Oblate Lay Congress Celebrates the 200th Anniversary of the approval of our Oblate Constitutions & Rules

The gathering was held at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville, Illinois

After some months of planning, this past weekend (July 31 to August 2, 2026), a 3-day National Gathering of Oblate Laity took place at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville, IL. The last meeting of Oblate Laity for the USA Province was held about 10 years ago. The event marked the 200th anniversary of the Oblate Constitutions and Rules, approved by Pope Leo XII in 1826. About 40 lay Oblate associates came from California, Texas, Illinois, Florida, and New York. They had the opportunity to participate in the 83rd annual Novena to Our Lady of the Snows. Among the attendees was U.S. Provincial Fr. Raymond Cook, OMI, who inaugurated the Congress. Other Oblates who attended were Fr. David Uribe, OMI, Fr. Juan Gaspar OMI, Br. Lester Antonio Zapata and Br. Elisha Chisanga, OMI, also there was Honorary Oblate Mary O'Herron, former OMI JPIC staff.

During our time together, we embraced Pope Leo XIV's invitation to pray for peace in our world. Each day, we joined our voices with his by praying the Prayer for Peace he led during the Vigil for Peace at Saint Peter's Basilica on April 11, 2026. "Lord Jesus, you conquered death without weapons or violence: you shattered its power with the strength of peace. Grant us your peace …May the madness of war cease, and the Earth be cared for and cultivated by those who still know how to bring forth, protect and love life."[1]

Fr. Ray Cook, OMI, inaugurated the gathering and told attendees that each of them has an important call to live out our charisma. Some Oblate associates came from places where the Oblates are no longer staffing any parish or ministry, but they are the ones keeping the charism alive. He explained that the absence of an Oblate priest does not mean the absence of the Oblate charism. He also explained that charism was given by the Holy Spirit to the whole Church. It was never exclusively given to the ordained or vowed Oblate. We are also called to protect and share the charism left to us by St. Eugene de Mazenod. Fr. Juan Gaspar spoke about the process of forming Oblates to embrace and live the Oblate way of life. Fr. David Uribe, OMI shared on Constitution 8: being close to the people, taking into account their values and aspirations, preaching the Word of God in a simple yet efficient way to reach their hearts, helping them realize their human dignity and daring them to live the gospel.

Br. Elisha Chisanga, OMI shared about his vocation journey and being a missionary in the USA, preaching the Gospel to the most abandoned, and bringing hope to the poor with many faces.

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[1] Pope Leo XIV's prayer for peace at Saint Peter's Basilica, April 11, 2026, http://vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/homilies/2026/documents/20260411-rosario-pace.html

Br. Lester Antonio Zapata shared on Constitution 9 and being Prophets of the New World. He explained that by their baptism they are called to be kings, prophets, and priests. He also explained that the central function of the prophet in the Bible was not to predict the future, as is frequently thought. Prophets generally focused more on speaking about present circumstances than future ones and were often more concerned with fidelity to God's covenant. Their purpose was to call the people to repentance and conversion, and their message was constantly related to present events and circumstances of a political, social, or religious nature. He also explained the evolution of the understanding of the ministry of Justice within the Oblate congregation. Saint Eugene founded the congregation before the publication of Rerum Novarum in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII. Saint Eugene was very involved in founding charity organizations within the diocese, reconciling people and accompanying prisoners.

Under the leadership of Superior General Fr. Léo Deschâtelets, O.M.I., who embraced and guided the Congregation through the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), in which he participated directly as a Council Father. He encouraged the Oblates to embrace the Council's spirit of renewal and fresh self-understanding. Vatican II broadened Concepts of "Poverty" and "Ministry, " leading to the revision of the Constitutions and Rules at the 1966 General Chapter. Under Fr. Léo Deschâtelets leadership, the Congregation broadened the scope of its mission beyond traditional material poverty to include human groups alienated from the Church—such as marginalized urban factory workers, abandoned rural areas, ethnic minorities, immigrants, students, and those alienated from the Church. The 1972 *Missionary Outlook* expanded the concept of mission from solely building up Church structures to building the "Kingdom of God"—a kingdom of peace, love, and justice across secular society.

Under the leadership of Superior General Fr. Fernand Jetté, O.M.I., the reform constitutions and rules were approved in 1980. This chapter confirmed that working for justice is an "integral part of evangelization". Finally, Br Lester Antonio shared about how different Oblates have lived out this Oblate constitution and made them aware of the existence of the Office of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation and explained that the Office coordinates and directs the advocacy efforts within the USA Province and also has alliances and partnerships.

Oblate associate Michelle Divito shared her experience of growing up in an Oblate parish and her participation in the international Lay Oblate Congress in Aix in Provence, France. She shared about joy of being an Oblate associate and invited to persevere despite the challenges they encounter during the mission.

Scott Woodward wove the reflections of the Congress and asked attendees to ponder what they bring to the table as Oblate Laity. He also launched the new website of the Oblate Charismatic Family. He was very grateful to the technical support of Matthew

Grim and Dan Mateyka. He noted that on the website: https://oblatefamily.oblatesusa.org/eugene-101/, people will be able to find many resources. The videos and other materials found on the website, especially Saint Eugene 101, are the work of the Kusenberger Chair of Oblate Studies at the Oblate School of Theology, held by Fr. Frank Santucci, OMI. He was assisted by the late Fr. David Muñoz, OMI. These videos were created to introduce people to the life, charism, and spirituality of Saint Eugene de Mazenod. Each one provides a piece of his life and the life of the community he formed.

On Sunday, we had a closing Liturgy presided over by David Uribe, OMI, where some lay Oblate associates were able to recommit themselves to continue living the Oblate Charism.