Standing on the Shoulders of Giants
Dear Friend,

When I was reading through this issue of Oblate World, I couldn’t help but think of the saying – It’s not where you start, it’s where you finish.

So many Oblates come from humble beginnings – working as a hospital janitor, growing up in an impoverished African village or ministering as a young Oblate on a remote island in the Pacific. But through hard work and strong faith, they go on to create important ministries that impact the lives of many people every day.

I grew up on a family farm in Iowa. Never did I imagine that one day I would be the Provincial of a congregation of priest and brothers. As Provincial, I was given the honor to receive one of the first blessings from our newest Oblate priest, Fr. Steven Montez, O.M.I. His ordination reminded me that our congregation will be in good hands for generations to come.

The founder of the Missionary Oblates, St. Eugene De Mazenod, beautifully described the starting and end points of an Oblate ministry this way: “We must strive first of all to lead people to act like human beings, and then like Christians, and finally, we must help them to become saints.”

Every day Oblates are treating people like humans, providing them with food, shelter and medical care regardless of their faith. Every day Oblates are treating people like Christians, as we introduce the faith in places like Cuba and Turkmenistan. And every day we are helping people to become saints, as we see people give their lives in service to God and each other.

Your prayers and support may feel like humble gifts to the Missionary Oblates. But they are not. You are a vital part of our family as we treat people like humans, Christians and saints.

No matter where we started, let us continue to work together to create a glorious finish.

In Jesus Christ and Mary Immaculate,

Fr. Louis Studer, O.M.I.
Provincial, United States Province
Father Steven Montez, O.M.I. began his life as a Missionary Oblate priest on Friday, September 17, 2021. On Saturday he celebrated his first Mass for Oblates approaching the end of their earthly ministries.

“When I was a scholastic, we had to move in with the elder priests for six months while our new house was being built,” said Fr. Steven. “They took me in and were so wonderful. They were always praying for me, so it made sense that for my first Mass I would return the favor and do the same for them.”

As the newest Missionary Oblate priest in the United States, Fr. Steven understands that he is continuing a legacy of serving the poor and needy established by generations of Oblates. It is a legacy that has been part of his life since birth.

Father Steven was literally born into the Oblate family. His uncle, Fr. Manuel Villarreal, O.M.I. is an Oblate priest who performed Steven’s Baptism. Father Steven grew up in St. Martin de Tours Parish in Kingsville, Texas which was staffed by the Oblates. One of his pastors was Fr. Jim Foelker, O.M.I. who was sitting in the first row for Fr. Steven’s first Mass.

As a student at the University of Texas – Austin, Fr. Steven was pursuing a degree in Biochemistry but felt something was missing in his life.

“Throughout my first year I couldn’t help but feel that something was off, and I felt like I didn’t belong there. I had friends and did decent in the coursework, but it was something deeper,” said Fr. Steven. “While praying about what it was that God wanted me to do, a very clear idea came to me: religious life. It then became obvious that God placed wonderful Oblates in my life to show me their charism in action, caring for the poor and abandoned. At the thought of becoming an Oblate I felt a quiet peace.”

So, Fr. Steven contacted Fr. Charles Banks, O.M.I. the Oblate Vocation Director about joining the Oblates. Word of the decision spread fast. Father Banks called Fr. Villarreal, who then called Fr. Steven’s mother. By the time Fr. Steven got back to his dorm room, mom was on the phone thrilled with his decision.

Father Steven entered the Oblates’ pre-novitiate program in Buffalo, New York and studied philosophy. He then spent a year discerning his calling at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Novitiate. As a scholastic, he studied at Oblate School of Theology (OST) in San Antonio, Texas.

While attending OST, Fr. Steven spent his pastoral internship at the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Brownsville, Texas. The cathedral was built by the Oblates and has been staffed by them for decades.

At the cathedral parishioners often mentioned to Fr. Steven their deep love for a former rector there, Fr. Pasquale Lanese, O.M.I. When it was time for Fr. Steven to choose his Oblate Cross, a tradition of a new Oblate receiving the cross of a deceased Oblate, Fr. Steven decided he wanted Fr. Lanese’s cross to continually remind him to be close to the people he serves.

While in Brownsville Fr. Steven also became friends with the Most Rev. Daniel Flores, Bishop of Brownsville. Bishop Flores was honored to accept Fr. Steven’s request to preside at his ordination.

After his ordination, Fr. Steven was assigned to be Assistant Pastor at Most Precious Blood Parish in Chula Vista, California.

But before he left for his first assignment, Fr. Steven made sure to thank the elder Oblates who inspired him along the way. One of those Oblates was Fr. Pat Guidon, O.M.I. who at age 96 was celebrating his 70th Anniversary as an Oblate priest.

Father Steven made sure that Fr. Pat received his first blessing, a special moment between the oldest and youngest Oblate priest in San Antonio.

“My Oblate journey has been a continuing step of walking with my brother Oblates and Christ,” said Fr. Steven. “They have accompanied me all this way, and we are going to keep on trekking together.”

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants
When Fr. Julito Dela Cruz, O.M.I. joined the Missionary Oblates, he wanted his life to be an adventure. The Oblates did not disappoint.

Father Julito grew up in the southern part of the Philippines where he knew nothing about the Oblates. One day in high school some Oblate scholastics came to the school to share with the students about religious vocations. For Fr. Julito, their visit was the spark to an adventurous life as a Missionary Oblate priest.

After his pre-novitiate and novitiate studies in the Philippines, Fr. Julito was given the chance of studying in Rome at the Oblates’ International Scholasticate. He returned to the Philippines where he took perpetual vows and was ordained in 2005.

Father Julito’s first assignment was for three years as a parish priest in a rural, mountainous area near Cotabato. The parish had a main church and more than 50 outlying Catholic communities associated with it.

“You would have to walk, use motorbike or even horseback to get to these communities,” said Fr. Julito. “Often we would stay with the people in their homes.”

Father Julito would try and get to each community a couple of times a year. His stay would be busy because so many sacraments would have to take place each visit. It was not uncommon to have 50 children baptized in a single day.

Father Julito’s next adventure took him to the remote island of Tabawan where he was the Director at an Oblate school, Notre Dame of Tabawan. It was an assignment that involved taking on some risk.

Tabawan is located in a part of the Philippines that is overwhelmingly Muslim. Islamist militants have sometimes targeted priests and missionaries in the area. In 2008 Fr. Reynaldo Roda, O.M.I. the then Director at Notre Dame of Tabawan, was abducted and killed by unidentified armed men.

The Oblates began the school in Tabawan in 1963 as a way of helping the people to have access to education and to bridge the divide between Muslims and Christians. When Fr. Julito was Director, he usually had about 350 students at the school, and only six or seven would be Christians.

Life on Tabawan had a slower pace which Fr. Julito loved. The people he ministered to were of an ethnic group who lived on houses on stilts above the water.

Father Julito spent six years in Tabawan, three of those years he was the only Oblate at the mission.

“My time in Tabawan was really the peak of my ministry so far. I just loved it there,” said Fr. Julito.

Father Julito’s next assignment was a dramatic change. In Tabawan he would have about 20 people attend Mass on Sunday. At his new assignment as many as 20,000 people could attend Mass on Sunday.

Father Julito was assigned as the Parochial Vicar at Our Lady of Grace Parish in Caloocan City. The parish church holds 2,500 worshippers. There are nine Masses on Sundays.

After a year in the parish, Fr. Julito was appointed Director of the Notre Dame of Greater Manila School. The school has 3,700 students from pre-school through high school, and there are 500 employees.

After three years in the school, Fr. Julito realized he needed to slow down from his hectic ministries. But instead of taking some time for rest, he decided to take part in a two-year Oblate Studies program based halfway around the world.

The Kusenberger Chair of Oblate Studies is based at Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. The program is dedicated to the study and dissemination of the history, charism, spirituality and mission of the Oblates.

Father Julito spent the first year of the program online because of the Covid-19 pandemic. This year he is in San Antonio for a year to finish the program.

Father Julito is the first Oblate from Asia to take part in the program. Once completed, he will be able to help expand the program in Asia so that it can enrich the lives of Oblates and lay associates in numerous locations.

As he takes part in the Oblate Studies course, Fr. Julito often comes across a simple statement from the Oblate founder, St. Eugene De Mazenod: “Leave nothing undared for the Kingdom of God.”

Father Julito has always taken to heart that commandment to be daring. And he is always looking forward to the next adventure on his Oblate journey.
Friends of the Oblates’ Nature Preserves Honored

The Friends of the Oblates’ Nature Preserves were recently honored as the “Volunteers of the Year” by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

The environmental program was founded in 2015 to provide stewardship, protection, monitoring and public education and outreach on environmental issues. The 16.5-acre Missionary Oblates Woods Nature Preserve and surrounding 143 acres of protected land is located in Madison County, Illinois and is part of the Illinois “Forest Legacy” program.

The “Friends” group logs hundreds of volunteer hours annually removing exotic plants and trash, planting local ecotype seeds and plants to improve the diversity of the woods, participating in prescribed burns and assisting Illinois Nature Preserve Commission staff with protection efforts. The group also hosts public workdays and wildflower hikes.

Volunteers worked nearly 1,000 hours at the preserves last year.

Oblates Begin Ghana Mission

The first Oblates who will form the apostolic community in the Mission of Ghana have been called to obedience by Fr. General. This follows the formal establishment by decree of the Mission of Ghana and the approval of its Statutes on May 13, 2021, at the Plenary Session of the Superior General and Council.

Father Hyacinth Nwaneri, O.M.I. of Nigeria, of the Oblate Province of Cameroon, will be the Mission’s first Superior. He is 55 years old, 28 years in religious vows and 20 years as an ordained priest. He had previously served as Superior of the Mission of Nigeria and Vicar Provincial of the Province of Cameroon. Presently he is Pastor at St. Pierre, Garoua, Cameroon.

The local church of Ho, through the bishop, is calling on the Oblates to respond to missionary needs in Ghana - witnessing to religious life and to the universal mission of the Church, promoting genuine Marian spirituality and developing a pastoral community in the periphery of the diocese. This mission opening in Ho can also be a stepping-stone for the Oblates to explore future missionary possibilities for a specific Oblate ministry, within Ghana or in neighboring places.

In 1983 the Missionary Oblates in Texas accepted the challenge of starting a new ministry in the African nation of Zambia. Four Oblate Texans were assigned to the mission. And each one of those pioneer Oblates would have a significant impact on the life of a young man who would carry on their missionary spirit.
Brother George then attended the Oblate seminary in South Africa. During his pastoral internship he ministered at the Oblates’ Radio Liseli in the Diocese of Mongu in Zambia. Brother George helped to broadcast a variety of religious programs that could be heard throughout the western portion of the country. This ministry is especially important to people living in isolated rural villages where access to the Word of God is almost non-existent.

While in Mongu Bro. George was part of the Jack Joyce Oblate Community, named after Fr. Jack Joyce, O.M.I. the fourth Texan who was part of the original Oblate Zambian delegation.

Brother George took final vows in 2013. His first assignment was as part of the pastoral team at St. Michael Parish in Kalabo. The parish has numerous mission centers connected to it out in remote villages. Brother George would spend weeks at a time visiting these villages to bring them the Word of God.

In 2015 Bro. George’s knowledge about mechanics came in good use when he was assigned to help operate a garage run by the Oblates in Lusaka. The garage fixes vehicles for the Oblates and other religious congregation. With many roads in Zambia nearly impassable, having a garage with good mechanics is vital for the Oblates to reach out to the most isolated.

In 2019 Bro. George returned to South Africa for advanced studies. He then got the shock of his life when he received an obedience halfway around the world, as a member of the formation team at the Oblate Novitiate in Godfrey, Illinois. The novitiate is for the United States Province but welcomes novices from around the world, particularly Zambia. Currently there are three Zambian Oblates there.

As part of the novitiate team Bro. George teaches a class on the charism of St. Eugene De Mazenod, founder of the Missionary Oblates. Saint Eugene once instructed his followers - “Let us bow down, listen respectfully, admire in silence. Let us swear to be faithful and to become worthy of this great vocation.”

As a child Bro. George admired the Oblates in silence. As a seminarian he listened to them respectfully. And today he bows down in obedience to their missionary work that is transforming the lives of the poor and needy around the world. He has sworn to be faithful, and is indeed worthy of this great vocation.
When Bro. Dogo Amaguedeau, O.M.I., decided to pursue a calling to become a Missionary Oblate, he was a little apprehensive to tell his dad. His father was not Catholic, not even close.

Brother Dogo’s father was a pagan and a polygamist. He had five wives and 50 children. When Bro. Dogo told dad about his intentions to become a priest, the response from him was short and simple: “Do it and be happy.”

Brother Dogo is indeed “doing it” as he nears his goal of becoming a missionary priest. And he is indeed very happy.

Brother Dogo grew up in Garoua, Cameroon. Though his dad was pagan, his mom was Catholic, and she and her children attended an Oblate parish. The Oblates would often come by Bro. Dogo’s house to visit, and he considered them a part of the family while growing up.

“I became an Altar Server and then a lector at the parish,” said Bro. Dogo. “I soon began to realize that life as a priest would be good for me.”

Brother Dogo didn’t take long to decide what type of priest he wanted to be. He never considered joining the diocese or any other congregation. He only wanted to be a Missionary Oblate.

“The Oblates are close to the people, especially the poor and abandoned,” said Bro. Dogo. “That was exactly what I wanted to be.”

So, Bro. Dogo joined the Oblate formation program, and since then his path to the priesthood has taken him on a journey around the world.

Brother Dogo joined the Oblates’ pre-novitiate program in Cameroon. He spent some time in Chad improving his pastoral skills. As a scholastic he spent a year doing his regency in Nigeria.

During his time studying for the priesthood, Bro. Dogo’s father began to experience his own religious calling. He began to discover the Catholic faith and contacted the Oblates about converting to Catholicism, a complicated matter because of his pagan past. He enrolled in Catechism classes and began attending an Oblate parish.

Unfortunately, the health of Bro. Dogo’s father began to deteriorate. He passed away in 2018. The Oblates baptized him on his deathbed so that he could die a Catholic.

In 2021 Bro. Dogo was told that his Oblate journey would take him to the other side of the world. He became a student at Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. He joined an international formation community which included Oblate scholastics from Zambia, Kenya, Chad, Burma, Mexico and the United States.

Brother Dogo will spend the next several years in San Antonio studying and preparing for his eventual ordination. When he is ordained, Bro. Dogo knows that his father will be in Heaven looking down on him, and he will have fulfilled his dad’s instruction: “Do it and be happy.”
Young people have much to be thankful for when it comes to Oblate Fr. Ronald LaFramboise, O.M.I.

From young kindergarteners in Japan to young Oblates studying for the priesthood in San Antonio, Texas Fr. Ron’s youthful enthusiasm has enriched lives around the globe and deepened the faith of many people.

“I’m now what they call a R.A.M. (Reduced-Activity Ministry), but not really,” said the 81-year-old priest. “My life has been a great adventure and I plan on it being a great adventure for many more years to come.”

Father Ron’s adventurous life really took off when he decided to join the Oblates. After spending his early formation years in New England, Fr. Ron was assigned to the Japan mission one week after making perpetual vows. The original assignment was for two years, but Japan would become his home for 30 years.

“Much of my work in Japan was as an administrator of our schools,” said Fr. Ron. “The Oblates were very active in establishing kindergartens in Japan and we still have six kindergarten schools operating there today.”

The Oblates arrived in Japan in 1948 after the end of World War II. One of their initial ministries was educating children, and they opened several Montessori kindergartens where they taught the children about God and gospel values.

In addition to educating kindergartners, Fr. Ron also began educating future Oblates as the Japan mission grew. Making his vocation ministry complicated was the fact that Japan is a country where less than one percent of the population is Catholic.

After 30 years in Japan, Fr. Ron’s ministry took a dramatic turn. He went from one of the least Catholic countries to working at the epicenter of the Catholic faith – Rome. Father Ron was named the Superior of the Oblate General House, the congregation’s headquarters.

For 12 years Fr. Ron ministered in the shadows of the Vatican. After serving as Superior of the General House, Fr. Ron was put in charge of the Oblates’ Communication Office. It was at the start of the Internet era and Fr. Ron oversaw the transition from mailing bulletins around the world to sending digital copies to nearly 70 countries. The transition from mail to digital saved the Oblates $100,000 annually.

When his time in Rome was over, Fr. Ron returned to the United States and much of his work has since involved mentoring young men on their Oblate journey. For six years he was part of the Oblate pre-novitiate staff in Buffalo, New York helping young men discern a calling to religious life.

After a three-year stint in retreat ministry at Christ the King Retreat Center in Minnesota, Fr. Ron was assigned to the Formation Team in San Antonio, Texas where he currently ministers. Father Ron mentors Oblate scholastics from around the world who are studying to become Oblate brothers and priests at Oblate School of Theology.

For Fr. Ron, working with the next generation of Oblates is allowing his missionary life to come full circle. It is a circle that has crossed the world and improved the lives of countless people in the past, present and future.

“I look with no little bit of paternal pride and much hope at the new (younger) generation in whose formation I am privileged to be a part,” says Fr. Ron. “May they be blessed with the same support I received, and may they give themselves courageously to bring the Good News and the love of God to all who cross their path.”

“I am a priest, a priest of Jesus Christ. That says it all.”

St. Eugene De Mazenod
Founder, Missionary Oblates
For more than 70 years, Missionary Oblates have considered their Immaculate Heart of Mary Novitiate in Godfrey, Illinois a “place set apart.” Now that place is here to stay for generations of Oblates to come thanks to a complete renovation.

In recent years the Oblates had to look at the possibility of closing the novitiate and moving to another location. The nearly 100-year-old building, which the Oblates acquired in 1950, had not been significantly updated for about 60 years.

“Each time the discussion came up about what to do with the novitiate, the decision was made to keep it in Godfrey,” said Fr. Louis Studer, O.M.I. Provincial of the U.S. Province. “The overwhelming majority of Oblates preferred to keep the novitiate at its present location because it is a ‘place set apart’ that affords wonderful opportunities for prayer and vocational discernment in an area of beautiful surroundings.”

The novitiate has always had one beautiful surrounding—a breathtaking view of the Mississippi River. But over the past few decades it was hard to find any other beautiful surroundings. The building had been deteriorating, and patchwork repairs could no longer keep the building as an adequate home for the novices and the novitiate staff.

A fundraising campaign was started which allowed for renovation of the building to begin in 2020. Last year’s novices moved into temporary arrangements at the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows. The novices moved into their new home in September and a formal dedication of the building took place in October.

In addition to serving as the Oblates’ novitiate, the property is also home to the Ecological Learning Center which educates Oblates and others in ecological awareness. The initiative also includes the La Vista Community Supported Garden and a wildlife preserve on more than 200 acres. As part of the renovations, an improved eco-lab was created at the novitiate to help novices and people in the surrounding area reach a deeper understanding of the importance of preserving the integrity of creation.

Currently there are five novices spending their novitiate year in Godfrey. They come from the United States, Canada and Zambia. In future years it is expected that about a dozen novices will call the novitiate home annually, coming from countries throughout North America, Africa and Asia.

“Provincials from several English-speaking countries have contacted me about sending novices to the U.S.,” said Fr. Studer. “Each of these units is blessed with many vocations and the Provincials recognize the value of the program we are able to offer at the new novitiate.” ♦
Watching over the novices at their new home is a five-panel icon created by internationally-acclaimed iconographer Fr. Clyde Rausch, O.M.I. Since the 1980s Fr. Clyde has been painting icons that now grace churches, retreat houses, seminaries and other sacred places throughout Europe and the United States.

The five-panel icon created for the novitiate took several months to complete. Father Clyde said the Covid-19 pandemic allowed him to spend much more time in his studio working on his art.

The icon includes images of: Jesus; the Oblate Madonna; St. Eugene De Mazenod, the founder of the Missionary Oblates; Fr. Fernand Jetté, a former Oblate Superior General who wrote extensively on Oblate formation and a woman carrying a basket of fish, symbolizing a woman who begged for fish for the poor alongside St. Eugene as he ministered to the fishermen in Marseille, France.

"It’s not something that you can just sit down and start to paint," explains Fr. Clyde. "You have to do your homework, read the Scripture, study and pray before you start. You have to create a relationship with the subject you are going to paint."

Father Clyde developed his artistic skills as a missionary priest in Sweden where he ministered for 29 years. For two years Fr. Clyde ministered at an Oblate mission in the northern part of the country, just 100 miles from the Arctic Circle. At that time, he met Oblate Bro. Olof Asblom, an accomplished iconographer who helped Fr. Clyde develop his icon painting skills.

In 2013 Fr. Clyde returned to the United States after a tenure at the congregation's headquarters in Rome. Today he continues to paint his icons in his studio at the Oblate Renewal Center in San Antonio, Texas.
When Sunisa Lee won the gold medal at the Olympics as the gymnastics all-around champion, her family in St. Paul, Minnesota celebrated with great pride. And that included several Missionary Oblates.

Sunisa was the first Hmong American to compete for the United States in the Olympics. The Missionary Oblates have worked with the Hmong community in St. Paul for decades and continue to do so today. Several of the parishioners at the Oblates’ St. Patrick’s Church are members of Sunisa’s family.

Joua and Kou Ly are Oblate Associates and leaders of the Hmong Catholic Community at St. Patrick’s Church. Prior to the Olympics they contacted the Oblates to ask for prayers for Sunisa, their niece, who was attempting to make the U.S.A. Gymnastics team for the Tokyo Olympics.

Not only did Sunisa make the team, she went on to become the leader of the U.S. squad. Her success at the Olympics brought an abundance of joy to the Hmong community, an ethnic group from southeast Asia that most people had no knowledge about.

The Hmongs are primarily from Laos and were evangelized in the 1950s and 60s by Catholic missionaries, including the Missionary Oblates. The Hmongs were supporters of the United States during the Vietnam War. As a result, they were persecuted by the Communists when they took over Laos.

Many Hmong fled the country, and thousands found their way to Minnesota. Father Daniel Taillez, O.M.I. also had to flee Laos and ended up in Minnesota where he led the Oblates’ ministry to the Hmong people for decades.

For more than 40 years the Oblates in St. Paul, Minnesota have been working with the Hmong community to meet their spiritual needs and to help them preserve their culture. The Oblates founded the Hmong American National Catholic Association to develop prayer books, hymnals and other worship materials for Hmong Catholics.

Over the years, the Oblates in Minnesota have baptized more than 500 people of Hmong heritage into the Church. Today, they continue to have an extensive outreach to the Hmong community and offer a Mass in Hmong every month.

Sio Lo, a parishioner at St. Patrick’s Parish, said the Oblates have truly been at the forefront of ministering to the Hmong people.

“About a century ago, it was Oblate priests from France that found our people in the jungles of Laos. They risked their lives to find us there. Once they found us, they took the time to learn our culture and our ways, in order to truly teach us about Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” said Sia.

“Today we are most thankful for our Oblate priests. Through Christ they clean our souls every Sunday with holy water and protect us from evil. Through Christ they teach us the blessings of Heaven and the true purpose of life. Through the power of Christ, they have led us to be closer to God and for that we cannot thank them enough.”

Oblate Frs. Harry Winter, O.M.I. left, and Fr. Lucien Bouchard, O.M.I. were presented t-shirts signed by Olympic gold medal gymnast Sunisa Lee. Father Harry has been very active with the Hmong community in St. Paul, Minnesota. Father Lucien was a missionary in Laos, risking his life to minister to the Hmong people.
In order to become a Missionary Oblate, a man must be willing to leave home and go wherever God is calling him. For Sipho Mukobola, leaving home to follow God’s calling is not a problem. He’s been doing it since he was 11 years old.

“My parish priest suggested I go to the minor seminary for the eighth grade,” said Sipho. “I was the youngest student there when I arrived, and I stayed from eighth grade to 12th grade.”

Sipho’s formal journey to the priesthood may have started at age 11, but the idea of becoming a priest was with him since first grade.

Sipho was born in a small town in northern Zambia near the Tanzania border. His mom is Catholic and Sipho became an Altar Server at age five. Even at such a young age he had great admiration for the parish priests, especially how they were so close to the people they served.

As a student at the minor seminary, Sipho was faced with a dilemma. He felt a strong calling to the priesthood, but he also felt a strong responsibility to his family. As the oldest child it was expected that he would get a job after 12th grade and help support his brothers and sisters.

Sipho decided to totally surrender his decision about his future to Our Lady. Using the prayers of the Holy Rosary he asked for a sign from God through her intercession on what to do. He asked that she help him achieve the top score of six points as he approached high school graduation. Anything else and he would pursue a professional career. When the time came and the scores were posted, Sipho had indeed achieved the six points he sought.

“When I asked my mom about becoming a priest I thought she would say no,” said Sipho. “But all she said was to be serious about my decision and to not disappoint her.”

So Sipho began to look at different types of religious communities to join. He discovered the Oblates because his mom, who teaches high school, worked with another teacher who had been an Oblate seminarian.

Sipho contacted the Oblates and spent five days at a Come and See program to learn more about the congregation and its ministries. He was hooked, and soon left for the Oblate pre-novitiate program.

After four years at the pre-novitiate Sipho was given the honor of spending his novitiate year in the United States at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Novitiate in Godfrey, Illinois. Sipho arrived in the United States in July. After ten days in quarantine, he and his brother novices began a year of deeply discerning their calling to life as a Missionary Oblate.

Sipho said there were some minor adjustments he had to make living in the United States. It wasn’t the heat but the humidity in the Midwest that took some getting used to. And eating the main meal in the evening instead of mid-day was also difficult at first.

But for someone who has been making adjustments to his living arrangements since the age of 11, humidity and meal schedules are minor inconveniences.

“I am ready to minister anywhere in the world,” said Sipho. “And I know that God will point the way.”
He dropped out of high school. When he was in his early 20s he was still reading at a grade school level. His first job as a hospital janitor earned him the unflattering nickname – “Mr. Toilet.”

And he ends up running a cathedral and shrines throughout the United States.

From humble beginnings Fr. Mike Amesse, O.M.I. has inspired and influenced countless people throughout the United States as a Missionary Oblate priest. He has an impressive resume, which he cares nothing about. Instead, Fr. Mike is proud that he is still fulfilling a simple statement made by his dad during his early Oblate journey: “My son is happy because he is giving his life to God.”

Father Mike began giving his life to God as a youngster growing up in Montreal, Canada. God and his family had faith that he would have a bright future, but many people were skeptical. Father Mike struggled terribly in school and dropped out. He spent a couple of years working as a janitor at the Montreal General Hospital, spending most of the day cleaning bathrooms.

But while Fr. Mike struggled with his education and early employment, his faith was blooming. His mom was a member of the Ladies of St. Anne at their parish, and one day the group took a day trip to visit the Oblates’ Our Lady of Hope Shrine in upstate New York. That daytrip changed her life and her son’s life too.

“I was 11 years old, and when mom got off the bus after that trip, she was literally bouncing down the steps,” said Fr. Mike. “She kept saying, “We have to go there, we have to go there.”

And the family did go there, about once a month throughout Fr. Mike’s childhood. The trips would take two hours each way. For Fr. Mike those visits to Our Lady of Hope were life-changing.

“I joined the Oblates because of Our Lady of Hope,” said Fr. Mike. “Our Lady of Hope had a great influence on me as a child and still does today.”

During those visits, Fr. Mike got to know the Oblates who staffed the shrine. A seminarian, Bro. Paul Hughes, O.M.I. became a family friend and invited Fr. Mike to his ordination. It was watching his friend be ordained that Fr. Mike really had the seed planted that he would become happy if he gave his life to God.

“I thought I wasn’t good enough to become a priest,” said Fr. Mike. “But the Oblates saw something in me that I didn’t see.”

Father Mike joined the Oblates’ Eastern U.S. Province. Eventually his studies took him to Oblate College in Washington, D.C. Not surprising he struggled academically.

One day his Spanish teacher, Fr. Sean O’Malley, asked Fr. Mike what was the river that separated the United States from Mexico. He had no idea it was the Rio Grande.

Years later Fr. Mike would become very familiar with the Rio Grande when he became the Rector at the cathedral for the diocese that runs along the river. And that teacher who asked him such a simple question, he would become the Cardinal of the Archdiocese of Boston.

Father Mike was ordained in 1984 and his priestly ministries have taken him to a variety of assignments at parishes and in vocation work. He also served as Superior of the Oblates’ infirmary and retirement community in Tewksbury, Massachusetts. He has overseen the operations of two shrines and one cathedral.

At St. Jude Shrine in New Orleans, Fr. Mike ministered to people on the fringe of the historical French Quarter, and on the fringe of society. Saint Jude Shrine has an extensive outreach ministry to the homeless and needy.

Father Mike was ministering in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. He stayed at the shrine to ride out the storm, which was a big mistake.

“The water kept rising and I really thought I was going to die,” said Fr. Mike.

After carrying the Blessed Sacrament to safety through the flood waters, Fr. Mike ended up at a home of Jesuit priests that was on higher ground. They gave him a car so he could go to join the Oblates in Houston. While ministering to people in temporary shelter at the Houston Astrodome, Fr. Mike found some of his parishioners from New Orleans, and immediately began to pray and care for them.

After his ordeal in New Orleans, Fr. Mike was assigned to the Immaculate Conception Cathedral at the southernmost tip of the United States in Brownsville, Texas. Father Mike

"It's a happy life because it is a life given to God."
thought he would be there for two or three months. Instead, he spent 15 years ministering at
the cathedral, including 10 years as the Rector.

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Oblate Crossings

St. Eugene De Mazenod 101

In 2020 the Kusenberger Chair of Oblate Studies embarked on a new initiative. The Chair sought to provide an enrichment course on the life, mission and spirituality of St. Eugene De Mazenod, founder of the Missionary Oblates.

The course is designed for anyone interested in learning more about St. Eugene. The first year more than 200 participants from around the world took part in the course which is held in English, Spanish, French and Italian.

The four-part series is free and can be accessed entirely on the internet. Each series consists of four, 20-minute videos, and offers a resource page for personal or group reflection.

Participants must register for each part via the Oblate School of Theology website at www.ost.edu. †

Two New Oblate U.S.A. Citizens

Congratulations to two new United States citizens who are members of the Oblates’ U.S. Province. On July 21 Fr. Paul Dass Selvaraj, O.M.I. took the oath of citizenship in St. Louis. On July 26 Fr. Antonio Ponce, O.M.I. took the same oath in San Antonio.

Father Paul is the recently-appointed Administrator of Most Precious Blood Parish in Chula Vista, California. Father Antonio is the Superior of the Blessed Mario Borzaga Formation Community in San Antonio and is a member of the U.S. Provincial Council.

Father Paul was born in 1976 in the state of Tamil Nadu in India. He was ordained to the priesthood in 2004 and began his ministry as a Vocation Director in India. After serving as a Pastor in his home country, he came to the United States in 2011 where he made missionary appeals for his home province during the summers and worked in parishes in Florida and Texas. In 2019 he served as a Vocation Director until his recent new assignment in California.

Father Antonio is a native of Mexico. He joined Oblate formation in Tijuana and was ordained to the priesthood on July 4, 2009. In 2010 Fr. Antonio was named Associate Pastor at Santa Rosa Church in San Fernando, California. He also served as the Director of the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Office for the Oblates in Washington, D.C. He has been a member of the Provincial Council since 2017. †

One of the biggest expenses for the Missionary Oblates every year is the education and formation of our novices. Expenses can run about $50,000 annually per novice depending on how many men are in the program.

Adding to the cost is that the novitiate in Godfrey, Illinois is now truly an international novitiate, with candidates coming from around the world. Invitations were made recently to the Oblates in India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Zambia and Cameroon to send their novices to Godfrey.

“These young men come from some of the poorest countries in the world and the Oblates there don’t have the funds to cover their expenses for their novitiate year,” said Fr. Louis Studer, O.M.I. Provincial of the United States Province. “So the U.S. Province has to assume all of the formation costs, room and board. This is our gift to the international Oblate community, one that we can only provide because of the support of our generous benefactors.”

In addition to the ongoing support needed to keep the novitiate flourishing, the Oblates are still in need of some funds to cover the final expenses for the novitiate renovation.

Our Oblate novices are truly at the beginning of their Oblate journey. They are the future of the church and ask for your prayers as they continue their journey to become missionaries to the world.

To learn more about how you can benefit the Missionary Oblates, please contact the Office of Charitable and Planned Giving at 1-800-233-6264.

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For more information on how you can support the work of the Missionary Oblates, scan this code on your digital device.
The history of the Missionary Oblates is portrayed in stained glass at the Shrine of St. Joseph the Worker. To learn more about the Shrine's current Director, please visit page 26.