"A Blessed Souvenir"

We've come to the last day of pilgrimage. What will you take home with you? Chocolate, champagne, other shopping? Visions of churches, stained glass, or Parisian cafes?

Today I propose another souvenir, one that costs nothing, that doesn't need packing, and that has the potential to be of more lasting value than any other ... and that is the gift of Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance.

St. Francis de Sales, our patron, knew this gift. Suffering from the conviction, of mind and heart and soul, that he was predestined to an eternity in hell, he prayed before this statue each day that he returned from the Sorbonne. He regularly stopped into the church of St. Etienne-des-gres, and on one such occasion, he was completely delivered from his depression.

The souvenir he took from that moment of grace was a certainty of hope that would become the foundation to a life and legacy of optimism. He knew, from that moment forward, that his hope rested not on his own abilities or accomplishments, nor on any collective societal progress, but only and entirely on the graciousness of a benevolent God. Only a hope based on One who is eternally good and infinitely loving could deliver any of us from the difficulties experienced in this mortal life. And that souvenir comes from no shop or no city; it is received only in prayer.

Fr. Louis Brisson, whose beatification we came to France to celebrate, also knew this gift. He was an inventive genius and an astute administrator. He also suffered immensely, and mostly at the hands of his own. But through it all, he persevered in prayer. He knew, and also taught, that success is not of our own making; rather, all that we need to do, and what we should always do, is to abandon ourselves completely to the will of God, however that comes to be expressed, in the firm faith that this good God has "taken hold of us, never to let go." That intuition, and that holy practice of doing "nothing more, nothing less" than God's will, is what we celebrate in now calling him Blessed (and, hopefully one day soon, a saint).
This lesson, too, is suggested to us in today's Scripture readings. A never-ending question in our lives, and one that can become depressing if we have the courage to pursue it, is the question asked by Ecclesiastes, the question that wonders, in the long run, whether all our efforts in this life really accomplish anything or amount to much. Without the "aspect of eternity" which Fr. Pocetto mentioned yesterday as the view of saints, the answer is probably no, not much. In one respect, that is the same question asked in the gospel when Jesus wonders who people think he is. Notice that the typical answers are all on a human level. But the real answer, mouthed by St. Peter, is that this man, Jesus, is God, the Christ who has come to save the world. Only that divine difference, only that focus on God and God's will, even in suffering, will give hope in the midst of existential frustration.

Why I suggest to you that this is the real souvenir of our pilgrimage is because on this trip what we see, by way of the Black Madonna here in this chapel, and what we have celebrated during our days in Troyes, is that hopeful abandonment to God that is the fundamental gift of Salesian spirituality. And, whether in our work at DeSales University or in our life as Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, that spirituality is who we are and what we do.

This is the gift we have been offered on this pilgrimage, and now it is a gift we are to called to share as the souvenir we should take back to Center Valley. Why this souvenir? Because without this distinctive spiritual gift, DeSales University would not be what it is supposed to be. Without personally sharing this never-ending optimism, without explicitly teaching this gift of prayerful faith in God, without intentionally passing on this saintly tradition that we have come to experience in a special way these past ten days, our institution will be no different than any other college or university, no matter how good it may be by other common measures.

So let us all enjoy our last day in France. And when we prepare tonight for the journey home, may we not forget to take with us our Salesian souvenir, the indomitable gift of hope that is founded on God's love for each of us. And let us now go to the table of the Lord to receive that gift once again.

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