Louis Brisson was born in Plancy, in the Department of Aube, on June 23, 1817. He was the son of Toussaint Brisson, a simple dry goods merchant, and of Marie-Savine Corrard. At an early age, he showed a keen power of observation and a curiosity for the natural sciences, chemistry, physics, and astronomy, dispositions that, in his adult years, would later develop into ingenious inventions, which he received within a family context, marked him as well; his mother taught him to read by means of St. Alphonsus Liguori’s Visits to the Blessed Sacrament and imbued him with a love for the Holy Eucharist. His Father’s way of acting offered him the example of a Christian who was not afraid to put himself at the service of the clergy during the Revolution of 1830. In the little parish church of Plancy, a few weeks after his First Holy Communion, Louis lived an unforgettable experience. There, before the altar of the Blessed Virgin (“It was at the end of the 4th bench”) he had the very strong feeling that God was calling him to save a great many souls and (“and to make Him loved with an infinite love”). He was 12 years old!

After a time of “unstructured” study at the rectory in Plancy, Louis entered the Seminary of Troyes in 1831. Humiliated at having to repeat the sixth level as a 14-year old, he quickly caught up with the others and showed himself to be a very gifted student. There he followed the entire course of studies and events which culminated in his ordination to the priesthood on December 19, 1840. Already a professor of science for his fellow students, he likewise became one for the boarding students of the Visitation of Troyes, and at the age of 24, his maturity and judgment were such that he was named chaplain and confessor to the Visitation Community as well. During 40 years, that is until 1884, he became entirely imbued with the thought and the spirituality of St. Francis de Sales under the remarkable impetus and direction that Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis’s guidance imprinted upon that monastery. Guided by her, he was formed in order to reproduce the life of the Savior on earth in its entirety. However, for a long time, he resisted her when she spoke to him about the divine plan for founding a Congregation of priests that would spread the spirit and doctrine of St. Francis de Sales throughout the world. She told him that he was destined to realize that foundation. He asked for signs that such was the Will of God and received them...his honest and upright intellect took note of them, but his will wouldn’t give in. It was only after beholding the Sign par excellence—the risen Lord and His silent command to be obeyed—that he surrendered himself totally and forever, waiting only for the moment fixed by the Divine Providence to begin.
In 1858, he was named Diocesan Director of the Association of St. Francis de Sales. In two years, that Association, devoted to the defense and renewal of the Faith, counted 6,000 members in 35 parishes and became the instrument of a quasi “new evangelization” in a de-Christianized environment; so well did its young Director know how to stimulate the zeal of its members by enlisting them in a league of prayer and having them give witness in the milieu where they lived and worked, that he was a precursor to the Catholic Action movement.

Moreover, attentive to the signs of the times, he saw the human, moral, and spiritual “desert”, in which a great number of young working girls, exposed to many dangers, “survived” in the textile factories of Troyes, then in full expansion. Not only did he open, first of all, Sunday Youth Clubs for them, then family-style residences, and soon school as well, but he also formed them to be apostles in the environment in which they lived. In 1866, to assure the stability of these “Oeuvres ouvrieres” (Working Girls’ Clubs)—criticized for their novelty—he founded the Congregation of the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales with two former students of the Visitation, one of whom the Church has already canonized, St. Leonie Aviat.

In 1859, the Bishop at the time, Bishop Ravinet, confided to Father Brisson the task of reopening the sole Catholic secondary school for boys in the diocese, after it had gone bankrupt. It was a real challenge! He had neither men nor money! But at the Bishop's order, he cast the net...Successively transferred, then audaciously enlarged during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the new secondary school named for St. Bernard, the illustrious Saint of Champagne, became the cradle of the Congregation of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales foreseen by Mother Mary de Sales. Among its first Religious, it counted Father Brisson, himself, and his earliest collaborators, all of whom were won over by Salesian humanism and the pedagogy that flowed from it. But she, whom the Oblates rightly consider as their “Foundress” would, however, not live to see neither its full realization nor its fruits. Mother Mary de Sales died on October 7, 1875.

That same year, the Oblates received their first Roman approbation from Pope Pius IX, and Bishop Ravinet as head of the diocese. Upon discovering all that Father Brisson had done, he exclaimed in admiration, “Nothing like this has been done in the diocese for 200 years!” And he named him Vicar General and chose him as his confessor...However, the first foundations made by Father Brisson outside the diocese—and soon those of his first Missions in South Africa and in South America—were contrary to his pastoral views; his diocese was not rich in priestly vocations, and he would have really liked to keep all the energies of that new Congregation for it. There followed a very sad and difficult conflict, which lasted for ten years, and made personal rapport and collaboration extremely painful. One after another, Father Brisson saw his offices and
responsibilities taken from him. Ten years, as well, of heroic efforts to safeguard both the rights of his Institute, approved by Rome, and the humble and respectful charity he showed toward his Bishop who tried to destroy his work. And when the hour of reconciliation struck in Rome in 1888, Pope Leo XIII rightly hailed Father Brisson as “the man of peace”.

The opposition within the Church would soon be followed by that of the secular society by means of the anti-clerical laws passed from 1901 to 1904 and the religious persecution which raged in France. The Congregations of the Oblates and the Oblate Sisters were dissolved, their goods confiscated, their members forced into exile. As he was too old to follow them, Father Brisson withdrew to Plancy. His word of acceptance was that of Job, “The Lord has given me all things; He has taken them all away; blessed be the Name of the Lord!” Firm in his faith and sure of the future of his two Congregations, he remained unshaken in his invincible confidence.

He died on February 2, 1908, at the age of 91, and could in all truth say, “Now, O Lord, You can let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen the Savior!” In this same Cathedral of St. Peter and Paul, on February 6th, Bishop Monnier rendered homage to him for all he had done for the Church of Troyes, especially for his apostolate on behalf of the working class, and as a final gesture, he kissed his coffin.

That was a prelude to the act that is taking place at this moment.