Father Brisson: practicing love for life

We could look at our founder’s life from different perspectives. There are several events in his life and many teachings of his that could be for us a source to reflect on and to learn from.

At this moment I would like to stress one aspect of his life. Reading again the biography of Father Brisson I was surprised about how often he uses the words “love” and “to love”. These are words we hear so many times. But what was interesting to me was discovering that the more our founder was aging the more he spoke about “to love”. One of the reasons for that is certainly his progressive interior identification with Saint Francis de Sales, whose life was centralised on the love of God and of the neighbors.

Right after starting his ministry as chaplain of the Visitation Monastery Louis Brisson had an experience that touched him, and he wrote it down in his diary. He was with Sister Marie-Delphine at the moment when she died, right after he administered the last Sacraments to her. He says: “When seeing the calm and the peace in the face of the dead, I felt renewed in me the deep desire of putting myself totally in my good Master's service. Who am I to be allowed as I am to do that? I am just 24 years of age. The beloved Christ impels me. He wants to show me that He loves me and entrusts to me his inheritance. I love him too.” We see him cultivating a personal and intimate relationship with God, at the very beginning of his priesthood.

He became early very appreciated as teacher both at the diocesan seminary and at the girls’ boarding school at the Visitation. He used to use exciting comparisons that impressed the imagination. He taught with communicative power. He was like the bishop Francis de Sales, who caught the attention of the children when he taught catechism at the cathedral in Annecy. Father Brisson’s love for the poor students was not restricted to the classes. He kept contact with the students after they finished their studies in the school at the Visitation. He kept praying for them and he used to write letters to them. He was more than a teacher; he was a true master who took care of those entrusted to him. He revealed his love as good pastor of the people.

The Visitation Sisters witnessed that in the confession; they felt encouraged to grow in the love of God. Father Brisson revealed his gift to help to discern the real needs of each singular person. He was able to say the right word at the right moment. It didn’t matter what the personal situation of each Sister was. Each of them felt helped listening to him. It didn’t happen only with the Sisters and the students. Former students and their families felt attracted as well by the pastor and master Father Brisson.

He was aware of the two different methods of spiritual direction. “The first is that of authority: I am the teacher and the one who knows what is good for you. I want you to do this because I ask it. That is not the method of the Lord. The second is the one of convincing, of persuasion. We go to others and we try to discover how we can establish dialogue with them. This is the method of the Lord. He didn’t preach any dogma. He just counted parables. He didn’t impose any obligation of conscience. He let the others see what was good and profitable.”
Mary de Sales Chappuis was for six years in the heart of France, in Paris, center of anticlerical and anti-ecclesial ideas. It was also the center of luxury, of the nobility, in contrast to the poor people, whose life practically didn’t change at all after successive revolutions that happened in France. On the other hand, a reaction to all this could be felt. A reaction that was coming from inside. Like seed that makes new life sprout, in silence, something new was sprouting. As expression of that, several Congregations began to appear. And the Good Mother interfered in this context when embodying a new way of living, based on interior strength that comes from the life of intense union with God and the readiness to do His will. And now, when returning to Troyes, she began with determination to reveal herself as the effective instrument in the hands of God.

We know what happened after that. The Good Mother came back to the Monastery in Troyes in 1844, and then she started trying to convince the Chaplain, Fr. Brisson, to found the Congregation that was in the dreams of the bishop Francis de Sales. And we know about the reluctance of the Chaplain, and his experiences of God showing him His Will. Father Brisson’s love to God and to His Will enabled him to win over his personal resistances.

Meanwhile he was waiting for the right time to start the work of the new foundation, he continued to be sensible to the needs of the people. At that time there was a great need to evangelize the families. Father Brisson dedicated himself to the "Association of Saint Francis de Sales", the organization to support and to help Christian families, especially in their religious and moral aspects.

Father Brisson became a close friend to Bishop Mermillod – auxiliary bishop of Geneva. The bishop was concerned about the need of a solid Christian formation, based on faith, earnestness and honesty. He said to Father Brisson: "Why not make to fructify the doctrine and teachings of my saint predecessor Saint Francis de Sales? Why not form the new generations like the image of that great figure who dominated his century and will be able to illuminate ours?" And he added: "Dear friend, you have long experience of the methods used by St. Francis de Sales in female education. Everyday you observe, with admiration and surprise, the results obtained by the Visitation of Troyes and by many monasteries which you know. I myself and all of the bishops meet on our way generous, eminent women, whose lives were prepared in the shadow of monasteries and they animated by the evoking blow of the spirit of St. Francis of Sales. That powerful blow could elevate to those heights of conscience and of faith souls of women, would not it also be able to raise souls of men and elevate them to that moral and religious level that would be for all of us the type of what is beautiful and complete in the boys' education?" And he challenged Fr. Brisson to take charge of the undertaking. The Bishop was convinced about the impact of the method of Francis de Sales on humans hearts. He wanted to see the Salesian method to be the source of the renewal of human hearts, which would take to new life and to new moral attitudes. Father Brisson realized that the time to start the work was at hand, and it would be needed to involve himself entirely in the task.

After the foundation of both Congregations the founder revealed his love in very realistic ways to his daughters and sons. He expressed his concerns about Oblates living isolated, but encouraged them to remain faithful to the Directory and to meet and help each other to live their consecrated lives. "The poor priest - he said - is alone in the parish so many times and still he has a soul and a heart which need food and love. Where to find them? "In God", you will say. But it is necessary that they learn how to live with God. Well, it will be the Directory which will teach them to know God intimately and to live with Him in deep union. The Directory is our strength. It will be theirs. It is a wonderful help." He suggested to the members of the community to share about their personal spiritual reading. He added: "This way you will find among us hearts which understand you and help you."

It is interesting how the personality of our founder impressed many people around him. His way to express his love constantly and in small ways was remarkable. After 25 years of our foundation, at the Jubilee of 60 years of Father Brisson’s priesthood, the bishop of Troyes confirmed that Father Brisson had conquered the hearts of the Oblates, and that the Oblates held him in a high esteem and in a high regard. The bishop said: "I don't tell you anything new, Very Reverend Father, and I believe I may say that maybe there is no Superior of a Congregation so dear to his religious confreres as you are. For my heart as bishop it is a show full of sweetness which causes me every day greater satisfaction and, I add, a consolation. So I express the wish that the union which reigns among you, dear Fathers, may
strengthen still more and if the probation, which we ask God to deign to remove, comes and reaches you, stay more than ever united among each other.”

The bishop was not the only one who recognized the great influence of Father Brisson. Also the students of our schools expressed their admiration and recognized the importance of our founder in their lives. At the end of the celebration of the Jubilee of Father Brisson’s priesthood, the students expressed themselves in this way: “You gave us two clear and practical orientations for our way. The first is trust in God and love to the Church. The second is trust in ourselves, the conscience of the own value and of the own responsibility.”

After the French parliament decided to suppress the religious Congregations, Father Brisson began to close schools and houses in order to facilitate the workers to get to some other work, before being forced, from one moment to another, to close the doors. He took initiatives coming from a paternal heart that did everything possible for the good of the workers. A director of a school said later: “I remember from my youth that a gentle elder and with appearance of sanctity guided the Congregation and that he always had a special love for the simple people. Therefore I am always thankful to him.” Again and again what is stressed by others is the love that the life of our founder radiated. And his love was directed specially to the simple and the poor people. The bishop, the teachers and the students perceived in our founder a person that captives others through his relationship. The more he advances in the age the more he is recognized by his capacity to touch hearts and to renew them by love.

At the time of the dispersion, he said to the Oblates Sisters: “Thank God for the grace He grants you. Do not ask for the end of persecution, nor another situation. I don't say that you should not pray in order to obtain that the Holy Church be not persecuted any more, but you remain in the hands of God as Saint John. He was with the Master on Tabor. He is again near him in the Olive Garden and at the foot of the cross. And why? Because he loves Him and when there is love, separation is not accepted.” Father Brisson chooses in the Bible examples of people firm in their love in order to encourage his daughters and sons during the difficult time of persecution.

When he was 87 years old he withdrew himself and went to live in Plancy. There he would spend the last years of his life. A time of inactivity apparently began. In reality, however, it was a great retreat for him, the time of supreme purification of his life. There, in silence, he would spend hours reading and reflecting on the Gospel, especially the Gospel of Saint John. It is interesting that he chooses exactly the gospel that speaks more directly about the love of God and the beloved disciple. The heart of our founder seems to be closer and closer to the heart of God. Between God’s heart and Father Brisson’s heart is a mutual relationship based on love.

In 1905 he was still able to preach to the Sisters of the Visitation: “My Sisters, remain faithful, very faithful, and lovingly faithful to everything you must do. I recommend you to put always your heart in the love of God's Will in order to love Him in everything, in the suffering and in the practice of the Rule: that was our saint Founder’s intention. He instituted an Order based not on penitence, on austerities, but on love. We will always be thankful for the vocation we were called to, because the religious vocation is a grace, a privilege. It requires everything to be done by love, by a generous disposition that, continually, is offered to Him and our neighbor. I ask you to never forget me. I will never abandon you that I assure you. It is very good not to go alone to God, but to go to Him with all those persons we love.” His words to the Visitation Sister sound similar to the words of Francis de Sales. Both recommend to the sisters to remain faithful in the love of God’s Will in everything.

One year later he gave an interesting and realistic directive to the Oblate Sisters, who had been dispersed: “My Daughters, the calamity of this time doesn't allow us to live in community. We were dispersed, some to the right, others to the left. Each one should carry the community in his heart, follow the interior Rule.” In time when to live in community was not possible because of the political situation, he encouraged the Sisters that “each one should carry the community in his heart”. It reminds me of one of the principles of Saint Francis de Sales: “We have no bound but the bound of love!”
What could his beloved daughters and sons hear from their beloved father at the end of his life? What was in his heart at that time, having faced so many and great difficulties during so many years? We have an answer in his words from January 24th, 1908. He was very weak, and he was hardly able to pronounce a single word. That day several Oblates Sisters and Oblates were gathered around him. Father Deshaire, on behalf of all of them, asked him: “Father, say a word to the Oblate Fathers and Sisters, a word that will remain as a reminder and which we will keep to conform ourselves always to your desire.” The patient seemed not to have understood, and the question was repeated. He was hardly able to articulate a phrase: “I love you with my whole heart!” The emotion was general. Then all of them prayed there as in a shrine where a painful sacrifice would be offered.

A life centered in practicing love characterized the lives of both, Saint Francis de Sales and Father Brisson. It plays, of course, a central importance in the characteristic of our lives as Oblates of St. Francis de Sales.

May God be blessed!

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