Once again, today, we welcome you to our annual celebration of “Founders’ Day” – our world-wide celebration for our religious congregation. We recall especially the life and work of Fr. Louis Brisson, the founder of two religious congregations (female & male) sharing the same name.

Foundations recall for us a time of beginnings, a laying of the groundwork for things to come. Beginnings are often difficult and involve hard work. We who bear and who share the fruits of that early labor rightly pause to give thanks.

But our celebration of Founders’ Day is not simply an occasion to recall the past. Instead, it is an opportunity for us to be reminded of what is essential, what is foundational, to our present lives. We recall, both proudly and humbly, that because of what Fr. Brisson did more than a century ago, we are “Oblates of St. Francis de Sales.”

In that name we find what is foundational to our lives. We know well the “Francis de Sales” part – he who is the patron of this university is also the initiator of a grand tradition of spirituality whose heritage is ours to live and disseminate. But what about that “Oblate” part?

The Latinists in our midst could conjugate the verb for us and would inform us that it means “to offer” or “offering.” In religious history, the term “oblate” is associated with monastic life. It referred, early on, to those children given by their parents to a monastic house under whose rule the children lived. Later, it was used for those folks (workers or servants) who, without taking religious vows, would voluntarily offer themselves to the abbot and subject themselves to the religious rule. Should any of you be so inclined, Fr. Hudgin, our superior, is always on the lookout for servants!

When Fr. Brisson used the term, though, he had a loftier vision in mind. Speaking in reference to a description of the cross by the Bishop of Nice, Fr. Brisson repeated the phrase: *Oblatus est quia ipse voluit* – “he is offered, because he wills it.” This depiction of Jesus, whom Fr. Brisson calls “the first Oblate,” recognizes that the redemptive act of Christ’s passion came not as a result of external forces, but because of the divine choice of God for us: he is offered on the cross because he choose, out of love, to die for us. The challenge for us is to read that a little differently, using a noun for the verb: “the Oblate is because he wills it.”
To be an Oblate, then, is not something that comes from our skill or knowledge or ability. It doesn’t define us by what we do in terms of our ministry. To be an Oblate is to be offered, to offer ourselves, to recognize that the foundational choice we make is to not choose for ourselves, except to choose to follow God’s will, as it is signified for us or as it happens to us in God’s good pleasure.

We see this at work in the story of our founding. It took Fr. Brisson decades to get it, to understand that that religious nun (Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis) in the Visitation monastery to which he was the chaplain, really did know what God was wanting and willing for him. His resistance was manifold: part personal (he was content with his own labors), part prejudicial (what could this woman know that he didn’t), he could not come to the conclusion that starting a new group was what he was supposed to do. Until the Lord appeared to him, that is. Then, once he gave himself over to this divine reality present before him, once he offered his mind and heart and will to the one who stood before him, once he choose to will what God willed, then the Oblates were born.

And that oblation, that choice, that offering is what the Oblates are and what we are to do even to this very day. To be an Oblate is to surrender our selves, in utter and total obedience, to what God wills, to what Jesus wishes. It is to fulfill what St. Paul writes in today’s second reading: “whatever you do … do it in the name of the Lord Jesus.”

But that’s not easy. To be an offering means that our own plans are secondary, our own preferences are subordinate, our own inclinations are subjected, instead, to the designs of divine providence. It also means that we will suffer, perhaps not physically, like that “first Oblate,” but certainly in terms of the spirit, because still today the world despises this offering.

Nevertheless, we are called – not just the Oblates in name, but all of us – we are called to offer ourselves to God. And so, as we go now to the table of the Lord, we will raise our hands in offering to the God who offered himself on the cross for us. And when we do, when we raise our hands to God, He comes to us, offers Himself into our hands by way of this blessed sacrament. And then, when our offering meets His, then we shall know joy.

+ May God Be Blessed +

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