The theme for this seminar – “Propagating the Salesian Spirit” – could be further specified in any number of ways, including who does this, how it happens, and what it entails. In this, the year in which we celebrate the centenary of the death of Fr. Louis Brisson, priest and founder of the Oblates and Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales, this paper derives from his insistence that the Spiritual Directory encapsulates the Salesian spirit and that the practice of the Directory effects its propagation.

Looking inwardly, to the character of the religious in his congregations, Fr. Brisson believes the Directory provides a distinctive identity. Comparing the Oblates to other Salesian congregations, he makes this claim:

What advantage have we over them? They do not have the Directory; consequently, they do not have the intimacy of the thought, life and spirit of the saintly Doctor. We, on the contrary, force ourselves to
convey and realize in ourselves the life of the Saint, his thought, his intentions, his conduct and manner of acting, his soul in its totality.

Looking outwardly, at the work which his religious are to accomplish, he prefers the Directory as a methodologically effective means of ministering to all. In fulfillment of Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis’ thought that our actions are to become those of the Savior, he tells the Oblates:

We are to employ ordinary means of operation, yes, but, shall we not join to them some particular methods? Yes ...

What methods? I say it aloud: the Directory. The Directory practiced by you, practiced by the souls whom you guide, by the complete, entire society in whose midst your influence is to be developed.¹

In his day, Fr. Brisson recognized that the Spiritual Directory contains and communicates the Salesian spirit in a privileged way. It still does today. Being succinctly and distinctively Salesian, while also thoroughly and effectively Christian, this under-appreciated work of Saints Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal offers a way to propagate the Salesian spirit in the world of the twenty-first century that is uniquely manageable and meaningful.

A Spiritual Gem

The Directory is nothing else than the ensemble of practical, concrete, daily means, practiced by St. Francis de Sales in order to sanctify himself and lead to perfection the souls whom he directed, a means which we must privilege in as much as we are direct heirs of his spirit.²

At first glance, this jewel given to us by St. Francis de Sales seems rather small, even fragmentary. Materially, the Spiritual Directory is but a short booklet, whose pages gather together a series of exercises that pertain to the “custom” of religious life.³ Unlike the other oeuvres of this Doctor of the Church, the Directory is neither a doctrinal exposition nor a spiritual treatise. Theologically, however, the Directory is all-encompassing, as “a practical code of sanctification which, to be well understood, demands to be meditated upon and, above all, lived.”⁴ It becomes, in practice, a way of life, “the daily route that Saint Francis de Sales

¹ The True Understanding of the Congregation according to Father Brisson. Texts of Father Brisson chosen by Father Roger Balducelli, O.S.F.S. for use by his conferes (Rome: Generalate, 1989), pages 31 and 73.
³ A. POCETTO, “The Spiritual Directory in the American Oblate Tradition” (unpublished) notes that “The Directory or Custom Book had a twofold purpose: (1) to give the Rule and the Constitutions of a particular order or congregation its specific and distinguishing characteristic, and (2) to create a common spiritual life that would transcend cultures and countries.” He adds that “A directory also listed the duties of a particular assignment in the monastery” (p. 1).
proposes to us so that we might not lose sight of our intended goal [union with God] nor
distance ourselves [along the way] from the Savior’s company.”

To liken this small, yet comprehensive, work to a “jewel” is to suggest that it has a
distinctive radiance. The sparkle with which it glistens is the aura of sanctity shining through
the lives of those who live by it. As such, the Directory should engender our admiration. Like
that diamond given on a special occasion to one who is beloved, it is also a valuable gift,
bequeathed to the Salesian family, that continues to live centuries after its patron saints. As a
former superior general of the Oblates exclaims, “(T)he Directory is not only the Founder’s [Fr.
Louis Brisson’s] gift to us [the Oblates and Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales]. Through us, it
is also his gift to the Church and to our world today.” Not only for vowed religious in the
Salesian family, but also for the laity who wish to live this spirituality in their own lives, the
Spiritual Directory is a fine gem, one that reveals the glamour of holiness to all who seek a life
of Christian perfection.

Diamond in the Rough?

Yet, like all jewels whose worth is primarily material, some see the Directory as merely
an accessory. Those who object to raising this tiny tract to the level of a privileged means of
propagating the Salesian spirit bias their views in three ways.

The first is a “marketing” bias. In this view, the Directory is too pithy a product on which
to build an entire spiritual tradition. Its brevity precludes any literary attractiveness, and its
simplicity renders it devoid of theological or spiritual ingenuity. This viewpoint asks whether it
would make more sense to propagate the Salesian spirit by means of other works more closely
associated with the saint and now readily available to the public.

That the Directory is small is without doubt. In fact, as Fr. Brisson points out to the
Oblates, there is found there only a few citations from Sacred Scripture, and nothing from the
Fathers of the Church, nor any systematic arguments in theology. Nevertheless, its content, in
terms of meaningfulness for a life of holiness, is no less substantive by these omissions:

Many great things do not appear very impressive. In fact, they may
seem rather insignificant. The Directory is a small book. But, for that
matter, so is the Gospel. Is it not one of the smallest books ever
written? Yet within it lies all of Christianity. Within it are all the marvels
of Christianity, all that has changed and saved the world. It is among
the greatest and most extraordinary of God’s works.

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8 L. Brisson, Commentary on the Spiritual Directory of St. Francis de Sales (Washington, DC: private distribution,
No doubt, other writings of St. Francis de Sales are more substantial. Unfortunately, however, they are not easily appropriated by the masses today. The *Introduction to the Devout Life* remains popular, even four hundred years after its original publication, but some today consider its language and references obsolete and, thus, in need of adaption for the modern reader. The *Letters* of spiritual direction are endearing and insightful, but their insights remain bound to the particular situation of the addressee, and old contexts may not be relevant today. And the *Treatise on the Love of God* is surely a masterpiece, but its richness is hard to grasp by most without additional and advanced study.

The second bias is a “sexist” one. One manifestation of this derives from the redactional history of the Directory and argues that this work comes chiefly from the hand of Jane de Chantal, not Francis de Sales, as if the former were somehow a lesser saint in the Salesian tradition. A second variation sees the exercises counseled in the Directory as pertinent only for the life of religious, a specialization and limitation that renders the Directory less useful as a means of propagating the Salesian spirit to the wider world.

That the Directory comes to us thanks to St. Jane de Chantal is without dispute; indeed, her efforts to collect all of her saintly companion’s writings and redact them as best the early Visitation sisters could, were nothing but frantic! As Fr. Gayet notes,

> After the death of her Blessed Father, the solicitude and ardor of St. Jeanne increased more: the most important (task) is to recover all that is possible of his writings in order to publish them, of his deeds and acts in order to put them at the disposition of future biographers, and to pursue the amendments and corrections of the custom book for the particular directives (which she designated sometimes by « the directory » sometimes by « the directories »).\(^9\)

Nevertheless, her frenzy need not be dismissed as engendering some sort of secondary importance. Given the oneness of heart and soul with which these two saints lived and worked, the results are no less Salesian coming from one than from the other. St. Jane defends this clearly in some of her letters to other monasteries. To Mother Marie-Hélène de Chastellux in Moulins, she writes:

> I wish to do nothing new or to put (in the directories) anything except what we have received from our Blessed Father and according to his intention; and even concerning several questions that were made of him, I have rendered them according to what I sense that he had done when I had spoken to him my little reason ....\(^{11}\)

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11 STE. JEANNE DE CHANTAL, Correspondence, II, 214, lettre 566 (13 juin 1623).
And to Mother Anne-Catherine de Beaumont in Paris, she writes:

My daughter, I would hate to ever change anything of that, for it is our Blessed Father who has arranged it, but I will send a writing of his, by which he teaches how it is necessary to serve oneself by the directory. You will see, God willing, that all will be well.\textsuperscript{12}

That the early Visitation appropriated the Directory as being theirs in direct continuity with the teaching of their saintly Founders leads one to consider it today a work quintessentially Salesian. That this living tradition has been expropriated by apostolic religious congregations, by the clergy in general, and by the laity demonstrates its more widespread appeal.\textsuperscript{13}

Finally, there is the “activist” bias, which also appears in two ways. Some say the Directory offers too much; its multiplicity of spiritual exercises comes on as an “avalanche of observances” that constrain the practitioner by its weight, even those who profess to live by it. For others, the Directory offers too little; it appears to be merely an adaptation of the more worthy works of the saint that risks becoming nothing more than a superficial piousness, useful, perhaps, for novices, but something to be abandoned if one wishes to enter fully into the religious life. In either case, it seems less meaningful, if not actually contrary to, the true spirit of Salesian devotion.

To this dual view, St. Jane de Chantal responds most directly. In a letter to a superior in 1623, she writes:

The spiritual Directory gives every liberty to follow one’s interior attraction. I admire that these good Fathers say we are constrained by our spirituality. Alas! In what, if it is that we are shown the true good, which can be acquired only by constraining and mortifying our passions and making the old man die.\textsuperscript{14}

Still, this viewpoint seems to have been widespread, which may explain why St. Jane would later include the substance of these thoughts, supplemented by similar comments written to Mother Favre, as a concluding article entitled “Advice on the Directory.” And the view persisted with time, as can be surmised by Fr. Brisson’s comments to Oblates in the early 1890’s:

How long must we practice the Directory to attain habitual union of the soul with God...? God knows. Some attain it much more easily than others, because grace acts more noticeably in them. I can only say that

\textsuperscript{12} STÉ. JEANNE DE CHANTAL, Correspondence, II, 239, lettre 580 (10 août 1623).


\textsuperscript{14} STÉ. JEANNE DE CHANTAL, Correspondence, II, 218, lettre 568.
if we practice our Directory very faithfully we shall certainly attain it sooner or later. After how long? Let’s not worry about that. And while we await this grace from God, let us practice our Directory well, even if we must practice it all our life and still be among the beginners. In this way, God will be continually united to us, and we shall be ever in His holy presence.15

In the end, however, the best counter-argument to these objections is rather simple: if one wishes to be holy, the Spiritual Directory works! If the Salesian spirit has for its goal the attainment of Christian perfection in the practice of the devout life, then the Directory is a sure and certain means. She who practiced it under the direct teaching of St. Francis de Sales expresses this with some strong passion and with characteristic Salesian humility in a circular letter to all the Sisters of the Visitation:

I pray you and entreat all of you in the name of God, my most dear Sisters, and by the reverence and holy dilection that we owe to the memory of our worthy Father and most honored founder, that you gravitate to the more intimate place of your hearts and observe faithfully the salutary documents that he has received from the Holy Spirit, and which he has left for us to lead our souls to the glory of eternal joy, which I wish for you with a total and most sincere affection, being your most humble, most obedient sister and servant in Our Lord.16

A Living Legacy

Whether for the Visitation Sisters or for the Oblate congregations or for all persons in the world, the Spiritual Directory discloses the spiritual legacy we call Salesian in as much as it encapsulates the life, thought, and spirit of the saintly Bishop of Geneva.

In his own life, Francis de Sales gave witness to the Directory. We see this in the “exercises” he formulated for himself while a student in Padua, some of which were later adapted for inclusion in the Directory. We also notice this in what appear to be the rather personal aspirations he chose to include in the Directory.

In his writings, Francis expanded on the simplified elements of the Directory in his theological masterpiece, the Treatise on the Love of God. As Fr. Fiorelli explains,

The goal of the whole sweep of the Treatise up to its central Book 9 is to convince Theotimus of three things. (1) The first is that we have been created precisely for union with God, our supreme Good. (2) Secondly, God truly desires our union with him in this life through grace and in the

15 BRISSON, Commentary, p. 88.
16 STE. JEANNE DE CHANTAL, Correspondence, II, 412, lettre 698 (21 juin 1624).
next life through glory. (3) Finally, Francis painstakingly shows Theotimus how to actually experience union with God through prayer and daily life. In Books 6 and 7 of the Treatise he teaches him all about prayer as affective union, greatly expanding upon what he taught Philothea. In Books 8 and 9 he teaches him how to practice effective union through the love of conformity, submission, or holy indifference to the divine will.  

And, in the theological perspective of this Doctor of the Church, the Directory synthesizes the entirety of his view of salvation history, from the Fall of mankind to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and our Redemption through His death and resurrection. As the saint wrote in a sermon for Good Friday (1622),

Assuredly, God could have redeemed us by a thousand other means than that of the death of his Son; but he had not willed to do so, because that which was sufficient for our salvation was not (sufficient) to satiate his love; and in order to show us how much he loves us, this divine Son dies a most rude and ignominious death, which is that of the cross. What remains, therefore, and what consequence can we draw from this, except that, since he died for us, we should die also out of love for him or, if we cannot die of love, that at least we should live only for him?

The Directory, then, encapsulates this living wish and delineates how we can put this mortifying and unifying love into practice in the daily moments of our lives. To do so is to live a devout life, four characteristics of which are hallmarks of the Salesian spirit:

Salesian devotion is universal. While the Directory does include exercises specific to religious life (e.g., formal Meditation, recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours), the majority of its articles pertain to moments in the daily life of anyone (e.g., rising, eating, retiring).

Salesian devotion is exercised in the ordinary events of life. In imitation of our Lord, this is realized by “spiritualizing the material” dimensions of our existence. As Fr. Gayet explains, “The humanity of the Word is the unique and obligatory instrument of salvation; it is necessary to go there by way of it. ... This is why St. Francis de Sales made such a big deal about the concrete realities of human life, of the little, daily actions, which are the best means of sanctifying ourselves, the best instruments of perfection.”

18 Oeuvres X:364.
19 BRISSON, Commentary, p. 25: “Why did the Savior come on earth? To accomplish the work of Redemption? Yes, of course, this is his crowning work, but it is not His only work. Now and always He continues to act among us! ... He is with us by His grace, by His sacraments, but also by this action of every instant.” Cf. 31-32.
20 BRISSON, Commentary, 24.
Salesian devotion begins with the *interior* dimension. Exercises aid us by forming habits, but of themselves they do not engender love. In the spiritual life, as Fr. Brisson comments, “It is never our exercise that obtains grace, but the disposition in which we make it.”

Salesian devotion leads to *exterior* action. The desire to love is fundamental to the spiritual life, but interior disposition must find its expression in action. As Fr. Brisson notes, “Our entire sanctification lies in what we do. It does not lie in our mind, in our imagination, in what we think or say. It is to be found in what we do.”

The life, thought and spirit of St. Francis de Sales that are the foundation of the *Spiritual Directory* become a vital and vibrant legacy in the life of the Visitation of Holy Mary. Later bequeathed to religious congregations in the Salesian tradition, the essential elements of this spirit have the potential to benefit people of all states-in-life who desire to grow in perfect love of God.

We know that the original idea for the Visitation was that they be established without solemn vows. What was to unite them was the single bond without which even religious vows would lose their force, namely, the bond of love, the bond of perfection, which stands as the very first “wish” of St. Francis de Sales expressed in the Directory:

*We have no bond but the bond of love, which is the bond of perfection. For stern as death is love, relentless as the nether world is devotion. How then could there be any bond stronger than the bond of love, which is the bond of perfection?*

This love, this “dilection” of which the saint speaks, is a personally chosen preference for God, which is the basis and motive for all other affections: “Love is the universal means of salvation which mingles with everything, and without which nothing is profitable,” as Francis writes in the *Treatise on the Love of God* (book 2, chapter 8). Still, this love is not limited to those in religious life. As Fr. Gayet explains, it is the affection that characterizes any and every Christian vocation, “since God must be loved by an intimate and sovereign friendship of preference, meaning for himself, above all and more than ourselves.”

We know, too, that the Visitation was to be characterized by a distinctly “hidden” life. As Francis wrote, “the true spirit of our poor Visitation is to hold itself strongly abject and small, and of not esteeming itself except in as much as it pleases God to see its abjection .... Let it hold itself among the Congregations as the violets among the flowers, base, small, of a less clear color, and it suffices that God has created it for his service, so that it would give a bit of good fragrance in the Church.”

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22 *BRISSON, Commentary*, 27.
23 *BRISSON, Commentary*, 62.
25 *OEUVRES* XVI:236.
This hidden life, this flowering of love through a virtuous life in the midst of the vicissitudes of human existence, is what the Directory intends to actualize, as is expressed at its very beginning:

_The intention of our holy Father [Francis de Sales] was that our whole life and all our works be dedicated to union with God, so that we might assist in the renewal of the Church and the salvation of our neighbor by our prayer, works and good example, and that we might excel in every kind of virtue._

The “hidden life” intended here is the same way of life by which the Church acts in the world today. As such, the Salesian spirit, contained in and communicated by the Directory, holds much promise also for the spiritual growth of the present generation.

**The Salesian Spirit in Practice**

Recalling that for Fr. Brisson the preferred methodology for disseminating the Salesian spirit, which itself is a distinctive embodiment of the doctrine of the Savior, is the practice of the Directory, we now consider briefly the two areas in which this is to take place, two groups forming concentric circles. The one is internal to the Salesian family, those who actually belong to the tradition by formal affiliation or direct ministerial attention. The other is external and includes those potentially affected by this Salesian spirit.

Looking inwardly, we must realize that the necessary first step in propagating the Salesian spirit is for those who have professed, in some way, to make it their own. With reference to the congregation he founded, Fr. Brisson pulls no punches when speaking of this necessity: “Without the Directory, there can be no Oblate. ... The Directory is the mould that must form us .... The study of this little book, therefore, should be our continual preoccupation.”

Commenting on the psychological key to the entire Directory, he asserts that “For the Oblate of St. Francis de Sales, direction of intention is a powerful means of sanctification – I shall even say, it is the only means.”

As for the Oblate mission to disseminate this tradition via their ministries, an apostolate which he claims is “more complete ... than the ordinary apostolate,” Brisson adduces two principles of guidance. The first concerns the Salesian spirit. Our goal, he says,

> is to reach the greatest number of souls and to reach them as completely as possible. Our goal is to preserve these souls in our way of

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26 **Brisson, Commentary,** iv.
27 **Brisson, Commentary,** 30.
28 **Balducelli,** _True Understanding of the Congregation_, 85.
life, to make them participate as fully as possible in our patrimony and
our riches, namely, the spirit of St. Francis de Sales.

The centerpiece of that patrimony, the jewel of jewels among those riches, is the *Spiritual
Directory*: “Our Holy Founder (St. Francis de Sales) has outlined for us a direct and sure way,
the Directory. This Directory is our means, our raison d’etre, and it gives us our own particular
stamp or trademark.”

The second principle dictates how to fulfill the first. Here Fr. Brisson speaks of the need
for an “exterior directory” – that is, for practicing the Directory so well that the Oblates will
exude its spirit in all their actions. The reciprocal principle is rather simple: “Nothing makes us
cherish what we do more than doing it well. We do well what we love to do, and the proof that
we love what we do is that we do it well.” Here one may note that older versions of the
*Spiritual Directory* included supplemental articles on “how to” accomplish specific tasks, such as
celebrating Mass and administering the sacrament of Penance.

Nevertheless, for the fulfillment of this mission in the twenty-first century, it would be
beneficial to consider anew how to share the *Spiritual Directory* in the specific situations of
religious and apostolic life today. For example, how might the Directory be incorporated in
programs of formation for diocesan priests, which both Francis de Sales and Fr. Brisson were?
Further, how might the Directory be taught in Oblate or Visitation schools or adapted to the
multifaceted life of a parish? Finally, how might the content of the Directory, whose form
currently relates to religious orders and congregations, be adapted to lay societies that have
Francis de Sales as their patron?

Beyond the specifically “Salesian” groups, whether religious or lay, the practice of the
Directory has the possibility to influence the broader society. In a culture which evidences a
religious longing yet is characterized by individualism and relativism, the *Spiritual Directory*
provides a worthwhile antidote, as its author states in the preface:

*This book will prove bitter to your interior, for it will lead to the perfect
mortification of your self-love. It will, on the other hand, be sweeter
than honey in your mouth because there is no consolation equal to that
of mortifying our self-love in order to let live and reign in us the love of
him who died for love of us.*

In a culture that longs for hope and seeks for joy, the practice of the *Spiritual Directory*
leads to inner peace and tranquility. “The fruit of the Directory is peace of soul,” says Fr.

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29 *Brisson, Commentary*, 16.
30 *Brisson, Commentary*, ii.
31 *Brisson, Commentary*, 90. Cf. p. 34: “Let us not forget that we are obliged not only to do our duty, but to do it
well; we must not only accomplish the various ministries that have been entrusted to us. We must accomplish
them in the spirit we are striving to attain and for the attainment of which God gives us grace.”
Brisson, “a spirit resting in God without worry or indecision.” The lives of the saints formed by the Directory – from Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal, to the numerous Visitandines, and hopefully one day to Mary de Sales Chappuis and Louis Brisson – all attest to the power and efficacy of this spiritual gem.

Finally, in a culture enamored of “self-help” processes and personages, each of whom seeks to move people away from the dysfunctional to the mainstream, the *Spiritual Directory* goes even further, leading its practitioners from the secular to the sacred, from the natural to the supernatural. Its “mystique” responds to that natural inclination shared by all people to do more and better, with the practical truth that getting there requires grace. The informative and formative power of this jewel is summed up well by Fr. Roger Balducelli, in reference to the “advice” that St. Francis de Sales first wrote to Mother Jacqueline Favre and later included as part of the text of the Directory.

St. Francis de Sales displays in that text a pedagogical understanding of the Directory. He sees in it a pedagogical strategy tested and well calculated to lead those who make it their own to the love of God. This is its role. And since Salesian spirituality is nothing but a quest for the love of God, the Directory enjoys within the economy of that spirituality a privileged status. It brings it to fruition. From the level of conception and speech it moves the spiritual doctrine to the level of existence by making that which the spiritual discourse is about a modification of that which the discourse is for, namely, a modification of consciousness and life.

Achieving this modification is the fulfillment of that universal call to holiness by which the faithful are to live in the world. The practice of the *Spiritual Directory* is its Salesian means. To share this jewel of perfection with the Church today – by modeling it ourselves, by conveying it to others, and by adapting it to new forms of ecclesial life – is how we best propagate the Salesian spirit.

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32 Brisson, *Commentary*, ii.