Celebration of the 100th death anniversary of Fr. Louis Brisson OSFS
Meeting of Major Superiors - Fr. Brisson OSFS Workshop

Introductory remarks by Fr. Aldino Kiesel OSFS, General Superior

I would like to welcome each of you: I welcome every Provincial and Regional Superior, I welcome the members of the International Commission of Salesian Studies (ICSS), the members of the General Council, and all other confreres.

These days here in Troyes have for us a special meaning. Our goal here is not to discuss issues related to our Provinces and Regions. These days have the special character of a celebration. We are here to celebrate and to give thanks to God. It is good to be here where we were founded and where we started as Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, and from where we spread out over the world. It is good to celebrate the life of our founder, Father Louis Brisson, and the life of the first Oblates. It is good to give thanks to God for our history, our charism and our mission in the Church. It is good to give thanks to our Salesian spirit, the treasure we received from God through our holy founders: Saint Francis de Sales, the Good Mother and Father Louis Brisson. It is good to give thanks for the gift of our own vocation and the vocation of our confreres who are Oblates of St. Francis de Sales. It is good to give thanks to God for so many wonderful things happening in the Church through our ministry as Oblates.

Besides the celebration of the centenary of the death of Fr. Brisson, we will have a workshop on his life and his mission during the next days. We will come to know and understand better our founder’s life and how he discerned and responded to the signs of God at that time. We will look at the past in order to be able to see better our future. Knowing better our founder and the beginning of our Congregation, we certainly will be able to understand better our mission in our days.

As we know, the last years of our founder’s life were very difficult. In 1901 the French Parliament voted in favor of the law of the suppression of religious Congregations in the country. The years after that were challenging for Father Brisson and the other confreres. Little by little the schools were closed and the Oblates from France went to join confreres in other countries, where we already had been established. It was a time of uncertainty about what to do and where to minister. It was a time of uncertainty about our future as Oblates. But while the doors were closing on the one side, other doors were opening. At that time our presence in other countries in Europe, in the United States, and in the missions in South Africa, Brazil and Uruguay were flourishing.

In some way, our situation today seems to be similar. We also have our questions about our future. Our experience is that in many of our Provinces we are reducing our presence in parishes and schools. Because of the decreasing number of confreres, the main question often seems to be: which is the next place to let go? Which community do we have to close down? Normally this is a painful experience.
On the other hand, we see new regions worldwide where our presence as Oblates is growing. Our presence in some areas of the third world, like in India, in Benin and in Haiti, brings joy and hope to our hearts. It is wonderful to see the number of new confreres growing, and to see a great number of new candidates coming to knock at the door of our communities.

It seems that we are in a time of change. The face of our Congregation is changing. More and more we have confreres coming from several and different cultures and backgrounds. Again and again we are facing new challenges, new situations.

What can we learn from our founder that could bring light and strength to us today? In the difficult situation of dispersion, Father Brisson remembered the Good Mother’s prediction about the sufferings that he would have to face. And he did not get depressed. He said: “The most profitable time for the soul is the one of the sacrifice; and the bitterer the sacrifice is, so much larger the reward. We do not understand the mysteries of God’s Will, but we must bow under the divine hand!” And he added: “As for us, we have to trust God more than ever, because my certainty is that He has special purposes for us Oblate Fathers and Oblate Sisters of Saint Francis de Sales. This was the Mother’s thought. This is what was told to me in Rome. It is up to us to maintain our spirit which is a spirit of unction, of abandonment of our will and of our whole being in the hands of God”.

Father Brisson, due to his advanced age, was advised to ask dismissal of the position of Superior General, keeping the title of honorary Superior General. He didn’t accept this because, as it seemed to him, it would have been abandoning the boat in the middle of the storm and that, in his opinion, would have meant that he was doubting the Providence which had chosen and conserved him living such a long time only to safeguard the work. The bishop sent his secretary to convince Father Brisson to leave the position. Though that had disturbed the founder he stayed firm. Until the very end he was faithful to the mission God had entrusted to him.

At that time he once said: “This year was without doubt for me the one with greater probations. There was no single week, I would say no single day even, that I didn’t have more or less bitter probations. They came to me from everywhere. But they were not unexpected”.

A person, a friend of our founder, gave this testimony: “We felt that the venerable Founder tried to communicate to our hearts the burning love that consumed his”.

As we are stepping on the same ground where our founder and the first Oblates walked, let us be open to God during these days. Let us ask God to send to our hearts and to the hearts of our confreres the same burning love that consumed the heart of Father Louis Brisson. May God enable us to face our current challenges as He enabled our founder! May God be blessed!

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