence who became missionaries of the world, can claim, under God, their full share of credit. And the Canadian work of the sons of de Mazenod set a pattern for their labours across the world.

Sri Lanka.

The work of the Oblates in Ceylon began with an appeal from the Coadjutor Bishop in Jaffna to Monsignor de Mazenod, asking the founder of the Oblates to send missionaries to help in the work of converting a population of more than one and a half million pagans and of ministering to the 100,000 Catholics on the island. That appeal was at once answered. The first Oblates went to Ceylon in 1847. Today there are almost three hundred Oblates (including a Cardinal) working in Sri Lanka (Ceylon).

“I would like to be able to supply missionaries for the whole world,” the Bishop of Marseilles cried constantly, and, so far as it was in his power and the power of his Oblates, he endeavoured to answer every request for missionaries that came to him.

South Africa.

Scarcely had his group of missionaries sailed for Ceylon when there was yet another request. This time it came from the Prefect of Propaganda, Cardinal Barnabo, and asked for priests to work in the mission field of South Africa. “How could we refuse that which came from the legitimate voice of the Pope?” Eugene de Mazenod wrote in his diary on receiving that request. And once again, he made decisive answer to the request. In the autumn of 1851, Monsignor Allard, consecrated in Marseilles, embarked with three Fathers and a Brother for the port of Natal.

And so the territories, marked by an Oblate Cross, spread across the map of the world. Before the Founder died in 1861, his sons were to be found, to quote Father Cooke, “on the shores of the great Atlantic, amidst the snow-clad pine forests and dismal prairies of the Hudson Bay territory, near the shores of the Polar Sea, amongst the vastnesses of the Rocky Mountains, on the coast of the Pacific, on the plains of Texas, amidst the burning sands of South Africa, on that fairest of the islands of the Indian Ocean, Ceylon. To all these points in Asia, Africa and America did de Mazenod live to see his labours of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate extended.”

England, Ireland, Scotland.

The Oblates went to preach their missions in the towns and cities of England and Scotland and Ireland. Typical of their history is the story of their coming to Dublin. In 1857, an Oblate of Mary Immaculate, preaching a mission in Dublin, had sought permission of the Archbishop to commence pastoral work in the Archdiocese. He was granted permission to work in the district of Inchicore. Here more than a thousand families of railway workers lived. Those who had not grown careless of their religious observances heard Mass and confessed and communicated in neighbouring parishes, for they had no church of their own. To them came the Oblate missionary.

Australia.

In 1845, Bishop Brady of Perth called on the Oblate Founder and asked for missionaries for Western Australia. Reluctantly he had to refuse. It was to be fifty years before the Oblates came to Australia, this time at the request of Bishop Gibney of Perth. They came to Fremantle to care for the local people and to open an Industrial School for boys. In 1926, they took over the parish of Sorrento, Victoria. Gradually they spread their pastoral care in parish and mission work throughout Victoria and the other States.

Answering the call of the Bishops for Catholic Education, they opened three Colleges through Australia and an Oblate Education Centre in Sydney. To ensure the continuation of their work a House of Studies was opened in Mulgrave, Victoria.

The Oblates have contributed much to the care of the Italian Migrant population especially in Western Australia. Italian speaking or Italian born Oblates have worked among the local population for many years.

In recent years, the Oblates have spread to New Zealand and more recently to Indonesia where they work in Jakarta and Central Java.

Last Days.

That story of the Oblates, of “the Pope’s men” going out to the ends of the earth, brought comfort to the last hours of the Founder. One day, during his last illness, a letter came from one of the foreign missions of the Order. Told of the letter, he asked if it was a letter that called for his guidance on spiritual matters or on matters of organisation. Told that it was a letter concerned solely with the routine organisation of the missionaries, he said that this, now, was a matter, which had passed into the hands of others who would carry on the work he had begun. The work of organising and directing his missionaries in the far corners of the world was no longer his concern:

“My only business now,” he said, “is to prepare for a good death.”

Death came to him on the 21st day of May in 1861. As his long, fruitful life of constant prayer and unceasing effort came to its close, he could look with pride on the transformation of a handful of dedicated men labouring in the towns and villages of the Midi into a mighty battalion in the Church’s apostolic army. His Oblates of Mary Immaculate were being faithful to the chosen motto of their Founder: “To preach the Gospel to the poor, He has sent me.”

His Work Today.

At the death of the Founder in 1861, his Oblate Congregation numbered just about 500 members.

One hundred years later the official total of membership shows an impressive muster of almost 7,000 members spread through 44 countries and pursuing the Ministry of the Gospel in more than 70 differing languages.

The tiny mustard seed planted in the poverty of Aix in January, 1816, has grown to a large Institute in the Church of God — an Institute that knows no boundary or frontier and extends, literally, from Pole to Pole. The legacy of Eugene de Mazenod is large for his sons have, under Providence, been chosen to “inherit the earth” for their portion and the Church, for her part, has shown its approval by proclaiming him, “Blessed” in 1975. [Eugene de Mazenod was canonised in 1995.]
