

Oblates to focus their missionary zeal on secular culture of U.S.

SAN ANTONIO – The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate have never been known for shrinking from difficult tasks.

Their nickname, “Cavalry of Christ,” recalls their willingness to ride to distant, remote places where others couldn’t or wouldn’t go.

Now, the Oblates’ U.S. province has launched a nontraditional kind of mission to people who are turned off by church to help them understand the ways that God works in their lives.

In San Antonio, the Oblate School of Theology’s Pat Guidon Center for Continuing Education recently hosted 24 men and women for a dialogue about the complexity of secular culture and the challenge of how to approach people in a secular environment with the Gospel. Participants included 21 Oblate priests and brothers, two women and a Marist.

Three Oblates – Father John Mark Ettensohn, Brother Pat McGee and Brother Paul Daly – have been authorized by their congregation’s U.S. province leadership to open a house in Indianapolis where they plan to live in community and invite people from the neighborhood.

Indianapolis was chosen because of its proximity to major universities. The missionaries can interact with students and teachers, and the neighborhood where their house will be is diverse. The Archdiocese of Indianapolis is receptive to the Oblates’ plan.

Purdue University, which is in West Lafayette, Ind., and Indiana University, in Bloomington, share a campus in Indianapolis.

Father J. William Morell, vicar provincial of the Oblates’ U.S. province and former president of Oblate School of Theology, said the San Antonio conference grew out of discussions the Oblates have been conducting since their 1998 general chapter,

which called on the congregation to examine what it means to be missionaries in a secularized society.

“The question is, how can a group of First World missionaries be missionaries to their own culture, which is highly developed and highly secular?” he said. “How do you bring missionary zeal to the First World as we’ve brought it to the underdeveloped world?”

Father Morell said everybody in the United States who is in ministry deals with the secular nature of American culture, but the focus on secularity typically gets diluted in the overall thrust of the mission.

“This is a specific mission to engage the secular aspect of people’s consciousness. It’s relatively personal in its approach; it’s not to groups or to a structured organization, but to a way people live,” he said.

“I’d certainly like to be able to help people become more aware of God’s presence in their lives,” Father Ettensohn said. “Most of the time, we move right by and don’t recognize it.

“People are so fixed on the reality of the world that they’re often not aware of God’s presence among us in the cracks and crevices of their lives,” he added.

There is some uncertainty in going into the venture virtually without a road map, he said.

“Where do you go and do this in a loving way that doesn’t turn people off before you turn them on? They’re already not coming to church or retreat centers. We’re not going out and knocking on doors. That can turn off people as easily as it invites people into a dialogue,” he said.

It’s not like a parish ministry in which people already oriented toward the church come to be fed, Father Ettensohn said, adding, “We have to have a different kind of missionary presence.”

He and the two brothers believe they must imitate Jesus as St. Paul described him to the Philippians. “He didn’t deem equality with God something to be grasped at. He

emptied himself,” the priest said.

“We have to establish relationships with a listening posture. People often have a deeper consciousness that something is missing in their lives, but they don’t make the connection that what’s missing is God,” he said.

Brother McGee said it’s precisely the unfamiliarity of the ministry that appeals to him.

“I’ve spent 40 years of ministry in rather traditional ministries, all church-centered, and I was looking for something different,” he said.

But while it’s new and there is no established plan for how it’s to be done, Brother McGee said it’s in line with the charism of the Oblates’ founder, St. Eugene de Mazenod, a 19th-century French bishop.

“St. Eugene wanted his early companions to reach out and bring the good news to those who were ‘left out’ by the church in its ‘business as usual,’” he said.

“His style of preaching was meant to touch people’s hearts and lead to conversion and restoration to the church’s sacramental life,” the brother said.

“We’ll be seeking ways to reach out to ‘those left out’ and ‘those who have opted out’ of the church’s compassionate mission,” he added. “But we’ll go slowly – yet hopefully still with a bit of St. Eugene’s passion – meeting people where we find them and finding ways to connect with them.”