



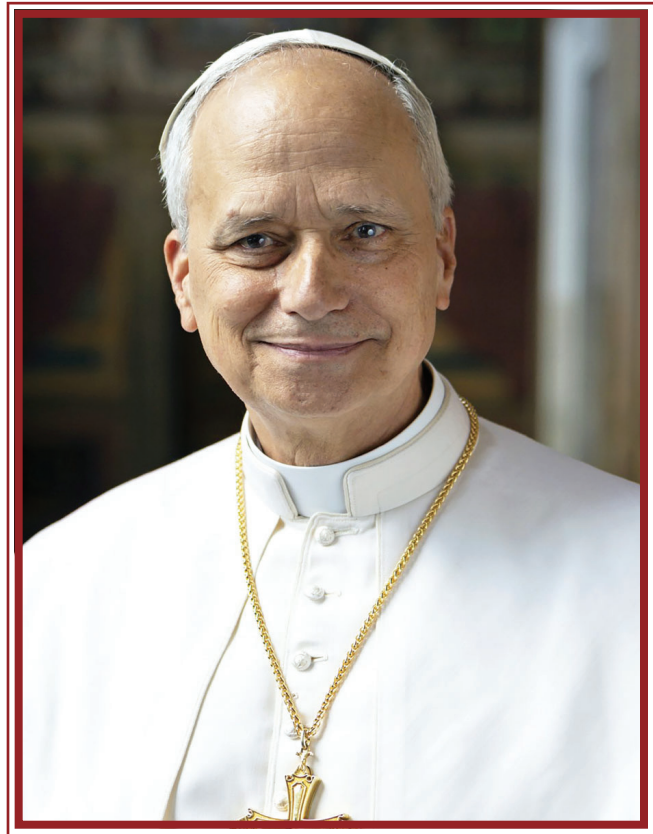
THE WELCOMING CHRIST, p. 11

**NEWSLETTER OF
THE UNITED STATES
PROVINCE OF
THE MISSIONARY
OBLATES OF MARY
IMMACULATE**

**SPRING 2026
VOL. 29, No. 2**

Pope Leo XIV: a blessing for the Oblates!

On February 21, 2026, just a few days after the highly anticipated February 17 celebrations of the 200th anniversary of the papal approval of the Constitutions and Rules of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Pope Leo XIV made time in his busy schedule to greet a large group of Oblates who either live in and around Rome or who had come to the Eternal City for the celebrations. The Oblates were joined at this meeting by a group of religious women who were celebrating the 150th anniversary of their founding. The Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles (OLA) are an international religious congregation founded in 1876 in Lyon, France, by Fr. Augustin Planque to support missionary work, particularly in Africa.



In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Peace be with you.

Good morning and welcome to all of you!

I am very happy to greet the Superiors General who are present, as well as all of you here today. I am delighted to meet with you on the occasion of two significant milestones for your Congregations: the 200th anniversary of the Papal approval of the Rules and Constitutions of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, and the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles.

Although your histories are different, your religious institutes have many things in common: the period of their foundation, their land of origin and above all the missionary vocation.

“He has sent me to evangelize the poor” (cf. Is 61:1; Lk 4:18) was the motto chosen by Saint Eugene de Mazenod for the Oblates, whose foundation he courageously undertook at a time when Europe was shaken by complex and dramatic events that heightened the urgency of proclaiming the Gospel to those most in need. He powerfully spoke and acted in defense of the dignity of the poor, workers and peasants who were exploited as a mere source of labor with their deepest human needs neglected. Equally powerful and striking was the audacity with which, even as Bishop of Marseille, he did not hesitate in responding to his brother in the episcopate, Archbishop Bourget of Montreal, who requested help. He sent religious first to Canada and then to Europe, Africa and Asia. This generosity was rewarded, in fact, by an



Front row: the OMI Central Government got the best seats!

impressive flowering of missionary vocations, which testifies to how docility to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and attention to the demands of charity are sources of fruitfulness and a leaven of growth for every foundation.

Even today, with more than three thousand religious spread across seventy countries, you continue to carry out your ministry with the same preferential openness to the least among us, enriched by the precious gift of an extended charismatic family and a growing appreciation of individual cultures. You welcome this vitality as a gift and as a sign that prompt you to preserve and renew the spirit of your origins. As Pope Francis pointed out to you not many years ago, your Founder taught you to love the Church as a mother, and you offer her “your missionary zeal and your life, participating in her exodus towards the peripheries of the world beloved by God, and living a charism that leads you towards the furthest, the poorest, those whom no one reaches” (Address to Participants in the General Chapter of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, 3 October 2022). And you do all this under the protection of Mary and with her maternal support.

In this regard, we are also encouraged by the presence of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles, whose motto is inspired by the

words of Saint Luke in the Acts of the Apostles: “With Mary, the Mother of Jesus” (1:14).

This phrase refers to the presence of the Blessed Virgin Mary among the Apostles, in the Upper Room and in the first Christian community. Father Augustine Planque entrusted these words to you a century and a half ago, when he founded your Congregation to ensure the indispensable presence of women in the work of the Society of African Missions. Many women from France and other countries responded to his invitation to be “with Mary” so that they might be like her, who bore witness to Christ among the apostles and in the world. For many of them, that “yes” cost them their lives, given the harshness of missionary work, exposure to disease, and, in recent times, martyrdom. Even now, you are present in difficult situations, where you offer your service with faith and respect for all. I encourage you, dear sisters, to continue this mission, wherever you serve, becoming ever more authentic witnesses of fraternity and of peace (cf. Saint John Paul II, Homily at Holy Mass on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, 2 February 2002, 4).

I would like to conclude by recalling one last aspect of the charism that unites the

Cont. on p. 4: Pope Leo

Cont. from p. 3, Pope Leo

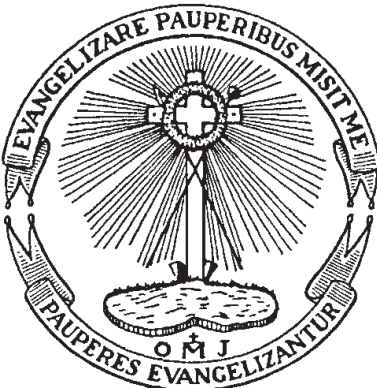
inspiration of your Founders: a family spirit. In this regard, both of them encouraged their spiritual sons and daughters to foster a sincere and generous family spirit within their communities. For consecrated men and women, as well as for truly committed Christian laypeople, this arises first and foremost from their encounter with God, from the Eucharist, from prayer, from adoration, from listening to the word and from the

celebration of the sacraments. From there, from the altar and the tabernacle, this spirit grows in our hearts, filling them with those feelings of communion and affection, of solicitude and patient closeness, which must always distinguish us and which makes us a reflection of God's love in the world.

Dear friends, thank you for all the good that you do. I assure you of my support in prayer and I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and your Congregations.

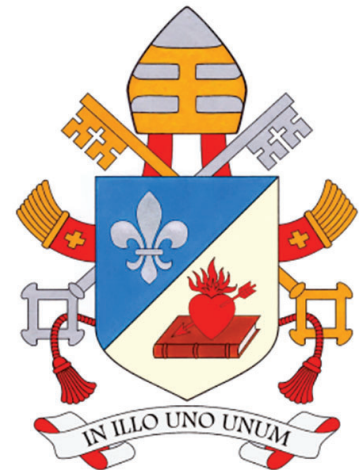


Former Superior General, Bishop Guillermo Steckling, OMI, chats with Pope Leo XIV.



Right: Coat of Arms of Pope Leo XIV. Motto: "In the One, we are one."

Left: Coat of Arms of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Motto: "He has sent me to evangelize the poor. The poor are being evangelized."



In the footsteps of Saint Eugene de Mazenod

Oblates in Rome celebrate our 200th Jubilee

The Founder of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate visited Rome on several occasions and kept copious notes in his diary about places where he stopped to celebrate a Mass or just for a moment of prayer.

The Oblates who live in and around Rome, as well as several representatives from the five regions of the Oblate world mission followed in the footsteps of the Founder to visit and pray at a few of those places that hold special meaning for our religious family, especially those related to his own journey in 1825-26 to seek papal approval of our Constitutions and Rules.

Sunday, February 15: The Vigil of Expectation

The pilgrimage began in the afternoon with a liturgical celebration at Santa Maria in Campitelli. This location was chosen with intent. It is the very church where St. Eugene spent long hours waiting for news from the Cardinals charged with studying our Rules and presenting their recommendations to the Pope. It placed the community right in the Founder's shoes during his moments of uncertainty.

I-r: Fr. Luis Ignacio Rois Alonso, OMI, Superior General; Luis Antonio Cardinal Tagle; Bishop Guillermo Steckling, OMI, former Superior General.



Later that evening, the community gathered for Solemn Vespers at the International Roman Scholasticate, giving thanks for the gift of the Constitutions and Rules and for the mission they inspire.

Monday, February 16: Invoking the Spirit

On Monday morning, the community turned to the Holy Spirit, the true source of all mission. They celebrated a Mass of the Holy Spirit at San Silvestro,

presided over by Bishop Guillermo Steckling, OMI, who served as the Superior General from 1998 until 2010. (Photo above) He is now the Bishop-emeritus of the Diocese of Ciudad del Este (Paraguay).

This choice of venue is significant because the church sits directly opposite the Quirinal Palace, placing the community at the very doorstep where Pope Leo XII signed the decree of approval

Cont. from p. 6, Jubilee





February 17: Mass in the General House Chapel

Cont. from p. 5, Jubilee

two centuries ago. It is also the church where St. Eugene was ordained a bishop in 1832.

Tuesday, February 17: The Silent Architect

On the anniversary day itself, the Oblates dedicated the morning to reflection, prayer, and sharing. The focus was on Father Charles Albini, the man St. Eugene later described as “half of myself.” Albini’s inspired the Founder to go to Rome, and he translated the original Rule from French to Latin. His hidden labor remains a foundational part of our history, and this day restores

the “silent partner” of the approval to his proper place in our history.

Later in the day, at the General House chapel, they celebrated a Mass of Thanksgiving, presided by His Eminence, Luis Antonio Cardinal Tagle, Pro-Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Evangelization of Peoples. The Superior General, Fr. Luis Ignacio Rois Alonso, OMI, preached the homily.

Ash Wednesday, February 18: A Spirit of Conversion

History reminds us that St. Eugene’s time in Rome was not just administrative but deeply spiritual. To honor this,

the community celebrated a penitential liturgy. They entered into the Ash Wednesday spirit



General Councillor, Fr. Jim Brobst, imposes ashes.

of conversion and humility that animated the Founder during his Roman stay.

Thursday, February 19: The Papal Connection

The pilgrimage reached the Vatican on Thursday. The community celebrated Mass at St. Peter's Basilica, followed by prayer at the tomb of Pope Leo XII. The day also included a commemoration of St. Eugene's presence in the basilica for the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854.

Friday, February 20: In the Founder's Footsteps

On Friday, the Oblates physically retraced several "footsteps of St. Eugene" through the city streets. This itinerary included a visit to the rooms of St. Ignatius along with other places connected to the Founder's daily life in 1826.



Oblates concelebrated in front of the burial place of St. Peter.

These visits offered a concrete link to the places where Eugene prayed, discerned, and waited for the Church's decision.

Saturday, February 21: Communion with Peter

The week concluded with an audience with Pope Leo XIV. It was a reminder of our communion with the Successor of Peter. Just as St. Eugene knelt before Leo XII to pledge

the absolute loyalty of his small society to the universal Church, the current community gathered to renew that same commitment. It affirmed that after two centuries, the Oblates remain exactly where the Founder placed them: at the service of the Church, ready to be sent to the ends of the earth. (Thanks to omiworld.org, text and photos.)



Center: US Provincial Fr. Ray Cook concelebrated at the Mass near St. Peter's Tomb.



I-r: Frs. David Uribe and Cyril Czop assisted at one of the prayer sessions at the General House.

Ed. note: This is an excerpt of a story that first appeared in The Sentinel (magazine of the southern California chapter of the Special Forces Association).

Catholic priest tended to his flocks in Laos while war raged

By Marc Phillip Yablonka

Father Lucien Bouchard's calling was not a political one, yet politics—and war—were constantly in his path.

Father Bouchard is a legend to practically anyone who was in Laos during the years of the secret war. From the lowland Lao and Hmong hill tribes to CIA, USAID (United States Agency for International Development), and Air America personnel, everybody knew "Father B." They ought to have. He was in Laos from 1956 until it fell to the communists in 1975.

Father's goal was to give Mass and instruct the locals in the tenets of Catholicism in as much of the country as it was safe to travel. That included two years between 1958 and 1960, when he sought to baptize and teach as many who chose to attend the Central Mission in Sam Neua.

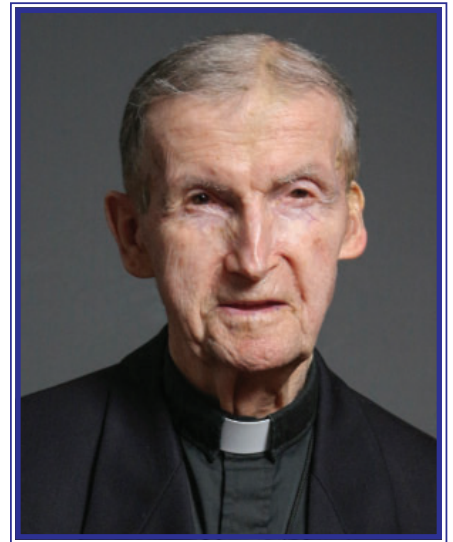
Very often, Father B, who speaks fluent French, Lao, Hmong, in addition to English, found himself working outside the boundaries of what one would think would fit the job description for a Catholic priest.

"In 1957, ten villagers from the

mountains came to me because there were no doctors around, and they'd had problems having their teeth pulled. I was afraid they might hemorrhage. I had Novocain from the hospital in Luang Prabang," he told me in 2016 when I interviewed him for my book *Tears Across the Mekong*.

"I tried to help them as much as I could," he said at the time. That help also extended to the two leper colonies the Massachusetts native helped to set up with the assistance of another Laos legend whom everyone knew and revered: Edgar "Pop" Buell, a Steubenville, Indiana, farmer who worked for the International Voluntary Services, a Peace Corps-like agency that had offered him a job as agricultural adviser for Laos after his wife passed away in 1958.

"Pop used to help giving me pots and pans. He helped with the rice drops that the Air America Helio Courier kickers carried out," Father B said, remembering that, very often, Pop would ask him to help with much needed mosquito nets in the villages.



Fr. Lucien Bouchard, OMI

Thoughts of Pop drift away and are replaced by thoughts of the lepers in Laos.

"I felt bad for the lepers as individuals. They had to live by themselves a quarter mile from the village. Their relatives would bring them rice."

Whenever Father B would tend to the lepers, it was a three-hour walk not without peril. They were close to Pathet Lao strongholds, which meant that some lepers' family members did not want to risk bringing food and needed medicines to their relatives living there. "They never felt very secure," said Father B, "because the Pathet Lao would come to visit their own

families in [nearby] villages at night. People visiting their relatives in the leper colonies hoped to get there when there were no Pathet Lao around."

On one such occasion, Father B's life was in danger when, though previously warned by three women with leprosy, the Pathet Lao had stalked him as he walked along the trail to the leper village. On that occasion, they were by his side when the Pathet Lao surprised them along the trail.

All at once, the women shouted to the cadres, "Don't shoot him. He's a priest!" Their exclamation was apparently enough to dissuade the Pathet Lao from taking his and their lives, and the cadres marched off into the jungle.

Though a Catholic priest, Father Bouchard admits that most of the people he helped practiced Buddhism, the main religion in Laos. But his help had nothing to do with attempting to bring them to the Catholic faith.

"I would visit the hospitals at Long Tieng (headquarters of the CIA), and the hospitals for wounded soldiers. Some of the patients were Hmong, some were Khmu Lao, some were animists, and some were Christians. It made no difference to me. I would visit everyone."

Life was pretty much cyclical for Father B. When he was up at Sam Thong, an encampment for the Hmong SGUs (Special Guerilla Units) under the

command of Hmong Royal Lao Army Gen. Vang Pao, he and Pop Buell would be flown by Air America into various villages and take care of whatever needs they could.

Air America would then fly them back to Vientiane to obtain more medicine from Dr. Weldon. They'd sneak in a Mass in Laos's capital city, and then be flown back to Sam Thong to do it all over again.

During one such stopover in Sam Neua, things quickly went from routine to extremely dangerous. "I was painting the doors of the nuns' convent when the Pathet Lao started attacking Sam Neua near the main mission there. On the last day of the siege, the Pathet Lao got hold of a mountain overlooking the city. They shelled it with mortars. I had to get out."

Father B left at noon that day along with doctors from an organization based in the Philippines called Operation Brotherhood, who had a Jeep, so they were able to make a fast getaway.

However, Father B and a group of 13 Christians equipped only with blankets and rice in their backpacks walked all the way to Xieng Khouang, all the while being pursued by the Pathet Lao.

Along the way, Father B and his entourage encountered some Filipino doctors who were encamped in a village helping locals take care of health problems.

"Some people told us that the

enemy was ahead of them and coming toward us. When the Filipino doctors heard that, they turned around and began going back from where they had come and, unfortunately, fell into Pathet Lao hands."

The priest lamented, "I had told them it was best to keep on going, that when we got closer to Xieng Khouang, we would hide."

Sadly, Father never heard what happened to the doctors, but he will never forget the fact that after he and his entourage left them, they walked for six long days and nights until reaching Xieng Khouang.

"It was a close shave, but I'm still free from the Pathet Lao," he said happily.

Visiting those remote outposts and SGU bases was part of Father B's work for 14 years. He always had to be prepared for his liturgical work by night and attacks from the Pathet Lao by day, which is why he made it a practice to never say Mass in the mornings.

For his own "comfort," his living quarters more often than not were a small four-foot-high lean-to in which he would often bivouac atop a mountain. Under it, he would dig a hole in the earth one foot deep and settle in as best he could for the night with the jungle and all that it conjured up surrounding him.

In between his hundreds of trips into the bush to minister to the

Cont. on p. 10: Bouchard



Father Lucien Bouchard, of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, with Hmong hill tribes' people in Laos. (Photo courtesy of the Museum of the US Air Force; Public Domain)

Cont. from p. 9: Bouchard

health and religious needs of lowland Christians, Lao Thung and Hmong tribespeople, Father B would be invited back to Vientiane where he was afforded the chance to study the Lao language and to teach math and geography in addition to religion.

Then he would be right back where he started having to seek permission from the authorities at the American Embassy in Laos' capital city to go to the villages again.

"Things were falling apart. I went to visit the bishop, who had previously taken stock of the villages and the safety factor in reaching them. The bishop had visited the SGU strongholds in Sam Thong and Long Tieng and determined that things were very dangerous," Father B remembered.

"By this time, half of the city of Vientiane had been taken

over by the Pathet Lao. I went to Steve Schofield's house, and we talked until 11:30. Steve felt that it was too dangerous for me to leave his house or even to be driven the six kilometers to where I was staying. We would have been ambushed."

So, Father stayed overnight with Steve, and the very next day, on May 8th, 1975, got a visa to leave Laos as whatever vestige of freedom that remained in country was crumbling all around him.

He crossed the Mekong River by boat and pulled up at Nong Khai, Thailand. God's providence must have been shining down on Father B that day because, right after he left, he later learned from fellow priests, two Pathet Lao cadres came looking for him and, undoubtedly, would have carted him away to years of servitude in one of the notorious communist re-education camps known in Laos as the "Seminar."

As Father said, it was a close shave, but today he is still free from the Pathet Lao. Among many other liturgical opportunities throughout his life, that freedom meant that he could deliver the Mass in French to Haitian refugees at Christ the King Catholic Church in Perrine, Florida from 2005 to 2013.

As for Father Bouchard's future, the soon-to-be 97-year-old Catholic priest, now a resident of the Oblate Retirement Home in Tewksbury, Mass., he told me in 2016, "I'll leave things in God's hands. If He wants me to keep ministering, or wants to call me to Him, that's okay, too."

Ed. note: The Lord called Fr. Lucien Bouchard to Himself on April 24, 2026, just before this newsletter went to press.

The Welcoming Christ

By Fr. Mark Dean, OMI



The Jesus sculpture now located at the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows, and bearing the name **The Welcoming Christ**, carries a history marked by craftsmanship, loss, and restoration.

The sculpture was completed in 2000 by artist Mark Crowder as a gift for his grandmother, Retha Henson, who played a central role in his upbringing. During a difficult childhood, she provided stability, guidance, and care, and the sculpture was intended as a lasting acknowledgment of that influence.

Crafted entirely of brass, the sculpture required nearly a year to complete and was originally installed at a family church, where it remained for many years. Crowder selected brass for its durability and long-term performance outdoors. He intentionally initiated the patina process, understanding that controlled oxidation would allow the surface to mature naturally over time. The resulting green patina is a stable, protective layer that preserves the metal beneath and reflects the artist's expectation that the sculpture would weather rather than remain fixed in appearance.

After Crowder's death in 2018 and the subsequent closure of the church, the sculpture was relocated to the artist's gravesite. In 2021, it was stolen. Although recovery seemed unlikely, the sculpture was returned in January of 2022 after the individual responsible came forward. When asked why the sculpture had been taken, the individual replied, "All I can say is, Jesus saved my life." The sculpture was recovered without permanent damage.

In 2025, the sculpture was relocated to the grounds of the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows, where it now stands in front of the Shrine church. Once lost and restored, the sculpture now serves as a visible reminder that even through loss and brokenness, renewal and hope can emerge.

Sharing the Gospel on Social Media

by Fr. Victor Patricio, OMI

On February 2nd, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, Oblate Frs. Juan Gaspar and Victor Patricio (l-r in picture) concelebrated a Mass virtually (Facebook and YouTube) for the twelfth anniversary of an internet radio and television platform called *Valores Media* (Media Values).



Valores Media was born in the parish of Santa Rosa de Lima in San Fernando, California, in 2014, while we—the Oblates of Mary Immaculate—were in charge of the parish. Father Juan Gaspar was one of the pioneers of this initiative, envisioning what would evolve into an immersion in social media—a reality that is both highly relevant and useful today.

The Montoya-Lazo family (Esther, Luis and children) have been the ones who have helped coordinate the efforts of *Valores Media* over the years. The main focus they have sought is to promote Christian faith and values.

Valores Media has a presence on social networks such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram with different radio and video programs. Oblates such as Luis Valbuena, Tom Rush, Juan Gaspar, Antonio Ponce, Lester Zapata and others have contributed input since the beginning. The weekly program of "Vitamins for the Soul" that Fr. Victor has produced since the pandemic was an inspiration of *Valores Media*.

The anniversary Eucharist was, therefore, to thank God for these twelve years of existence of *Valores Media* and to ask God to allow his Gospel to continue to reach all corners of the world and transform it through the Kingdom values.

A NEW CLINIC IN TJ



On February 10, 2026, Frs. William Antone and Henry Zayamoe blessed and officially inaugurated a small free medical clinic for the benefit of the entire community of the Maria Inmaculada Parish in Tijuana, BC, Mexico. They also blessed a replica of the Oblate Cross made by the youth of the parish, as a reminder of their mission to God's people.

Local celebrations of the Oblate Bicentennial

OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

To mark the 200th anniversary of the approval of the Oblate Constitution and Rules, the Oblates ministering in Oakland gathered for 2½ days of community retreat at St. Columba's Church and Retreat Center in Inverness, CA, on the banks of Tomales Bay. The Oakland community consists of Cornelius Ngoka, Mathews Zulu, Philip Singarayar, Carlos Alarcon, Jack Lau, and Ray John Marek. Drawing from the animation materials provided by the General Administration and other sources, the retreat sessions focused on personal expectations and hopes for the 200th anniversary year; the opportunities and challenges presented by renewed living of the Constitution and Rules; the prophetic and social challenges of the Constitution and Rules; and communal and apostolic living informed by the Constitution and Rules. Opportunities were provided for communal prayer, quiet reflection, sharing and discussion, and celebrations of the Eucharist. The retreat concluded on February 17 with a Eucharist during which the Oblates renewed their vows and recited the consecration prayer. This was followed by a festive meal in Crockett, where the Oblates previously staffed a parish. (Fr. Ray John Marek, OMI)



l-r: Frs. Mathews Zulu, Carlos Alarcon, Cornelius Ngoka, Ray John Marek, Philip Singarayar, & Jack Lau.



LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS

St. Joseph the Worker Shrine celebrates Oblate Bicentennial In commemoration of the Bicentennial of the approbation of the Missionary Oblates in 1826, the Oblate Associates at the Shrine are leading the weekly Stations of the Cross during Lent 2026. The program was put together by Bro. Richard Coté, OMI, Curator of the Oblate Historical Museum at the Shrine. Entitled “The Stations of the Cross with St. Eugene,” it incorporates, scripture, a reflection and a quote from the Constitutions and Rules for each station. Material was taken from a similar program published by the Australian Province and adapted to the times. Approximately 50 people attended the weekly service. (Bro. Richard Coté, OMI)

l-r: Bro. Richard Coté, David Lazu and Rebecca Duda, Oblate Associates.



Oblate Leadership in Zambia: l-r: Oblates Michael Kasonde Musaba (Treasurer), Pius Musilizo (Secretary), Chibwe Tembo, Cyril Muko Keba, Godfrey Sekula Mpundu, Sidney Musonda and Nchimunya Haakakata.

New leadership team begins work in Zambia

In Lusaka, Zambia, on February 21, 2026, the newly appointed Delegation Superior, Fr. Sidney Musonda, OMI, was installed, along with his Delegation Counselors. The outgoing superior, Fr. Chibesa Chishimba, OMI, presided at the ceremony.

The Superior General in Council has appointed the following Oblates as members of the Delegation Council for a period of three years:

- Fr. Chibwe Tembo, OMI (1st Councilor)
- Fr. Godfrey Mpundu Sekula, OMI (2nd Councilor)
- Fr. Nchimunya Hakakata, OMI, (3rd Councilor)
- Fr. Cyrille Keba Muko, OMI (4th Councilor)

In announcing the appointments to the members of the US Province, Fr. Ray Cook, OMI, US Provincial, thanked them for their willingness to serve. He stated: "My Council and I stand ready to continue the working relationship and collaboration that has existed between the Delegation and the Province. Let us continue to hold each other and our missionary efforts in prayer."

Oblate Formation News

Zooming across the Americas

By Bro. Pablo Henning Manrique, OMI

In early February 2026, I was invited to an online meeting of all of the formation communities in the OMI Latin American Region in celebration of the 200 years of papal approbation. The Blessed Mario Borzaga community in San Antonio was invited to represent the Canada-US Region as well. The five from the Texas community were Oblates Fr. Juan Gaspar, the community superior; Bros. Alexander Robles and Marco Antonio Cruz Baldiviezo from the BOLPER province (Bolivia and Peru); Lester Zapata and myself (US Province) — since the meeting was primarily held in Spanish. The Guatemala novitiate community was the organizer and Fr. Bonga Majola, the Oblates' Director of Communication at the General House in Rome was our Zoom host.

The meeting began with prayer and introductions, which might have been my favorite part. With

introductions of each participant from across the entire Latin American Region, we were able to see all the different places and men in the different stages of formation. We saw other intercultural houses in the region, especially the scholasticates in Mexico and Brazil, and heard the many regional variations of Spanish in their presentations. To my own surprise and excitement, I met the pre-novices in my birthplace, Venezuela, and in the end, Venezuela was the third or fourth most-represented group among the Oblates present in the meeting. I had not yet met another Venezuelan in any Oblate community so that was very exciting for me!

We then had two presentations — a short video from Father Chicho, the Superior General, and a longer presentation from our Postulator General, Fr. Cleber Lopes.

Cont. on p. 19: Zooming





Our Missionary from afar...

Fr. Elvis Mwamba, OMI

Across continents and communities

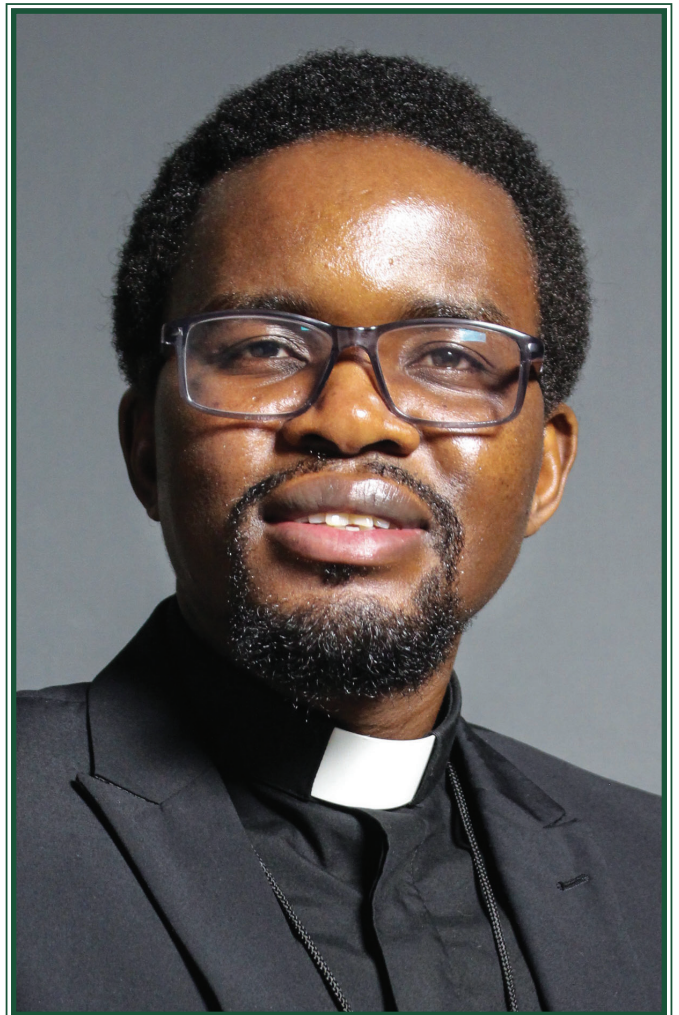
Born in the town of Kabwe in Zambia, I was brought up by a single Mom who died just after my arrival in Rome 12 years ago. I have 2 siblings: an older sister and a younger brother.

My journey as an Oblate has taken me across continents and communities, shaping my faith and deepening my commitment to serving God's people. I completed my education at Kalonga Secondary School before beginning my formation journey. I entered the novitiate at Our Lady of Hope in South Africa where I first professed vows in 2010. I later studied philosophy at St. Joseph's Theological Institute in South Africa and theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

Following my ordination in 2018, I was assigned to the USA and served as Pilgrimage Director at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville, Illinois, where I worked closely with pilgrims seeking moments of prayer, healing, and renewal. That experience of accompanying people in their faith journeys remains a meaningful part of my ministry.

In November 2023, I was appointed as Administrator of St. Mary Parish in Georgetown and Rowley, MA, where I served until September 2025. I currently serve as Pastor of St. William of York Parish in Tewksbury, MA. In both communities, I have been blessed with the opportunity to walk closely with parishioners, fostering vibrant faith communities through the celebration of the sacraments, pastoral care, and outreach.

From 2019 to 2022, I was also involved in ongoing formation, mentoring younger priests in their growth and ministry. Earlier in my journey, my Clinical Pastoral Experience at the University Teaching Hospital in Zambia helped shape a pastoral approach grounded in compassion and attentive listening.



THE RAM'S CORNER

Fr. John Gonzalez Castro, OMI

From Episcopal Vicar to high school Chaplain

From episcopal vicar for Hispanic concerns for the diocese of Dodge City to chaplain at Antonian College Preparatory High School in San Antonio, Father John Gonzales Castro, OMI, has enjoyed multiple and varied ministries as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate for sixty-four years. Ordained a priest on December 22, 1962, he underscores that what he treasures the most today is returning periodically to St. Mary's Church in downtown San Antonio to offer the Eucharistic Celebration, where he first sensed a calling to the priesthood as a grammar school altar boy.

Among his many endeavors he also appreciates his role as one of the founders of the Hispanic Priests of the United States (ANSH) and his service as its second president. Another national office that he held was president of the Association for Religious and Value Issues in Counseling (ARVIC), a division of the American Association for Counseling and Development (AACD), from 1987-1988.

A graduate of Oblate School of Theology, after several years in

parish ministry in south Texas he earned a doctorate from Michigan State University in counseling psychology while he was teaching there and later engaged in private practice in the state of Kansas for several years. Other educational endeavors include director of Hispanic Ministry at three seminaries: Oblate School of Theology, Mount Angel Seminary in Oregon and St. Thomas Seminary in Colorado. He was also the director of counseling at Assumption Seminary in San Antonio for three years.

He served as pastor in Brownsville, TX; Del Rio, TX; and Dodge City, KS. He was also the director of Christ the King Retreat Center, San Angelo, TX, and the Christian Renewal Center, Dickinson, TX. As episcopal vicar for Hispanic concerns in Dodge City, he spearheaded a three-year formation program for Hispanics in preparation for the diaconate. In his most recent ministry as chaplain at Antonian College Preparatory High School, he was also instrumental

in the installing of a window painting in honor of St. Eugene DeMazenod in the new school chapel. (See picture below.)

Today, even at the age of ninety, Fr. John continues to direct retreats and to offer counseling and spiritual direction to priests, deacons, religious women, and lay persons. An avid listener, he insists that he learns more from others than what they learn from him.



Ed. note: Scholastic Brother Alfred Lungu, OMI, of the Zambian Delegation, finished his novitiate in the US in 2025. He was then assigned to continue his studies with the Oblates in Sri Lanka. He recently sent to Fr. Ray Cook an essay he wrote on community. Here is an excerpt from that essay.

The True Meaning of Community

By Brother Alfred Longu, OMI



If religious life concerns a transformed way of belonging to Christ, then community must be understood as more than shared residence or mutual compatibility. Community is not founded primarily on friendship, emotional closeness, or personal preference. Those realities may enrich fraternity, but they are not its foundation. Its true basis lies in a shared identity in Christ.

Through baptism, Christians are incorporated into the Body of Christ and become members of the People of God. In consecrated life, this common baptismal identity receives a particular expression in a shared charism and mission. Religious do not simply decide to live together because they happen to like one another. They are called, gathered, and entrusted to one another by God for the sake of the Gospel. Community is, therefore, fundamentally theological before it is psychological or sociological.

This distinction is decisive. If community is understood mainly in emotional terms, then it will rise or fall according to personal affection. If it is understood mainly in functional terms, then it will be reduced to efficiency or organization. But if it is understood as communion in Christ, then it possesses a stability deeper than temperament and a purpose greater than personal satisfaction.

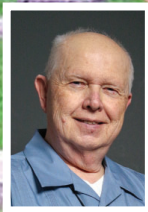
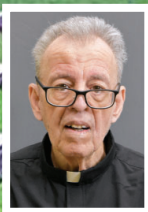
Such communion does not eliminate differences; it transfigures them. Religious communities bring together people of different cultures, languages, educational backgrounds, temperaments, and ideological sensitivities. These differences can certainly produce tension. Yet they need not destroy unity. Pope Francis has repeatedly emphasized that authentic unity is not uniformity, and that diversity, when rooted in Christ, can become a source of richness rather than division (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 117). Community is therefore not the absence of differences but the practice of communion through differences.

This understanding resonates strongly with the New Testament notion of *koinonia*. Christian communion is not merely shared life at the human level; it is participation in a common reality centered on Christ. The early believers were described as being “of one heart and soul” (*Acts* 4:32), not because they were psychologically identical, but because they were united by faith in the risen Lord. Their shared prayer, shared goods, and shared witness flowed from that deeper unity. Religious community, if it is to be authentic, must be shaped by the same logic.

We fulfill our mission in and through the community to which we belong. Our communities, therefore, are apostolic in character. The Founder left us a legacy: "Among yourselves, practice charity, charity, charity —and outside, zeal for the salvation of souls. (OMI Constitution 37)

Oblate Constitution 43

We will keep alive the memory of our deceased and not fail to pray for them, faithfully offering the suffrages prescribed on their behalf.



Lucien Bouchard, OMI Ramiro Cortez, OMI Charles Gilbert, OMI Kenneth Hannon, OMI Paul Madeiros, OMI

RECENTLY DECEASED OBLATES

Paul Medeiros, OMI, (Province of Brazil) died on March 26, 2026, in Tewksbury, MA.

Kenneth Hannon, OMI, died on March 29, 2026, in San Antonio, TX.

Charles Gilbert, OMI, died on April 1, 2026, in Tewksbury, MA.

Ramiro Cortez, OMI, died on April 14, 2026, in San Antonio, TX.

Lucien Bouchard, OMI, died on April 24, 2026, in Tewksbury, MA.

RECENTLY DECEASED FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS

John Beausoleil, brother of Father Charles Beausoleil, OMI, died on April 6, 2026.

Tim Gallagher, brother of Fr. Gregory Gallagher, OMI, died on April 9, 2026.

Cont. from p. 15: Zooming

Following these presentations, we had an opportunity to discuss some reflection questions among our own formation communities (via Zoom rooms) regarding the Constitutions, interculturality, and becoming apostolic men. Our small Borzaga group had many thoughts to share following our experience and the presentations and it was indeed a lively discussion.

The other fun part was that the Guatemala novitiate group felt that we needed to have some fun together to really try and build connections, so they made us play a game across Zoom where

we had to go and search for specific items (e.g., Oblate crosses, portraits of Oblates, etc.). It was as you might expect — an energetic, chaotic, and ultimately fun experience full of laughs. I was very happy to be able to participate in this, thankful for the work of the organizers, and I look forward to more of these types of meetings in the future!



Ed. note: Bro. Pablo was born in Venezuela and moved to the US with his family as a child. He belongs to the United States Province. He made his First Vows in 2022 and is in his fourth and internship year of theology.

We are blessed to have a richness in diversity within our formation programs. The Chapter encourages an intentional exchange of formandi among Units during the important phase of first formation. In this way, our newly professed Oblates can have an intercultural community experience, which will help them in the future to live the reality of our missionary life. (from *Witnesses of Hope in Communion*, 37th General Chapter, 2022)



391 Michigan Ave., N.E.
Washington, DC 20017

Non-Profit Org

US Postage

PAID

Missionary Oblates of
Mary Immaculate USA

OMI-USA

Newsletter of the U.S. Province of the
Missionary Oblates of Mary Immacu-
late, 391 Michigan Ave., Washington, DC
20017-1516

President and Publisher: Very Rev.
Raymond Cook, OMI
Editor: Fr. James Allen, OMI

Direct all submissions, inquiries and
comments to Fr. James Allen at email:
newsletter@omiusa.org.

Published four times a year for Oblate
personnel and their friends and support-
ers; distributed from the U.S. Provincial
Office in Washington, DC.

**MOVING? WANT TO CONTINUE RE-
CEIVING OMI/USA? PLEASE SEND
US YOUR NEW ADDRESS! Or, if you
no longer wish to receive it (whether you
move or not), please let us know: email to
newsletter@omiusa.org**

Thank you.

Ministry with the homeless in Brownsville

By Fr. Nick Harding, OMI

Years ago, Fr. Mike Amesse, OMI, developed an extensive service to those living on the streets of downtown Brownsville. It was suspended, mostly due to the Covid pandemic. Since Lent of 2023, Holy Family parish has resurrected this outreach with the name "*Cristo en la Calle*" (Christ in the Street) referring as a double entendre to the people in the street being Christ disguised (Matt: 25, 31-45) and also that the lay people with the Oblates represent Christ's presence. One elderly lady, Angelina, recently told us "I feel I do not exist, but when you come it makes me feel I exist."

The visits consist of offering sandwiches, fruit and water, prayer and friendship. If we encounter migrants on the way, we also assist them. However, the main focus and priority are those who live long-term on the sidewalks and in alleys: those with substance abuse issues, mental illness (and not taking medications), or without any income or family. For example, one elderly lady came from California and is stuck here after her money and ID's were stolen.

The ministry begins at 8 pm with a prayer and then walking around with wagons loaded with sandwiches prepared by rotating groups.



Fr. Nick (white shirt) offers a prayer along with volunteers.