To many, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, the taking of religious vows seems a strange and anachronistic practice, one that is simply out of tune with our world today. It seems out of tune for them because they little understand the Good News of Jesus and the nature of the consecrated life and of commitment, fidelity and true freedom. The prevailing societal value appears to be that of personal preference without any regard or obligation to any objective moral or religious norms. "Do your own thing" expresses the essence of freedom for them, a freedom from restraints of all kinds whether they be governmental, familial, religious or societal.

Now, instead of striking a discordant note, the taking and renewing of vows in the eyes of St. Francis de Sales is something that helps us to "make", as the popular song expresses it, "beautiful music together."

This is certainly the image that Francis presents to the early Visitandines, in what was probably one of the very first occasions for them to renew the solemn vows they had recently taken. He tells them on the feast of the Presentation of our Lady that we can't make beautiful music together unless the strings of our hearts are in tune or, as he puts it, unless we "examine and consider all the affections of our souls."
The image of the accomplished lute player needing to adjust the strings of his instrument demonstrates the wonderfully balanced spirituality that our saint championed and that we profess to live by our vows. The occasion of the renewal of our vows is not only a question of seeing where we are lax (tightening the loose strings), but also where we might be too uptight by loosening the strings that are too tight, i.e., to look at those areas in our spiritual life where we might be unduly demanding of ourselves and of others.

We can only tune our heartstrings properly if we pluck them and listen carefully to the sound they make. But as every musician knows, before you start playing, you have to check and see that the instrument is in tune; otherwise the music you play can sound very strange and sour indeed. We can readily tell when there is a discordant note by the relation that one string has to the other. In other words, in music as in life, it is our relationships with one another that will tell us whether we are in tune or out of tune because our vows are nothing more than solemn promises we have made to live our lives faithfully "with and for others" (Schillebeeckx) motivated by our love for God.

This living with and for others can be trying, and, at times, even crucifying. It is at those times we should be mindful of the expression that Father Brisson proposed to the first Oblates - "Oblatus est quia ipse voluit" (He offered himself because he wanted to; Isa 53:7). This expression alludes to Isaiah depicting the Suffering Servant, who prefigured the crucified Jesus, and tells us that Jesus offered himself because he wanted to, and he wanted to because he loved us so much. In fact, Father Brisson called Jesus the first Oblate since he is the perfect example of what it means to be an oblation, an offering ("La fidélité aux petites choses, notre fonds de sagesse" - Chapitre du 18 octobre 1899, édition millenaire).

This expression – Oblatus est quia ipse voluit – can also be translated as, "He is an Oblate because he wanted to be." It is precisely in this sense that Father Brisson uses it. This, for me, expresses the beautiful relationship between freedom, love and obedience. We are Oblates because we want to be Oblates, because we love to be Oblates. Love can only be freely given and never demanded.
Along the line of “Oblatus est quia ipse voluit,” Fr. Brisson tells the early Oblates: “Nothing is more free than obedience. Why do we obey?,” he asks, and responds by saying, “because we want to obey,” (Chapter, 13 February 1889 - "The Vow of Obedience") i.e., we freely chose to obey. So the Oblates by renewing their vow of obedience reinforce the decision that we have freely and willingly made. Francis de Sales captures the essence of freedom and obedience when he states: "Our will is never so free when it is a slave of God’s will, just as it is never so enslaved as when it serves our own will " (Treatise on the Love of God, book 12, chapter 10; Ryan II :272).

In the context of Oblatus est quia ipse voluit, Father Brisson insists that the Oblate life makes us better human beings. ("Rien ne développe autant l'homme que cette vie-là..."). The renewal of vows freely and lovingly made shapes the kind of person we want to be. Since it is one of the highest expressions of our freedom and love, it makes us more human. In a word, the freer we are the more loving we become; the more loving, the more human.

As our lives begin to ebb and fade, we become more conscious not only of our physical debility, but more importantly of our spiritual fragility. When we look at ourselves honestly, we know that we have fallen short of our commitment many times. This honest appraisal should not discourage us but rather encourage us because Francis de Sales insists that perfection consists in struggling against our imperfections. As long as we are willing to continue fighting, then we will be victorious; we will be winners. In his sermon on the Presentation of our Lady, he gives a word of encouragement to those early Visitandines and to us on this occasion. "For this custom of renewing our vows," he says, "can repair any faults we may have committed when we first made them" (Sermons on Our Lady, p. 43).

By renewing our vows, we become more aware of how essential it is, with the help of Jesus, to cleanse the temples or our bodies so as to give fitting worship and praise to God. It is a strong reminder that commitment and fidelity are values that are meant to last and that when we strongly adhere to these values, despite occasional lapses, we play and sing, in Francis' words, "the beautiful canticle of the glory of God and of our own perfection." Or, to put it more colloquially, "We can make such beautiful music together," melodious music that rises above the cacophonous, strident, and discordant sounds of a world in desperate need of harmony, God's harmony and the beautiful harmony of Salesian-Oblate spirituality.