something sacred:
The Real Contribution of Salesian Spirituality for Our Virtual Culture

Preface

In his opening remarks, Fr. Provincial noted that he would not, or could not, speak to you for sixty minutes, as the schedule suggests. But he did give that task to me! So let me get right to it.

Way back when, at the time that we were planning this retreat, there was a great hullabaloo about a television show that was airing on ABC called Nothing Sacred. You'll recognize the obvious allusion to it in the title of our retreat. Since then, for better or worse, the show has been canceled. Hopefully, you won't wish the same fate upon this presentation!

But, there's no need to worry. I have no intention of offering some theological review of this program in objection to its moral or pastoral perspectives. (After all, I only saw one episode, and it was boring enough not to elicit further viewing.) I do, however, have a problem with the assumption that underlies the show, the assumption that in our present culture, the interaction of religion and society is denigrated to the point where it is popular to think that "nothing" is to be taken as "sacred."

For it is my conviction, and the basis for this retreat, that we as Oblates do, indeed, have "something sacred" to offer to our world - namely, the charism of Salesian Spirituality which has been entrusted to us to disseminate to others through our ministries. Even more so, I believe that we as Oblates are "something sacred" - as religious consecrated to a life that embodies this spirituality. These are my basic assumptions. It will be the purpose of our gathering this week to
demonstrate the truth of these positions so as to re-appropriate this conviction in our life and work in the new millennium. [Hence, the sub-title of this opening talk - *the real contribution of Salesian Spirituality for Our Virtual Culture.*]

And it is good that we gather here for a "retreat" more so than a "convocation." It seems like years since we've done so! We've spent a great deal of time pursuing our corporate reflections for the purposes of "planning" and it was good that we did so. Yes, we have to come to grips with the reality of declining numbers in our midst. Yes, we must face the practical necessity that tough choices will have to be made concerning the future of some of our apostolates. But the success of this pragmatic planning ultimately falls to us as individuals, for our future, individually and collectively, is ultimately a personal matter. For this reason we need to re-appropriate the spirit that has brought each of us to this life and this work. It is why we need to re-examine the very reason for being which has brought the Oblates into existence and will carry us into the new millennium. And this is the stuff of the soul, not financial projections. It is a matter of consciousness, not numerical analysis. And in all this we have every reason to be hopeful, if we would but take to heart the counsel of our saintly patron: "The same Everlasting Father who cares for [us] today will take care of [us] tomorrow, and every day."

Now, while this maxim certainly rings true, and "optimism" is a key feature of our spirituality, it has often been said that the success of our future endeavors is dependent, in the final analysis, upon the ability and willingness of each one of us as individuals. Are we "able" to do the jobs that existing or even new ministries will entail? Are we "willing" to change and adapt to the future needs of the Church and the Congregation? To my mind, these are critical questions, not just because of the practical implications which their answers will yield for ministerial placements. Much more important, I believe, is the underlying phenomenon that causes us to ask the questions in the first place. That phenomenon is our sense of the sacred and its place and function in our own lives as individuals and as a religious community. In other words, our "willingness" to adapt to the signs of our times depends on the depth of our appreciation of the "sacred" in our own lives.

This is why I would like to suggest the following as a "goal" of our retreat:

*that we move beyond a shallow "optimism" toward a deeper renewal of our personal "willingness" to embrace and bear witness to our Salesian heritage as the first and foundational step in the effort of collaborative dissemination of our charism.*

To reach this goal, we aim to discover, yet again, that "something" that is "sacred" about us and that will inform our apostolic work in a changing culture. And that is why we have gathered together here on retreat. The speakers this week will address the influence of the "sacred" in a variety of settings: in our thoughts, our feelings, our relationships, and our ministries. And there will be ample opportunity to spend some quiet time reflecting on these presentations, which I invite and encourage you to do.

To begin now to explore this topic, I'd like to say a few introductory words, in three parts, about the fundamental conviction of Salesian spirituality - namely, that (1) in a culture where there
appears to be *nothing sacred*, (2) our charism offers *something sacred*, by which to transform our lives and our work (3) so that *everything* might become *sacred*.

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**Nothing Sacred**

While I'd like to speak about our contemporary "pop" culture, I certainly don't intend to articulate a detailed, phenomenological analysis of it ... after all, I only have sixty minutes! Rather, I want briefly to offer a general description of it and highlight some of its identifying features. Why? Because the culture in which we find ourselves provides the environment within which we live and work; it affects us even when we are not consciously aware of its influence. The extent to which this is true is nicely summarized in one of this month's issues of *U.S. News & World Report*:

> Popular culture is the very oxygen of our collective life. It glues together affinities. ... It saturates everyday conversation. ... It overlaps with politics. It circulates the materials with which people splice together identities. It forms the imagescape and soundtrack through which we think and feel about who we are or ... who we wish to be and fear we might become.

As a general context for our reflections, let us consider the rise of "postmodernism." Actually, the tag of "post-" something or other has been used in many ways to describe aspects of our contemporary age. Introducing a recent theological study, Terrence Tilley puts it this way:

> Manifestos appear with disheartening regularity, announcing that our era is postmodern, postchristian, postreligious, postcolonial, postindustrial, postideological, postmoral, postanalytic, postliterate, postnarrative, postauthorial, postpersonal, poststructuralist, postliberal, etc. Moral theorists situate us *after* virtue or *after* Babel. Philosophers theorize *beyond* objectivism and relativism. Sociologists construe modern culture as beyond belief. Christian theologians move far beyond theism. Contemporary theologians write *after* Freud, *after* Wittgenstein, *after* Auschwitz, *after* Christendom, *after* the death of God. The signpost marking our age is the "post" sign.

While this linguistic moniker may be appealing in terms of socio-cultural correctness, it also suggests a reality that is not so comfortable. Tilley announces this troubling truth:

> A paradox stamps each post-age. Each distances our present from our past. ... A "post"-age is a paradoxical age, an unstable era, both denying and affirming the present power of the past. ... For the post-age signifies where we've been. It does not signify where we are. Nor does it point to where we're going. ... In a post-age, the future is indeterminable and invisible, and the past paradoxically both dismissed and kept. Hence, ambiguity about where we've come from, uncertainty about where we are, and suspicion of where we're going are connected in every post-age.
This ambiguity, uncertainty, and suspicion have already affected us, in as much as they underlie our recent planning process. In one sense, they are the very reasons for undertaking the planning process, because they seem to represent a threat to our continued existence. In another sense, they are the focus of the planning process, the matters with which we must come to grips in order to ensure our stability as a province. In light of this confrontation with the postmodern culture, any hope we express with regard to where we're going can only come from a sureness about where we are. Yet, in the end this certainty, itself, has to fall back upon a clear understanding of where we've come from. It is this last piece - the past as it informs our present and stabilizes our future - that I wish to focus upon this evening.

In this postmodern age, two characteristics that stand out as defining our culture are those of "absence" and "simulation." The first suggests a problem, indeed a crisis. Social theorists bemoan the fact that, broadly speaking, today's culture suffers from the lack of a common cause or movement, and, too, the lack of a stand-out leader or hero.

Much of [the current] generation's antipathy to grand social movements comes from opposition to the idealism of the baby boomers in the 1960s. ... One generation's gain was another's loss; whereas the previous generation saw huge advances, our generation witnessed many disappointments. Propelled by mighty ideals, the baby boomers undertook organized social actions. In contrast, my generation inherited not free love but AIDS, not peace but nuclear anxiety, not cheap communal lifestyles but crushing costs of living, not free teach-ins but colleges priced for the aristocracy. [5]

Or, to put it in terms familiar to me as a college professor, this "crisis of absence" is evident in students' lack of interest in things intellectual. In an article published last week in The Sunday Times in London, it was reported, with not untypical British insolence, that "Students who prefer Homer Simpson, the cartoon character, to Homer, the Greek epic poet, are seen as contributing to the much lamented 'dumbing down' of American culture." [6]

More specifically, the current crisis of absence is the result of a burgeoning problem that we face in our ministry. And that is the fact of the increasing rates of divorce and deterioration of the traditional family. For those who come from this socially debilitating situation, the absence of a parent is a tragic lesson for life: "With about half of all marriages breaking up in the 1980s, [this generation] not only personally learned about the fragility of commitment but were also forced into a premature - and untutored - adulthood." [7] In turn, this fragile upbringing contributes to an ever-widening suspicion about all cultural institutions and their potential for meaningfulness in the future.

In terms of the Oblate situation, the current "crisis of absence" reveals itself in the lack of vocations to our own ranks. Absence, it seems, leads to a suspicion of institutions and the questioning of all authority. So, apparently, something is missing, something is absent, that prevents the choice of a religious life from being seen as a viable option for many young men. To put it simply, the prospect of being "bound" to the vowed life in religious community does not betoken an enthusiastic response.
A second characteristic of the postmodern age is its culture of simulation. Besides the changes taking place in the family, that which has had a tremendous, dare we say defining, impact on our culture is the television set. One recent analysis puts it in this way:

Television's ubiquity makes it a pop-culture version of the air we breathe. It is hardly news that this medium's programming has been influential -- superseding school, and sometimes even the family, as the major influence on our social and moral development.\[^{4}\]

In fact, the full range of "video" media (cable TV, video gaming, the Internet, etc.) enables viewers easily to cross the line back and forth between the "real" and the "virtual." For instance, I recall the story my mother tells of the dear nuns at the convent where she works. The convent is for sisters who require medical care, and so all of the wards there are wired for sound. During Mass this particular day, one of the sisters was offering a litany of intentions: for Joanna and her recent divorce, for Todd who was diagnosed with a rare disease, for Bill and his employment problems, for Diana and her suicidal sister, etc. These names and situations sounded familiar to my mother, but she couldn't place the people. And then it occurred to her ... they were all the characters on one of the current soap operas on TV! God bless the dear nun -- her reality contacts may not have been too strong, but her prayers, even for these simulated needs, were still fervent!

As Oblates, this culture of simulation affects us in terms of our public identity. Yes, we've created a mission and a vision and even a "tag line" that says we do ordinary things extraordinarily well. But our identity has to be much more than a marketing strategy. For the only thing that will make this identity "real" is what inheres in us as persons who live what the Oblates are.

The crisis of absence and culture of simulation that mark our postmodern age are quite evident in the signs of the times that have come to distinguish the culture of youth known as Generation X. Some of their fascinations reveal novel trends.\[^{5}\] Their source of entertainment is MTV, which combines an instant of music with a frame of film, and thus limits the attention span to a matter of minutes. Their choice of fashion is the unkemptness of grunge, the battle look of fatigues, or the penetrating marks of body piercing, all of which bespeak a certain image of themselves and makes of themselves a conflicting image for the world (an "ascetic aesthetic"). Their facility with computers fuels the world of cyberspace, an information highway which "appears as a powerful technological bridge between the ephemeral and the eternal."

There are other signs of this generation, as well, signs of the "de-generation" of a way of life. Many are the pathological trends that affect our younger generation in ways that lead to despair:

Assuming that we can identify a generation born in the 1960s and 1970s that has a common bond to popular culture, recent social and economic history tells us that such a generation has many challenges to confront. ... For instance ... a decline of real wages and an increase in the length of the average workweek over the past twenty-five years; an increase in young adult poverty and a concomitant decline of real income; the devastation of AIDS, the top killer of Xers in many cities; the continued socioeconomic crises of many minority communities, particularly of young African American men; continuing
crises of divorce and suicide; overqualification of college graduates for available jobs; unacceptable levels of violence in schools and neighborhoods; a steady drumbeat of drug abuse; and a high percentage of young adults without health insurance.\(^{(10)}\)

While we Oblates may not count ourselves as members of this Generation X, we cannot help but be affected by this culture. Were we to ask others, or ourselves, what are the signs and images of "the OSFS Generation," the question would not be so easy to answer. It has been our heritage not to be characterized by something exterior to us. We have no specific ministry (as the Jesuits are known for education), nor any distinguishable lifestyle (as the Franciscans are known for their poverty). While this fact makes it difficult to identify us, in terms of recruitment, or to promote us, in terms of development, these realities need not lead us to despair. On the contrary, the "interior" focus of our charism is intentional. It is a hallmark of Salesian spirituality that devotion flows from the heart and informs whatever we do. And so, it is of vital urgency and importance that we renew this interior focus ... hence, our retreat.

This is not to say that the postmodern age of Generation Xers is unconcerned with things interior. Faith is perennially important, but it has taken a strange turn. We might even say that belief in the present age is a matter of "virtual" faith. No better example of this can be offered than the diva of postmodern religion, the pop singer known (ironically!) as Madonna. One of her tremendously successful songs is entitled "Like a Prayer." In its video version we see the irreverent religiosity of today's generation, as it seeks to fuse the sensual and the spiritual.\(^{(11)}\)

When faith is thus portrayed, religion as we know it is rendered disposable. Faith through an organized church is met with cynicism: "Churches seemed laughably out of touch; they had hopelessly droll music, antediluvian technology, retrograde social teaching, and hostile or indifferent attitudes toward popular culture."\(^{(12)}\) To put it in stark terms, let me quote to you an advertisement for a new Theology text from Paulist Press, which claims that "Losing your religion is just one necessary obstacle on the road to a holistic spirituality."

Thus, the cultural situation in which we find ourselves today seems antithetical to things spiritual. Or, to put it in somewhat more positive terms, the role of the Spirit in today's world seems to have changed. Our world gives evidence of a fragmented culture, where "ambiguity becomes the norm rather than the exception; experiencing the moment and determining its meaning overshadow any longer view."\(^{(13)}\) In this world, folks tend to ask only one "spiritual" question:

... the religious quest of GenX pop culture ... begins on the most intimate level and in the midst of profound ambiguity. Our most fundamental question is "Will you be there for me?" We ask this of our selves, bodies, parents, friends, partners, society, religions, leaders, nation, and even God. The frailty that we perceive threatening all of these relationships continually provokes us to ask this question.\(^{(14)}\)

Let me now draw this section to a close by raising a different spiritual question. In light of our postmodern culture, with its absence of stability and simulated reality, and in view of a virtual faith which focuses on personal meaning rather than the God of religion, the question is this: *What claims your love?* It is a question that goes to the very core of who we are and what we do.
It is a question that intimates a world of the sacred. It is a question that we need to ask of ourselves again as we seek to move forward into the new age of the 21st century. As we shall now see, it is a question whose answer has been given to us in another time and another place.

Something Sacred

The other time and place to which I allude is that of St. Francis de Sales. It is the age of Christian Humanism which, with its Renaissance sacrality, is quite different from the postmodern era. There we find not the instability of social institutions, but the flourishing of human endeavors. There we find not a sociology of despair, but one of hope, supported by the new and exciting discoveries being made. There we find not a focus on the momentary and fragmented, but an appreciation of the full span of history and of the place of human beings in the unfolding of the drama of life in this world.

And yet, while that bygone era may seem to be a fertile source for understanding the sacred, a curious fact emerged in my research for this little talk. When I scanned the index to the writings of Francis de Sales, I could not find a single reference to "the sacred." Perhaps my French is a bit rusty! Or, as I surmise, that notion of the "sacred" was not, in those days, a philosophical topic, one to be contrasted with the profane in some sociological analysis. Rather, I suspect that the "sacred" was something assumed, something acknowledged as already there in the universe that enveloped the world as they, and we, know it. In this sense, let me now shift from our talk about the "sacred" as a cultural characteristic to an examination of two experiences of the "sacred" -- namely, that of St. Francis de Sales and of Fr. Louis Brisson. The stories will be familiar to you all. Yet, despite my broad jump across the centuries, I hope to show by this re-telling of them that there is, indeed, "something sacred" that is peculiar to us as Oblates.

To speak of something sacred in the life of St. Francis de Sales, let us turn our attention to his days as a student in Paris. There, you will recall, the young Francis endured a terrible "crisis" of one sort or another. The source of this crisis, so formative in one so young, has been much debated. It may have been something "literary," in the sense that students then had begun to read the concrete and real experiences of patristic writings rather than the abstract and purely logical treatises of the medievalists. Or, it may have been a "devotional" crisis, in that the young Francis' familial fervor and piety were here being called into question in light of the raging theological debates on predestination. Then again, Francis' crisis may simply have been a "psychological" problem, in the sense that his conscience was so severely troubled by that debilitating anxiety about which he would later write.

Whatever the cause, the fact that Francis suffered some grave torment is undisputed. We might say, in summary, that his crisis was similar to, though more starkly evident than, the question we raise today. It was a matter of his own "willingness" -- his willingness to grapple with real life experience, to question what had always been assumed, to wrestle with his own humanness as compared with the incomparable ideal that is God.
The key element in this story is not where Francis' crisis originated. It is how he came to deal with it. The key to his development, as it will be to ours, is the decision he made. Listen again to the words of his own prayer before the black Madonna, Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance:

> Whatever may happen, O God, you who hold all things in your hand, whose ways are justice and truth, whatsoever you may have decreed concerning me in the eternal secret of your predestination and reprobation, you whose judgments are unfathomable, you who are ever Just Judge and Merciful Father, I will love you always, O Lord, at least in this life! At least in this life will I love you, if it is not given me to love you in eternity!

In a moment of grace, Francis must have experienced the sacred. And with these words of his submission, he resolves the dilemma of his life. As one of his biographers explains it, Francis "overcame his 'saintly craving' for God by transcending it completely." His life was changed forever ... and he was only 19 years old!

From this decision we see the foundation for that optimism that has come to characterize Salesian spirituality. Yet, as Lajeunie rightly points out, Francis's hopeful vision of the future is not at all shallow.

His optimism is not based on the worthiness of human nature, even when sanctified by grace. ... Pure hope, founded on God's mercy alone, is a corollary of pure love, the love that loves God for Himself and the universe in God.\(^{(17)}\)

In other words, Francis' view for the world is constructed on his own experience of the sacred. Of course, we cannot offer any further analysis of this experience or details about it. But we do know what came from it: a life of pastoral service and theological erudition characterized by a spirit of humility and gentleness, of simplicity and optimism ... a life which we are now called to share.

And now I make that historical jump, across the centuries, to the time and place of Fr. Brisson. His story of the sacred is a bit different than that of St. Francis de Sales. It is more extended -- having taken him some forty years to realize that what was calling for his response was indeed something sacred. It is also more dramatic -- and has been reported to us as such. It is the story of his collaboration with the Good Mother, Mary de Sales Chappuis, in the founding of our own congregation.

Let it be acknowledged with frankness and candor that at first, and in fact for a long while, this something did not seem so sacred to Fr. Brisson. As his biographer, Fr. Dufour, sets the scene,

> ... when the Good Mother broached the question of founding priests under the auspices of St. Francis de Sales, the chaplain withdrew into complete silence and stubborn resistance. Absorbed in his personal studies of theology and science, and already burdened with extensive ministry while being deprived of material resources and external influence, he was - above all - a lover of his independence. He was unwilling - at any price - to submit to the influence of a woman - as holy as she was - or to devote himself to a work for which he saw neither the goal nor the means to achieve that goal.\(^{(18)}\)
That should not seem so out of place to us. Do we not sometimes find ourselves absorbed in our own personal ways? Are we not similarly burdened with the many works demanded of us in the name of ministry? Is not the unwillingness to engage the novel and the unknown but a natural reaction for any of us?

But the story does not end there. The dialogue (and the action of grace) continues, like this:

Fr. Brisson: "Never, Mother, will I bring myself to do what you are proposing to me!"

Good Mother: "But if God leads you to it?"

Fr. Brisson: "Well, then, Mother, since you go that far, I declare to you that nothing will make me bend, even were I to see a dead man restored to life!"

And then it happened. Something sacred breaks forth, there in that simple parlor at the Visitation monastery in Troyes:

Without another word, the Good Mother withdrew, leaving the chaplain in a state of understandable exasperation. Suddenly, behind the grille, Our Lord appeared; His look was severe, his gesture imperative. Totally unnerved, the priest wanted to believe himself the victim of an hallucination, and coldly - for several minutes - he examined, in the minutest details, the mysterious vision. The more he studied it, the more undeniable the reality became, the more the divine will appeared manifest to him; and also the more a celestial peace and a radiant confidence invaded his soul. Then he prostrated himself in adoration and acquiescence to the eternal plans.[19]

That acquiescence, as we know, led to a new generation ... us, and the many Oblates of St. Francis de Sales who preceded us and who will follow us. It, too, was an action borne by one man's experience of the sacred. It, too, is not something that we can analyze further - except to say that it could only be the work of a divine Spirit, that same divine Spirit that continues to infuse the life of this religious congregation.

These two stories, as I noted before, are well known to us. They are, in their different times and places, two different stories. Yet, if we look to both of them, we can see in these very personal experiences the evidence of a real, and not merely virtual, faith. In fact, it is only through faith that we can make sense of them, as only through faith the two participants could make sense of them.

In both of these experiences of the sacred, real faith is something that goes beyond knowledge, something that exceeds the boundaries of comprehension limited by our minds. For Francis de Sales, the confusion over the matter of predestination was never fully resolved on the intellectual level; he would continue to grapple with this in his later studies at Padua.[20] For Fr. Brisson, the matter of "giving in" to the dreams of this nun was something that would gnaw at his male bearing for years to come, as evidenced in his later dialogue with Pope Leo XIII.[21] And yet, both of these men "knew" that their lives, and their future, had changed irreversibly.
This transformation was the result of their experience of the sacred, a "limit" experience that pertains more to the heart and soul than to the head. In some way, each of them was grasped by the divine; each was claimed by a love that could only be supernatural. This we know not by means of scientific analysis, but by the fruits of their lives. They were able to accomplish all that they would precisely because of this sacred experience.

As such, it would not be too much of a stretch to claim that these events, these singular experiences, were for each of these men defining moments in their lives. But we might be quick to add that these experiences are unusual, the stuff of saints, if you will, and not something that is easily to be shared by the likes of common religious like us. Certainly I would concede this point to those who might so object. But let me suggest two ways in which we might begin to appropriate a similar experience in our own time and place.

On the one hand, we could take a nostalgic approach. Each of us, I surmise, could look backward in time to the beginnings of our own vocation. No matter the number of years, each of us could remember that at some point in our own lives the voice of the sacred called to us and beckoned us to step into an unknown future. If we give it just a modicum of thought, we know that what we answered had to be a "divine" call -- after all, we're sitting here today!

But there is another way to share an experience of the sacred, one that is repeatable whenever and wherever we give it the attention of our heart and soul and not just our mind. And that is the eschatological approach that looks forward, that seeks to grasp the future so as to give meaning to the present. And what we look forward to (in time, not necessarily in anticipation) is the experience of our death. A proverb I came across in reading last week puts it quite succinctly: \textit{When we know how to die, then we learn how to live.}

For our patron and our founder, this dictum rings true. The young Francis de Sales confronted his death, and the potential for eternal damnation, head on. And in this experience he chose not to give in but to give up -- to give up his own preference and his own will out of love for God. And this experience of optimistic abandonment would underscore all that he later said and did. His pastoral dealings would reflect his own experience of being loved by God, and his writings would reiterate for all this sacred story of love. For Fr. Brisson, too, an experience of death was to be known - the death of his own inclinations and aversions. We see how well he learned this lesson of detachment when, following the expulsion of the Oblates from France at the time of the Revolution, he was known to say (in words reminiscent of my favorite biblical character!): "God has given me all. God has taken all from me; may His holy name be blessed!"

Would that we, too, learn from these two experiences. It certainly is not an easy thing to do, and on the surface confronting our own deaths is an act of the mind that lacks any sensible appeal. But when we come to question this ultimate reality, both as individuals and collectively, then we might share a common experience of the sacred and learn again what is to be the foundation of our lives -- our own willingness to commend our spirits and our works and our lives into the loving hands of our good and gracious God. Fortunately for us, we have at hand a ready-made means for doing just this, and one that will enable us to turn something sacred into everything sacred.
Everything Sacred

These two episodes from the narrative history of our Salesian heritage suggest that a "visionary" experience is woven into the very fabric of who we are. And that experience is recorded for our posterity, and our practice, in the *Spiritual Directory*, whose preface forms the basis for this final section of my presentation.

The context for appreciating the *Spiritual Directory* is the biblical vision of the prophet and the evangelist, Ezekiel and John. Focusing for now on the former, we can look to the prophetic narrative (Ezekiel 2:8 - 3:3) to shed some light on the intent of the *Spiritual Directory* and its import for us who have inherited it.\(^{(25)}\)

To understand Ezekiel's vision, we must acknowledge something about the person of the prophet. *Ezekiel* -- the name means "God strengthens" and we know that, in our view of the world from below to above, life as a prophet certainly required the strength of God. We acknowledge these courageous and heroic bearers of God's word as persons enjoying a special divine grace.

Yet, interestingly enough, in this narrative, God never calls the prophet by this name. Rather, God refers to him as *Son of Man* -- a term which emphasizes the person's mortality, his finiteness in the order of things. Perhaps the implicit suggestion is that we should likewise look upon ourselves as before God, to see us as God sees us, from above to below, and always to keep in mind our very real finitude.

The setting for this vision of the Son of Man is that of the Babylonian Exile. There Ezekiel is in his thirtieth year (1:1), concluding, as it were, the time of apprenticeship for priestly service.\(^{(26)}\) Yet, in the land of the Exile, this young apprentice may be ready to become a full-fledged priest, but there is no Temple in which he might fulfill his sacral duties. For him and for his nation, this solitary situation calls into question some fundamental truths. Where is the divine reality to be found, for it is no longer uniquely present in the Temple? What value of the priesthood is to be held, if the place of their practice is in shambles? The former question is one on the lips of our postmodern generation; the latter question might also be on our own!

In this setting, the vision of Ezekiel is drawn toward the hand of God holding out the *scroll*. As a product of writing, this message is something decreed, coming, as it were, directly from the hand of God. So, too, it is a fixed writing, something already determined as in the divine judgment to come. Finally, it is a complete work, written *front and back* and, thus, filling the scroll.

Strangely enough, the prophet is commanded to *eat* this scroll. Such a strange request, but not unusual in the world of prophetic experience. The act of eating the scroll is often interpreted as a means of receiving the message, where the prophet would thus be taking unto himself the revelation that God holds forth. But the divine command is not directed to the prophet's ears, as the receptacle of a message, or to his heart, as the place to embrace it. Rather, to eat implies the stomach - and putting papyrus down there is not a pleasant prospect! In this light, the command to eat the scroll is voiced as a test of the would-be prophet's obedience to God.
By fulfilling the command to eat the scroll, Ezekiel becomes a prophet. His place in this sacred fraternity is legitimated by this divinely ordained portent. His former identity as a priest is finally cast off, and his new identity as a prophet is incorporated through this experience of the sacred.

But more than a vocational sign, eating the scroll is, for the new prophet, a means of personally appropriating the truth he will preach. His first taste is one of sweetness, as his perception of the prophetic life first provokes initial joy. Yet, as we soon learn, the scroll doesn't sit well within him; its bitterness is a knotted reminder that actualizing the message of God in this world is a tiresome and dolorous process of assimilation. Ultimately, this combination of sweetness and bitterness, of perception and actualization, is the dual reality that faces the people of God in Exile. Theirs was the sweet promise of the covenant, by which they are perceived as the people of God. Theirs, too, is the bitter taste of Exile, when the actuality of sin leads to existential disarray.

The teaching of this biblical narrative suggests a rather personal message. In his prophetic vision, in his experience of the sacred, in his eating of the scroll, Ezekiel is a man who becomes the message he is given. So, too, for us as Oblates ...

If we look to ourselves and our situation, we might claim that we are currently experiencing the suffering of an "exile" brought on by postmodernism. We suffer from ambiguity, in that our identity is bound up with a spiritual tradition that dates back to the seventeenth century. For modern men, appeal to the past is not enough to ensure stability; all authority is relative to its present relevance. We suffer uncertainty, in that our understanding of who we are is constantly changing. For us today, appeal to tradition is not enough to ensure certainty; conformity to tradition has been supplanted by the quest for authenticity. We suffer suspicion, in that our continued viability is tenuous, dependent on factors beyond our control. Looking to the future, the status quo is not enough to ensure confidence; "the way it's always been" needs give way to pragmatic planning.

Now, as before, the prophetic message continues -- and it is time once again to revisit its place in our lives. The *Spiritual Directory*, that succinct yet stable encoding of the Salesian vision, is, still, something sacred for us. In his wisdom, St. Francis de Sales has bequeathed this book as a sure means of experiencing the sacred in our everyday lives. He offers it to us not as a revelation of the divine mind with words parroted to us for all times; nor is it simply an expression of his own personal preference as a prelate and spiritual director. It is, instead, a pedagogically pragmatic work. It offers do-able exercises which form in those who "eat" it, the food by which we taste the divine in our human lives. And, in the food chain of the spiritual life, this text has high nutritional value. Put simply ... it works!

The experience of the "sacred" here offered to us is our something. For Fr. Brisson, the *Spiritual Directory* is our way -- a pragmatically effective means by which we, specifically, can and will experience the sacred. So, too, he claims it as our raison d'être -- not merely an effective or helpful spiritual tool, but the normative means for our claiming to be who we are. Ultimately, Fr. Brisson defines this text as the principle of our identity -- that "something" which makes us distinctive on the imagescape of religious life.
In terms of the questions for reflection raised this evening, we might say that the *Spiritual Directory* is that which claims our love. For by our continuing fidelity to the exercises therein prescribed, we allow ourselves to be claimed by the divine Spirit of love that is its origin and end. So, too, the *Spiritual Directory* is the tool for knowing how to die that we might learn how to live. For by putting these exercises into practice, we die to our own preferences and inclinations and learn how to live continuously in the presence of God.

And so, it would do us well, as a basis for our retreat, to reflect upon the "Preface" to the *Spiritual Directory*. There we find the foundation for a renewed experience of the sacred. There is little time tonight to offer a detailed analysis of the text. There is also little reason to do so -- for the words are there, in their simple profundity, able to be digested by each one of us, if we but set ourselves to the task. Suffice it for me to offer a few comments to get us started.

*Come, O sons blessed from all eternity, and as was said to Ezekiel and to St. John the Evangelist, Come, take hold of this book and eat it, swallow it, fill your heart and nourish your soul with it.*

Here we are invited, with some urgency (the imperative "come"), to experience the same sacred vision as did the prophet of old. Notice the actions commended to us (set forth with not untypical Salesian embellishment!): "Take hold" - for the doing of these exercises requires an intentional effort. "Eat" and "swallow" - for simply having this text in our possession is not enough. "Fill" and "nourish" those dimensions to our being (heart and soul) that are in need of sustenance and cannot be satisfied elsewhere than in God.

*Let its words remain day and night before your eyes, that you may meditate on them, and in your hands, that you may put them into practice, and let your entire being praise God for them.*

The invitation extends first to our "eyes" -- the doors to the mind and the place of comprehension. But knowing does not suffice. This experience is one for our "hands" -- for no matter what ministry we perform or tasks we accomplish, our work is to be sanctified. Ultimately, this experience of the sacred extends to our "entire being" -- as persons created in the image and likeness of God and destined for union with God in eternity.

*This book will prove bitter to your interior, for it will lead to the perfect mortification of your self love.*

Contrary to the "tastes" of the present generation, contrary perhaps to our own preferences and inclinations, this book sets forth a course of life and love that will draw us out of ourselves and toward the God to whom we are naturally inclined. To reaffirm our "willingness" to serve God in our lives, this first taste of detachment may be "bitter" to swallow, but it cannot be avoided.

*It will ... 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.*
This sweetness and consolation, this filling of our hearts and souls with the crucified Jesus, is our experience of love. It is what claims our love. It is an experience of death that enables life. It is, ultimately, our experience of the sacred.

In this way your bitterness will be transformed into the sweetness of a perfect peace, and you will be filled with true happiness.

It's not difficult to imagine that a "false" happiness does exist; our culture offers images of it in many ways. In that happiness there is "nothing sacred." But, thanks be to God, we know differently. We can know the peace that the world cannot give. We can be sure, with an optimism that is real, not virtual. And we can be truly happy ... when our lives and work are grounded in an experience of something sacred.

And so, as this retreat begins, I invite you anew to discover everything sacred in your life: "Come, O Sons, ... and you will be filled with true happiness."

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NOTES


4. Tilley, Postmodern Theologies, p. vi.


11. See Beaudoin, Virtual Faith, pp. 80-84.


16. "With the single exception of sin, anxiety is the greatest evill that can happen to a soul" (\textit{Introduction to the Devout Life}, IV:11).


20. Lajeunie, \textit{St. Francis de Sales}, vol I., pp. 80-90


26. Note here an interesting allusion to the time frame mythically set for becoming an Oblate!

