According to today’s Gospel, “This is an evil generation.” So is this one, today! Indeed, it is true of any age, whenever religion is considered something unbelievable without further proof.

But this is not a new phenomenon. It was obviously true in Gospel times as those listening to Jesus demanded some wondrous sign as a proof of his identity. It is still true today, when religious belief is relegated to the objectively unknown or the merely personal. It’s why even, or especially, we Catholics need a Year of Faith, for as Dr. Howsare wisely explained last week, our culture in today’s world, steeped as it is in the scientific mentality, fails to appreciate the distinctive realm of truth which faith inhabits.

This was true, too, of nineteenth century France, but back then there was a sign, a living proof of faith. That sign, at least for us, is Blessed Louis Brisson, whom we celebrate today as the Founder of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales. But “founder” does not just mean one who started something; in fact, the real character of Fr. Brisson as a “founder” is not simply his initiative, but his perseverance, his “force” for good, his Christian virility—all of which may be summed up in the virtue of perseverance.

Fr. Brisson was a man of many talents, which meant that he became a man of many jobs: chaplain to the Visitation Sisters, director of the diocesan Association, confessor to people throughout Troyes, director of schools and youth apostolates, and animator of not one, but two religious orders. The man had to have gotten tired! Yet he persevered.

Fr. Brisson was a man who encountered numerous setbacks in his work. The struggles with his Bishop are well known, and included a demotion, after forty years of faithful service, when he was relieved of his post as chaplain to the Visitation Sisters and was also removed from being the diocesan Vicar General. He also struggled with seemingly insurmountable problems in his apostolic efforts. His new school was overtaken for a period during the war of 1870, and just five years later part of it was destroyed in a hurricane. Later, when his Oblates went to the missions in Africa, they ended up in a country almost uninhabitable. Still he, and they, persevered.

Fr. Brisson was a man who knew firsthand what persecution meant. When the French government, beginning in 1901, instituted its anti-religious laws, Fr. Brisson’s congregations were dissolved, their material and financial goods were confiscated, and their members were exiled. Soon thereafter, Fr. Brisson would die, penniless, in a small house in his hometown of Plancy. But through it all he persevered.
You see, Fr. Brisson was, as the Church says, a man of “heroic virtue,” but a virtue that is essentially religious in character. He lived by his own principle, that “to begin by way of trial is a guarantee of success.” But more importantly, he lived by the principle of faith. Even when he admitted to being distressed and having a sorrowful heart at all that was going wrong around him, still, he said, “If one doesn’t have faith, one would not be able to resist.”

That faith, that total fidelity to God’s will, that desire to remain faithful to whatever work God confided to him, that indefatigable spirit that accepted all things as coming from our heavenly Father’s hand, rather than contend with God in favor of what we want ... that’s the character of our Founder. That’s the spirit that makes him Blessed.

As we celebrate him and his work this day, there’s no doubt that we, too, will be fatigued. We, too, will encounter setbacks. We, too, may even face persecutions of some sort. In all this, may Fr. Brisson’s spirit be ours, may his virtue be ours, may his faith be ours. For then we, too, will begin to know the freedom for which Christ has set us free.

+ May God Be Blessed! +

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