STUDIES IN
SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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As the Salesian/Oblate World Turns

paper presented at the 2002 Salesian Scholars Seminar in Stella Niagara (NY)

Introduction

(1) One of the more distinctive aspects of Salesian spirituality is its focus on life “in the world” as the locus of one’s Christian existence, in and through which loving relationships with God and neighbor are to be fulfilled.

Salesian spirituality, while retaining much of the interior spirit of the desert, in the sense that a radical call from God does indeed claim and refashion the human heart, did not at all assert that that voice could only echo clearly in the stillness of the hermit’s cave or the monastery’s cloister. That voice might also be raised and heard in a life lived in the midst of the world.

In the Salesian world one loved God in the midst: in the busy bustle of what might be a “worldly” vocation and in the interpersonal exchanges of family, community, and friends.¹

(2) More specifically, Francis has become known and admired for having addressed his spiritual wisdom to those obliged to live in the world, where their Christian faith was regularly confronted by secular values.

Indeed through his writings, he draws out from sacred doctrine the loftiest principles of the charism of sanctity and explains it so clearly that it seems to be his special gift to know how wisely and gently to apply this charism to all the conditions of the faithful.²
(3) Today, of course, we live in a much different world than that of 16-17th century France. While the global reality may be different, the question remains concerning our understanding of, and approach to, life “in the world.”

(4) To examine this question, we consider two turns that the Salesian world has taken in nearly 400 years: the first, from Francis’ view to that of Fr. Louis Brisson in his founding of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales; the second, from these two historical perspectives to the Oblate view of apostolic life in today’s world.

(5) Our aim is to examine how the master metaphor of “the world” has been modulated in the ongoing Salesian tradition lived by the Oblates and what consequences, if any, this may have for initiating a lay association (third order) connected to this tradition and its Oblate embodiment.

**The “World” for St. Francis de Sales**

(5) In her analysis of “St. Francis de Sales and Culture,” RUTH MURPHY theorizes that “for Francis de Sales the world and its activities have no intrinsic and independent positive value; that it to say, they are not fully assumed into the economy of salvation in any modern sense.”

(6) At its worst, the world appears to Francis as a dangerous place, one whose activity sets it in opposition to the Christian ideal and from which the devout person must learn to be detached. Selections from two of his letters to Madame de Chantal suggest this antithetical position:

*June 8, 1606* – “These desires you have to see yourself removed from all these worldly diversions must, as you say, be good since they are not upsetting you at all.”

*January 16, 1610* – “I am a little happier than usual with my soul in that I no longer see anything in it which keeps it attached to this world, and I find it more in tune with eternal values. How happy I should be if I were as deeply and closely united to God as I am distanced and alienated from the world!”

(7) Numerous other references in the *Oeuvres* disclose the problematic “spirit” of the world, which Francis deems

- illusory (9:25,244; 10:231; 14:357)
- iniquitous (10:27; 14:121; 17:94; 19:311,357; 20:12,226)
- blind (13:150; 21:67)
(8) At its best, the world for Francis holds no significance, except that its very contrariness to things Christian provides innumerable opportunities for advancement in the virtuous life. This more “indifferent” view he makes evident in his letters:

\textit{to Madame de la Fléchère, May 19, 1608} – “Having to attend to so many things is a continual martyrdom; for just as flies are more bothersome and irritating to summer travelers than the traveling itself, so the variety and multiplicity of things you have to do is harder to bear than the actual weight of them. ... Soon we shall be in eternity and then we shall see how insignificant our worldly preoccupations were and how little it mattered whether some things got done or not; however, right now we rush about as if they were all-important.”

\textit{to Madame de Cornillon, August 6, 1610} – “Let us all belong to God, my daughter, in the midst of so much busyness brought on by the diversity of worldly things. ... Don’t be upset by these little attacks of anxiety and sadness that are brought on by the multiplicity of your household cares. No, my dear daughter, for this gives you the opportunity of practicing the dearest and best virtues that our Lord recommended to us.”

(9) In general, though, Salesian imagery depicts the world in a markedly unfavorable light. As Murphy summarizes

- The world is a desert (9:4), a land of Egypt (7:141), a vale of tears (9:200; 13:127), a wretched place (12:330), that is weak and fragile (14:310).
- The achievements of the world are phantoms, illusions, and untruths (14:310), and its pleasures are vain (9:96, 177).
- Worldly occupations are base (16:213) and mere child’s play (14:381).
- Life in this world is paltry (16:213) and fraught with wretchedness (9:16; 14:395).
- Time in the world is ephemeral and perishable (16:78, 281) and merely a passage to eternity (14:381).

(10) Francis’ literary deprecation of the world derives from the traditional conception of the two spheres, sacred and profane. As Murphy argues,

It is not merely that he personally holds secular matters distasteful (17:90) and has never meddled in them (17:186); nor simply that he judges primarily from the point of view of spiritual profit (17:66) ... It is that, for him, the profane or the secular are subordinate to the sacred; his attitude to society and to the world is essentially sacral.
(11) The difference between life in the world and life in religion is even more sharply contrasted, particularly in his Sermons (X:58). This leads Murphy to conclude that however adamantly he insists that devotion is compatible with any walk of life, and that fulfilling the duties of that walk of life are essential to salvation, it is quite clear, nevertheless, that the religious life has his preference, that solitude is better than company (3:21). ... This goes to the heart of the matter: living in the secular world can be tolerated if one has rightful cause to be there, that is, if because of the social structure one is not free to leave the world. But once one has the freedom, there is no real option: response to the Christian calling demands withdrawal from the world. The lay state is a concession.8

(12) As a result, the Salesian view represents a clear disjunction between the “service of God” that characterizes the devout life and the affairs of the world that make up the secular life.

Though he realistically acknowledges the existence of the secular sphere as the existential situation in which most Christians are called to holiness, nevertheless, that situation and its activities are for him of no intrinsic value. ... Normal secular activity is not included in the service of God. Holiness continues to be attained, not per vocationem but in vocatione; the emphasis bears on the social situation as a framework, not on its content. The Christian is in the world, but in no sense of the world.9

(13) To bridge the gap, Salesian spirituality provides a dual approach to life in the world:

- stress on the individual’s state-in-life as the necessary framework for salvation;10
- adaptation for use in the world of the religious life of prayer.

Fr. Brisson’s “veritable idea”

(14) From Francis’ 17th century view of the world in relation to the Christian life – antithetical, at worst, or contextual, at best – we turn to the 19th century perspective of Fr. Louis Brisson, the founder of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales. Here we consider his foundational understanding of what the Oblates are to be and how they are to become that.

(15) In one of his letters, Fr. Brisson outlined the transformational character which the Oblates would have for their purpose:

The grand final goal, and the victorious means for reaching it (the way, the truth, and the life), would be devotion to Mary and the eucharistic worship, which would be the soul and the powerful resource for the priests of St. Francis de Sales in their apostolate. They would be apostles of the Incarnation and of the divine Transubstantiation.
(16) In that same letter, he also specified the proximate purpose the Oblates would have for their work in the world:

the dissemination into all classes of society (above all in the working classes) of the solid principles of the faith and of Christian virtues, by means of familiar teaching, preaching and retreats in the spirit and the gentleness of the holy Bishop of Geneva.\footnote{11}

(17) How this work was to be achieved constitutes Fr. Brisson’s “veritable idea of the Congregation” – its paradigm and normative image, as summarized and explained by Fr. Roger Balducelli.\footnote{12}

It takes the form of a commitment to society as it happens to be (“tel qu’elle est”), to the world as we see it (“tel que nous le voyons”).

It calls on the Oblates to leap into the very middle of that world (“au plein milieu”) and to do so with both feet at once (“à pieds joints”; “de plein pied”), that is, wholeheartedly, deliberately, unreservedly – a clean leap – and by the use of all available means (“par tous les moyens possibles”).

Contact with the world should take the form of an ongoing relatedness to it (“continuels rapports”). It must amount to an involvement (“nous mêler à lui”).\footnote{13}

(18) Even more starkly than Francis’ descriptions, Fr. Brisson speaks of “the world” as a rather unsightly place.

It is a large cesspool, a sewer (“un vaste cloaque”), a stagnant bog (“un étang de boue”). We can therefore expect that both the leap into it and the ongoing involvement in it will get us “a bit besplattered” (“quelque peu éclaboussés”).\footnote{14}

(19) Nevertheless, this involvement with the world, which for Fr. Brisson is a constitutive element of the life of this congregation, has a sacral purpose.

We leap into, and stay with, the world in order to make contact with it as it really is, in order to reach it (“l’atteindre”), gain influence over the workings of it (“nou en emparer”), then go on to decontaminate it (“l’assainir”), clean it up (“le nettoyer”), or, in Christian language, to save it (“le sauver”).\footnote{15}

(20) In sum, the life of the new Oblate congregation was to involve a social commitment rather than a withdrawal from the world. It was intended to be a religious life that was apostolic rather than monastic. Note, however, that this socially committed and apostolic life, while it necessarily involved wholehearted engagement with the world, nevertheless approached “the world” as a place to be transformed, in terms of faith principles, sacramental grace, and virtuous living.
Oblate Life and Work in Today’s “World”

(21) For St. Francis de Sales, the world may be where most folks live and work, but the devout life requires the practice of contrasting virtue. For Fr. Brisson, society remains in such a troublesome state that it needs the engagement of professed religious whose apostolic life is dedicated to transforming the world through the infusion of Christian principles. Now we turn to the world of the 21st century, a world in which Christian and religious life has been shaped by the teachings of Vatican II and the magisterium of John Paul II.

(22) Conciliar teaching at Vatican II promoted a positive and dynamic view of the world (Gaudium et Spes), one in which human activity is assumed into our understanding of God’s plan for the world, not merely in terms of our tolerating it, but as having a proper place therein. This same council also called for the renewal of religious life according to the founding charism of one’s congregation.

(23) Emboldened by this new understanding, and responding to the call for renewal, the Oblates undertook a revision of their Constitutions. Originally, the aim of the Oblates was described in terms that emphasized their own sanctification, which “through the practice of priestly and religious virtues would make them more effective when engaging in the sanctification of others.”

Constitution #1 – The members of the Institute, by placing themselves under the patronage of St. Francis de Sales, propose to practice the priestly and religious virtues, following the spirit of the holy Doctor.

(24) A draft edition (1966) of new Constitutions exhorted the Oblates to aim

- at “the imitation of Christ” (Art. 1, where “imitation” stands for “following”)
- at “the sanctification of the Church” (Art. 1)
- at “the consecration of the world” (Art. 4, where “consecration” is taken in a transactional sense)
- poised to respond to “the needs of the Church” and “of the world in which we live” (Art. 5).

(25) Later (1967-68), the General Chapter of the Oblates reduced the aim of the Congregation to a twofold work: the imitation of Christ and the service of the Church. The former was further specified in the particular approach of imitating St. Francis de Sales (construed as the living and disseminating of his teachings and as the prolongation of his work). The latter was to include “all the forms that the signs of the times will require.”
In a later redaction “the signs of the times” was replaced by “our age” (“notre époque”). Thus a pearl of eschatological language was lost, but the position remained the same: the Chapter pledged the Congregation to serve the Church by serving the world in which we live, and to do this by taking any initiatives called for by the needs of that world.\textsuperscript{19}

(26) In sum

... the Congregation opted to part company with a finality framed according to the model of “self-sanctification” and to cast its lot with discipleship and an all-encompassing availability to service.\textsuperscript{20}

(27) With the pontificate of John Paul II comes a magisterial emphasis on “culture” in relation to the Church’s life and work.

It must certainly be admitted that man always exists in a particular culture, but it must also be admitted that man is not exhaustively defined by that same culture. Moreover, the very progress of cultures demonstrates that there is something in man which transcends those cultures. This “something” is precisely human nature: this nature is itself the measure of culture and the condition ensuring that man does not become the prisoner of any of his cultures, but asserts his personal dignity by living in accordance with the profound truth of his being.\textsuperscript{21}

All people are part of a culture, depend upon it and shape it. Human beings are both child and parent of the culture in which they are immersed. To everything they do, they bring something which sets them apart from the rest of creation: their unfailing openness to mystery and their boundless desire for knowledge. Lying deep in every culture, there appears this impulse toward a fulfillment.\textsuperscript{22}

The greatest challenge of our era comes above all from a growing separation between faith and reason, between the Gospel and culture.\textsuperscript{23}

(28) The spirituality of St. Francis de Sales emphasizes devotion “in the world” while at the same time recoiling from its purely secular values in favor of Christian virtue. The spirituality of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales leads them to “leap” into society with wholehearted commitment to justice, but precisely for the purpose of transforming the world via Christian principles. In light of this tradition, how are Oblates today best able to approach and respond to the cultural divide that permeates our world?

(29) Even that world continues to change, and its effect on religious life is telling:

... consecrated life also experiences the insidiousness of mediocrity in the spiritual life, of the progressive taking on of middle class values and of a consumer mentality. The complex management of works, ... together with the temptations presented by efficiency and activism, run the risk of obscuring Gospel originality and of weakening spiritual
motivations. The prevalence of personal projects over community endeavors can deeply corrode the communion of brotherly and sisterly love. These are real problems which should not be taken lightly. Consecrated persons are not alone in living the tension between secularism and an authentic life of faith, between the fragility of humanity itself and the power of grace; this is the experience of all members of the Church.\footnote{24}

(30) The answer to the question of the Oblates’ relation to the world, it would seem, lies not in achieving worldly expertise (educational, sociological, psychological, managerial, etc.). Rather, in keeping with Francis de Sales’ sacral vision of religious life in relation to the necessary duties of life in the world, perhaps the Oblates need somehow to reaffirm the “prophetic witness” of their vowed and apostolic life:

> It is precisely in the simple day-to-day living that consecrated life progressively matures to become the proclamation of an alternative way of living to that of the world and the dominant culture. Given this style of life and the search for the Absolute, it suggests, as it were, a spiritual therapy for the evils of our time. Thus, it is a blessing and a reason for hope, in the heart of the Church, for human life and the very life of the Church.\footnote{25}

(31) What this “alternative way of living” means in the concrete is an open question. So, too, is the question of lay associations (third orders) affiliated with the Salesian/Oblate tradition, particularly as these would have to balance the Salesian disjunction between sacred and secular and the Salesian emphasis on living a devout life “in the world.”

The growing awareness of the universality of the call to holiness on the part of all Christians, far from making the belonging to a state of life particularly adapted to the realization of evangelical perfection superfluous can become an added motive for joy for consecrated persons. They are now closer to the other members of the People of God with whom they share a common path in the following of Christ, in a more authentic communion, in mutual respect, without being superior or inferior. At the same time this awareness challenges them to understand the sign value of consecrated life in relation to the holiness of all the members of the Church.\footnote{26}

(32) Perhaps this begins the next “turn” – in yet another new modulation of the Salesian/Oblate world!