Today we, the Oblates here at Wills Hall, celebrate “Founders’ Day” – part of a world-wide celebration in our religious congregation that has been happening since 1995. We recall especially the life and work of Fr. Louis Brisson, the founder of the two Oblate congregations (the Oblate Sisters, which he began with St. Leonie Aviat, and us). But you may be wondering why we would have such a celebration? After all, no one alive today ever even met Fr. Brisson … not even Fr. Harvey!

Well, one reason is based on what we heard in this evening’s first reading from the book of Sirach. Fr. Brisson was, indeed, a “stalwart man” – one would almost have to be in order to be the chaplain to a monastery of nuns for forty years! And like those praiseworthy ancestors to whom Sirach refers, Fr. Brisson’s descendants are, indeed, his heritage, whom he cherished despite the pain. You see, in the last twenty years of his life, as a result of national politics in France, Fr. Brisson was forced to retreat to his family home in Plancy, from where he witnessed the near total devastation of that for which he worked his whole life, when religious persecutions led to the expulsion of his priests and nuns. Yet even then, he exhibited a remarkable trust in divine Providence … and today his heritage carries on throughout the world. There aren’t too many folks who can claim that their work continues after more than 100 years!

But history isn’t the whole story; nor is it the main reason for this celebration. Why we celebrate the life and work of Fr. Brisson is because of his exemplary virtue in carrying out the will of God. We admire that, to be sure; but we should also give thanks, because his example is a lesson and an inspiration for our own lives. He embodied the life of “God’s chosen ones” that Paul describes in our second reading, from the letter to the Colossians. One particular aspect of Brisson’s life bears this out.
When he founded the Oblates, Fr. Brisson was a priest of the diocese of Troyes, where he ministered as chaplain to the Sisters of the Visitation (the order of nuns founded by St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal) and later as rector of a diocesan secondary school. As a diocesan priest who had also served as vicar general (the #2 man to the bishop in the administration of the diocese), he was subject to the pastoral authority of his local bishop; from 1875 (the year in which the Oblates were founded) to 1897, that bishop was Pierre Cortet. Now, without going into too much detail, let’s just say that their relationship was a rocky one, at best, but it reveals Fr. Brisson’s character and gives us a challenge to imitate.

When the Oblates were officially founded with a decree from the Vatican, Fr. Brisson understood it to mean that he was to be the Superior General, with full authority for governing the new congregation. Bishop Cortet, on the other hand, considered the Roman document merely a blessing of Fr. Brisson’s good work; because they were located in his diocese, the bishop maintained that he, not Fr. Brisson, was the governing authority for the new Oblates. The inevitable conflict between them began and lasted eight full years. It involved, as is often the case, debates about status, affronts to prestige, objections to publications, divisions among personnel, and, of course, disputes about finances. It wasn’t settled until Rome intervened and the two were reconciled.

What this lengthy episode reveals is that a virtuous life is not easy! It requires conviction, which Fr. Brisson had in spades when it came to defending his congregation. It requires forbearance, as Fr. Brisson showed in so often biting his tongue. It requires devotion, as Fr. Brisson regularly practiced in his prayer and worship. But perhaps most of all, it requires forgiveness. And this Fr. Brisson demonstrated in his response to the death of Bishop Cortet, when he instructed the Oblates to pray for the repose of the soul of the bishop to whom he always remained faithful; he himself celebrated Mass for Cortet with tears in his eyes.

But the story doesn’t end there. It continues with us. The good news, as we heard in the Gospel, is that Fr. Brisson can be considered one of those children to whom God’s will is revealed – though Fr. Brisson was also quite learned and clever, as his mathematical prowess would prove. And because of Fr. Brisson, that same divine will now comes to be known for us Oblates, who are called to take up the same virtuous life that he began for us, in the spirit of St. Francis de Sales, who once wrote:

_A brave man can easily bear with ... an evil world; but to bear such injustice at the hands of good men, of friends and relations, is a great test of patience._
We can never make acts of gentleness and patience, or gather the honey of the truest virtues, better than while eating the bread of bitterness and enduring hardness. (Introduction to the Devout Life, III:3)

Yet that challenge is not only for us, as the religious descendants of Fr. Brisson. It remains a challenge for all in the Church. Fortunately for us, we have models of holiness like Fr. Brisson. Though not a canonized saint – at least not yet! – he gives our world something which it seeks more and more. He is for us one of those “unique figures in whom is found not a theory nor even merely a moral, but a plan of life to be recounted, to be discovered through study, to be loved with devotion, (and) to be put into practice with imitation” (Cardinal Jose Saraiva Martins).

To put it simply, Fr. Louis Brisson, our Founder, exemplified holiness. In doing so, he has become, to use the words of the late Pope John Paul II, “a message that convinces without the need for words” and which is “the living reflection of the face of Christ.”

So, let us gaze upon the reflection of Fr. Brisson’s life and heed his message in our own. And, indeed, let us celebrate.

+ D.S.B. +

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