

New Oblate leader seeks ‘better sense of how God is calling us’

Rev. Ken Thorson has taken on a key leadership role with the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a missionary order that brought the Catholic faith to much of Canada.

Father Thorson is the new Provincial Superior of OMI Lacombe Canada, the Oblate Canadian province whose members serve in parish, social justice and retreat ministries from Ontario to British Columbia and the Northwest Territories. The France-based Oblates first arrived in Montreal in 1841 and went on to play a pivotal role in Western Canada, establishing their first Alberta mission at Lac. Ste Anne in 1844, and in St. Albert in 1861.

Today they face a lack of vocations, an aging membership, and the damaging legacy of Canada’s residential schools. For Thorson, those are critical challenges, but with hopes of a renewed future for the order, he says he’s ready to tackle them.



Rev. Ken Thorson OMI

“As Oblates we have a great story to tell – about our past, present and future,” Thorson said.

“It is an exciting ministry, and the word needs to get out on that.”

Thorson was installed as Provincial Superior in an Aug. 15 ceremony at Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples in Edmonton. Other members installed to the provincial council were Fathers Susai Jesu and Leszek Kwiatkowski, both of whom

serve parishes in the Archdiocese of Edmonton with large Indigenous populations; Father Richard Baudette of the Archdiocese of Ottawa; and Father Jaroslaw Pachocki of the Diocese of Hamilton.

A total of 185 members of OMI Lacombe Canada minister to 35 parishes across the country. A top priority for the leadership is increasing vocations, considering that 80 Canadian Oblates have died since 2013 and there is no one currently in their formation process.

“There are struggles for vocations in religious orders in general, but for our particular community it’s significant,” said Thorson. “We haven’t had a final profession of vows in five years, so this is an area that’s going to receive a fair bit of energy from our team and our leadership.”

Energize the call to priesthood

For Thorson, a period of self-reflection and an increased outreach to youth is vital to energize the call to priesthood.

The Oblates’ four North American provinces are organizing a youth retreat at the Our Lady of the Snows national shrine in Belleville, Ill., set for the summer of 2020. It will be the first retreat of its kind for the Oblates. A similar retreat at the Our Lady of the Cape shrine in Trois-Rivières, Que., is also being planned.

“One of the big things we hope will come out of this is finding out what young people want from the Church, and why they’re interested or not interested in priesthood and religious life,” said Thorson.

While their numbers are declining, Thorson strongly believes there are young men today called to missionary life. A dedication to serving the poor and spreading the Gospel across the world has been a major part of Oblate history, and Thorson believes this charitable and international charism can be a big draw.

With this in mind, Thorson wants to ensure that the goals that bring men to ministry remain their top priority. As Provincial Superior, he hopes to look at ways the administrative burdens of priesthood can be lessened for Oblates.

“I get a sense from our guys that they feel pulled at from so many different directions,” Thorson said.

“The thing that draws us to priesthood or brotherhood is being with people and ministering to the poor. Sometimes it feels like you have less and less time for those things.

“It’s important to look at how we can lighten that burden of paperwork and other administrative duties, so that there is more time our Oblates can dedicate to the care of the people they’re called to serve.”



Drummers of the Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation add music ministry to installation Mass Alan Schietzsch/Grandin Media

Working to heal

One call to service the Oblates hope to continue is their ministry to First Nations communities, largely in Western Canada and the North. Their relationship with Indigenous peoples dates back more than 170 years. But because of the Oblates' role in the residential schools system and the abuses Indigenous people suffered there, the relationship has been marked by hurt and tragedy.

However, with efforts of reconciliation, in-depth psychological examinations for potential priests, and a more open approach to the culture and traditions of Indigenous peoples, Thorson says the Oblates are working to heal those scars.

“For a long time, we were a part of the colonial effort – even if we wouldn't have called it that, we were. And now we understand that our place is walking with the First Nations people as allies, as Christian brothers and sisters,” he said.

“There's a much greater focus on walking together – to learn with them who God is, who they are and how their culture and traditions shape their faith and practice.”



Chief Tony Alexis Of Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation

That vision of journeying side by side was reflected in the installation at Sacred Heart Church, which has a mandate to serve the Indigenous population across the Edmonton area. Chief Tony Alexis of Alexis Nakota

Sioux Nation noted the history the Oblates have had with his people, as well as the perseverance and spirit it takes to be a good leader.

“There may be times when everything around you is falling apart, but as a leader people are called to look upon you and you must have strength,” Alexis said. “The only place you get that strength is through God.”

For his three-year term as Provincial Superior, which can be renewed, Thorson plans first and foremost to meet with his brother priests and their communities. He sees his initial year as a time to understand better the order’s challenges.

“What I want to accomplish at this time, I wouldn’t say much beyond this – to ask good, thorough questions and get a better sense of how God is calling us, with our significant but limited resources,” Thorson said.

“Rather than offer a message to the communities we Oblates serve, I’d prefer to offer an invitation. That invitation would be to pray for us as leadership, to pray that we will always seek God’s will, especially through the voices of the people we serve.”

Thorson takes over the role of Provincial Superior from Rev. Ken Forster, who served for six years.