What is the “Chablais Spirit”? 

1. Introduction

In an essay entitled “Salesian Gentleness and Humility in Action: St. Francis de Sales’s Missionary Apostolate in the Chablais,” in the last issue of the ICSS Newsletter (No. 17 [January-February 2006], pp. 3-5, 12), we reflected on two key, but often overlooked, aspects of St. Francis de Sales’s Chablais mission (1594-98). First, we foregrounded the scholarly recovery of the Chablais mission’s original historical context as an example of the Church’s missionary activity within Europe that was part of the early modern Catholic reform and that is a precedent for the new evangelization at the dawn of the third Christian millennium. Second, we examined the distinctive Salesian spirit that animated the Chablais mission: Francis’s pastoral-relational-ecclesial approach, the “Salesian method” of winning hearts through gentle persuasion, other-oriented dialogue that seeks common ground and restores unity through reconciliation, and humility in the service of collaborative ministry with fellow missionaries with whom Francis was not always in agreement and vice versa.

In this issue, we will continue to reflect on Francis’s Chablais mission by considering the term, the “Chablais Spirit,” which has recently entered the Salesian lexicon. A survey of the various ways in which this term or its equivalent is used in various documents and publications suggests that there is not yet a consensus regarding its precise meaning and definition. This reflection, like the preceding one in the ICSS Newsletter, No. 17, is undertaken to assist the De Sales Oblates in their efforts to probe this early episode in Francis’s ministry so as to draw out its meaning for the Congregation’s missionary apostolate in the 21st century, as well as for the work of the Chablais Mission Fund, whose purpose is to ensure the financial viability of the missions. No less importantly, these two essays also seek to contribute to the continuing and vital conversation among Salesian scholars concerning Francis’s Chablais mission, to highlight the insights into this episode put forth by this appreciable body of scholarship, and to share with the wider Salesian family how one of its members has appropriated the narrative of Francis’s missionary apostolate in the Chablais.

Figure 1. St. Francis de Sales Preaching in the Chablais, engraving by Pitau after François Chauveau (France), from [Henri de Maupas du Tour] La vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu François de Sales ... (Paris: Chez la Veuve de Nicolas Belley, 1707), Courtesy Salesian Library. Wilmington-Philadelphia Province of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales.

Baron d’Hermaine, governor of the fortress of Allinges, where Francis took refuge each night in the Chablais, advised the young priest not to start his mission with the celebration of Mass, a major point of controversy between Calvinists and Catholics, lest he antagonize the populace at the outset. Francis’s acceptance of this advice exemplifies his humility and discretion in the midst of a highly volatile environment. Instead, Francis gathered the people, giving them talks and homilies on the Catholic faith and sacraments, and responding to their doubts and questions. His preaching style sought to win the hearts of his audience and was “edifying,” in that it aimed to build up the Catholic faith within his listeners. As Francis would write a decade later about preaching, “Say what you will, lips speak but to ears, heart speaks to heart” (OEuvres, 12:521).
II. Defining the Term

The term “Chablis Spirit” was coined to serve as a spiritual complement to the financial work of the Chablis Mission Fund.¹ This accords with Constitution 199 of the De Sales Oblates (“The Oblate missionaries continue the work of St. Francis de Sales, who began his priestly life in this role”), and Constitution 202 (“The Oblate who works in the missions will strive to acquire the virtues of the Apostle of the Chablis”). Referencing the former Constitution, it has been noted that the “Chablis Spirit ... characterizes an Oblate approach to the missionary efforts of the Church,” and, more broadly, it is “the Congregation’s missionary spirit.”² Further expanding the definition, it has been suggested that the “Chablis Spirit” ... represents the ‘missionary’ dimension of our Oblate vocation as followers of St. Francis de Sales,”³ and that it should be a component of Oblate formation⁴ and an evaluative standard for all Oblate ministries, according to the following definition of the “Chablis Spirit”:

1. An Oblate community that possesses the Chablis Spirit is well rooted in the teaching of the Church and in the Salesian spirit.
2. Such an Oblate community is open to new needs in the Church, within its own Province or Region as well as worldwide.
3. It identifies those needs through a process of mutual discernment.
4. It is ready to move ahead into new situations and new places, and to enter into dialogue with other cultures and regions.
5. It is ever open and in search of new and more appropriate ways of disseminating our Salesian charism.⁵

Salesian scholars reflect on Francis’s Chablis mission with an eye less on a given project or apostolic activity and more on history.⁶ This focus on history has facilitated the identification of Francis’s particular contribution to the Chablis mission that is regarded as accounting for the success of this endeavor. The intention here is not to provide an exhaustive review of this body of scholarship, but to offer an overview of its main lines of thought and development.

Undoubtedly one of the most extensive and important treatments of the Chablis mission is found in the masterful intellectual biography of Francis by E.-J. Lajeunie, OP, Saint François de Sales: L’homme, la pensée, l’action, 2 vols. (Paris: Éditions Guy Victor, 1966), with an English translation following twenty years later (Bangalore: S.E.S. Publications, 1986-87).⁷ For this great scholar, the very essence and core of Francis’s Chablis mission (what may be aptly called the “Chablis Spirit”) is what Lajeunie terms the “Salesian method.” In short, the “Salesian method” consisted in winning hearts through gentle persuasion so as to provide the inhabitants of the Chablis, who had been under Calvinist domination for nearly sixty years, a glimpse of the face of the gentle and humble Jesus of Matthew 11:29, whom Francis embraces as the “one unique model” for his priestly, and later episcopal, ministry.

According to Lajeunie, the “Salesian method” dramatically contrasts, on the one hand, with the force and violence employed by the Calvinists to coerce the Chablis into submission, and, on the other, with the aggressive and confrontational strategies of Francis’s fellow missionaries, especially the fiery Capuchin friar Chérubin de Maurienne, whose “zeal” and extremism eventually came to be deemed inappropriate by his foes and allies alike. Although Francis’s approach was criticized, even by his dear friend, Antoine Favre, for being too gentle and peace-loving, not sufficiently zealous and rigorous, and too slow in yielding results, he held to it because he was convinced that it was the Gospel way of proceeding. For his part, Francis was cautious about zealotry, which, he believed, leads to polarization and partisanship, which precludes the Church from serving as an instrument for peace and reconciliation. Years later, in his most well-known and best-selling book, Introduction to the Devout Life (1609), Francis gives this memorable formulation of the “Salesian method”: “whoever wins a person’s heart has won the whole person” (Pt. 3, chap. 23).⁸

Lajeunie’s interpretation of the Chablis mission was anticipated—to cite but two examples—by Pope Pius XI’s treatment of this episode in his 1923 encyclical on Francis, Rerum omnium, nn. 6-9, written to mark the third centenary of the saint’s death, as well as by Michael de la Bedoyere’s biography of Francis based on the saint’s letters.⁹ Moreover, it is supported by the preponderance of subsequent Salesian scholarship. For example, Elisabeth Stopp indicates that Francis’s Meditations on the Church (or Controversies, the title under which this work is usually known), an integral part of the Chablis mission, was unprecedented in two ways: “it is the first attempt [ever] at an informal work of theology written in the French language,”¹⁰ and it was “a genuine attempt at a dialogue, at a true conversation on points of difference”¹¹ with the
Calvinist elders of Thonon, who had sworn an oath never to go to listen to Francis and had forbidden their congregations to attend his sermons. Rather than a book, the Meditations' original form was as a series of eighty weekly news sheets (copied by hand, possibly even printed), explaining the true nature of the Church, that were hand delivered to the elders, many of whom were personally known to Francis, some from his childhood. The "Salesian method" is salient in this work: Francis never talks down to [the elders], never attacks them personally, addressing them as 'separated brothers,' an unheard of courtesy in that age of fierce polemics. He turned to them as to friends and pleaded for a hearing."

André Ravier, SJ, perceives Francis as undergoing change or development during the Chablis mission, as during these years he moved away from the intrinsigence of a jurist with regard to Protestantism to a pastoral and apocalyptic approach that sought to restore unity through reconciliation. Ravier observes that Francis "treated with respect and charity those Protestants who kept away from him, who sometimes insulted him or assailed him, and above all he took them seriously... By speech, undoubtedly, but especially by his entire life... [he] had to reveal to his separated brothers the spirit and the [gentle and humble] heart of Jesus Christ."

Wendy M. Wright, in her comprehensive introduction to the Salesian spiritual tradition, offers this assessment of Francis's Chablis ministry:

There were prominent conversions, which were celebrated and later remembered, and Catholic ritual practice was reintroduced into the region. More significantly, the Chablis mission confirmed the young prelate's intuition that persuasion—spoken from the heart in love—was preferable to battle, whether armed or in the form of inventive intellectual debate.

Elsewhere Wright elucidates the theological and spiritual foundation of Francis's approach:

But the arts of respectful conversation, constructive apologetics, and persuasive preaching were for the young [Francis] not simply means to an end. His respectful methods were based on a real affirmation of the intrinsic dignity and worth of each particular person, who is to be reverenced as such, even when—perhaps most when—the ideas they hold or the affiliations that claim them make them an "enemy." ... Francis de Sales was a man of genuine reconciliation, a man for whom love and its realization was not simply the goal but the means.

In a similar vein, James F. Cryan, OSFS, calls attention to the centrality of dialogue, as well as its broader implications, in the Chablis mission:

In his Chablis ministry, Francis de Sales departed from the polemic style... and chose dialogue.... "I want to discuss, not argue," he told Beta.... Dialogue seeks common ground, seeks to transcend difference. It is other-oriented, while need is self-oriented. In dialogue we do not promote our own agenda; we respond to another's concerns....

Such reversal of roles, a self-emptying that allows the substitution of the other for the self, pervades all Salesian thought....

Lajouje treats at length the collaborative nature of the second phase of the Chablis mission (1597-98), and the key role that Francis's humble, self-effacing, and gentle manner played in attaining success in what was sometimes a difficult and challenging collaborative process. More recently, Jill R. Fehleisen studies this phase in even greater detail, chronicling the shift from the personal and individual approach of the first phase (1594-97), to the more dramatic and public appeal of the second phase, specifically the sumptuous, lavish, and visually stunning Forty Hours celebrations held in Annemasse (7-9 September 1597) and Thonon (20-22 September 1598, and 1-3 October 1598). She explains:

In the case of the Forty Hours, missionaries in the duchy of Chablis consciously used words, images, actions, and sounds in the form of rituals, processions, and theatrical performances to appeal to people's senses instead of their intellects. Convinced that the introspective nature of Calvinism lacked overt emotional appeal, the missionaries emphasized aspects of the Catholic faith that had an emotional appeal to the people. The missionaries hoped to navigate the existing emotional landscape of the Alpine region to bring about a dramatic change in its confessional makeup.

This brief survey of the diversity of meanings attributed or attributable to the term, the "Chablis Spirit," suggests that to date the formulation of a single and universally accepted definition has proved elusive. Not surprisingly, some confess that they are perplexed about the meaning of this term, while others express concern that the definition proposed to describe an individual or group who possesses the "Chablis Spirit" seems generic and applicable to any number of religious congregations.
Perhaps another way to approach this question is to return to the narrative that is the starting point for these various definitions. This attention to story is very Salesian, for Francis himself was a skilled storyteller, as evidenced, for example, by his *Treatise on the Love of God* (1616), in which his “parables of great beauty ... make plain and readily understandable what lies beyond the conscious realm.”

In the present instance, the story is an episode from Francis’s biography, and, as is often the case in biographical narratives, this story has two discernible, but inseparable and interrelated, dimensions: the outer story and the inner story. Focusing on the dynamic between the inner and the outer is also very Salesian. For example, in the *Introduction*, Part 3, chapter 23, Francis avers: “As for myself, Philothea, I could never approve the method of those who begin by the exterior ... in order to reform a person. On the contrary, it seems to me that we should begin by the interior.... As the heart is the source of actions, they are such as the heart is.” Likewise, throughout the *Spiritual Directory*, Francis constantly privileges interior disposition and prayer as the fount and source of every external action. The Chablais story must be “reassembled” in its integrity, if there is any hope of arriving at a definition of “Chablais Spirit” that faithfully and accurately reflects this archetypal narrative.

**III. Reassembling the Narrative of Francis’s Chablais Mission**

The outer story of the Chablais mission is perhaps that which is most well-known and popular. Its basic plot line is as follows: After the Treaty of Nyon (1589) restored the Chablais (a region in present-day France along the lake of Geneva, thirty miles long and fifteen miles wide) to the Duke of Savoy, the duke requested Bishop Claude de Granier of Annecy to send fifty priests to restore Catholicism to the region, which had been under Calvinist occupation for nearly sixty years. Within two years, Calvinists from Geneva attacked the Chablais, occupied Thonon (the Chablais’s principal town), banished the fifty priests, and laid waste to the churches. The uncertainty of the claim over the Chablais was finally resolved when King Henri VI of France abjured Protestantism, and offered a truce on 31 July 1593. Again the duke asked Bishop de Granier to send priests to the Chablais.

At Bishop de Granier’s request, the newly ordained Francis undertakes the mission to re-Catholicize the Chablais against many odds: the vigorous opposition of his father, who feared for his son’s safety, as well as the

![Figure 2. St. Francis de Sales and His Cousin, Louis de Sales, Invoking the Protection of the Angel of the Chablais (detail).](image)
dishonor that failure would bring upon the family name; limited personnel (in the mission's first phase [1594-97] only his cousin Louis, and in the second phase [1597-98] a small band of missionaries); limited financial resources and little, often reluctant, support from the Duke of Savoy. Trusting completely in God to bring success from a situation that, humanly speaking, had very little prospect of success, Francis was ultimately successful after enduring four years of arduous, often discouraging work, as well as personal hardship, danger, and trials. In the end, Francis's heroic efforts bore fruit, and the "rightness" of his "folly" was justified before all, as he was proclaimed the "Apostle of the Chablaïs" by the duke.

There is no doubt that the outer story of the Chablaïs mission is a riveting one that, when told with passion and verve, can capture the imagination and rally generosity and enthusiasm to undertake the most challenging and difficult project. At the same time, this is only half the story. The plot of the outer story resembles that of any number of stories of the heroic exploits of the saints, and even of heroes of non-fiction and imaginative literature, who overcame what, from a human perspective, seemed to be insurmountable obstacles and hardships to achieve their goal or destiny. Defining the "Chablaïs Spirit" solely on the basis of the outer story of the Chablaïs mission may also appear generic, unless the outer story's distinctively Salesian elements are teased out, and this definition is well illustrated by examples from Francis's own life and ministry, as well as complemented by the inner story. Another concern is that this version of the Chablaïs episode does not seem to do justice to the primary collaborative nature of the mission's second phase, which was precipitated by Francis's threat to resign if he did not receive support and reinforcements.21

The focus of the inner story of the Chablaïs mission is not so much on the "what," as it is in the outer story, as on the "how." Careful attention to the particular, whether of time, place, occasion, or person(s), is one of the hallmarks of Francis's ministry and Salesian spirituality.22 The inner story of the Chablaïs mission allows us to enter into the particularity of this episode in Francis's biography more easily, more richly, and perhaps to a greater degree than the outer story. It opens a window onto how Francis was formed by this mission, in which he further developed, tested, and refined his distinctive way of proceeding in ministry and human interaction. In fact, it is this inner story that was the subject of extensive reflection in the ICSS Newsletter, No. 17. Here it suffices to provide a synopsis of that discussion.

Several factors contributed to the success of the Chablaïs mission, but perhaps none more significantly than Francis's method and approach to accomplishing this mission and surmounting the challenges it posed. Francis's personal model in the Chablaïs ministry, as throughout his entire priesthood and episcopate, was the Jesus of Matthew 11:29 (Francis's favorite Scripture verse), who revealed Himself as "gentle and humble of heart." From his youth, Francis was drawn to contemplate, to rest in, and to be sustained by the heart of Jesus. In the Chablaïs, Francis's appropriation of the gentle and humble heart of Jesus would attain an ever-greater profundity that was forged in the crucible of this mission's sufferings and trials, and nurtured by long hours of prayer before the Romanesque fresco of Christ in Glory in the chapel of the fortress of Allinges. Francis's process of imitatio Christi found concrete and tangible expression in the "Salesian method" of winning hearts through gentle persuasion, other-oriented dialogue that seeks common ground and restores unity through reconciliation, and humility in the service of collaborative ministry that was often difficult and challenging.

"Reassembling" the Chablaïs narrative does not mean choosing the inner story over the outer story, or vice versa. Rather, it aims to embrace the seamless whole of the tapestry of the narrative of this defining moment in Francis's life and ministry, which continues for another quarter century and unfolds in ways and with a richness that is only glimpsed in his missionary apostolate in the Chablaïs. (It should be recalled that the Chablaïs continued to be an "administrative headache" for Francis, especially during his tenure as bishop.23) An adequate, and accurate, definition of the "Chablaïs Spirit" will integrate both the distinctively Salesian elements of the outer story, which it must tease out, as well as the particularity of the inner story, whose narrative core is Francis's appropriation of the heart of the gentle and humble Jesus of Matthew 11:29, manifested by the Salesian method and its constitutive elements.

IV. The Chablaïs Chartism of the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales

For one member of the Salesian family, the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales (also known as the Fransalians), Francis's Chablaïs mission is the inspiration and paradigm for their particular charism and mission in the Church. The Fransalians, the Salesian missionary congregation par excellence, were founded in 1838 to re-Catholicize Annecy and its environs during the
period of recovery from the trauma of the French Revolution and its aftermath. Both the Fransalians’ founder, Pierre-Marie Mermier (1790-1862), and the bishop of Annecy at the time, Pierre Joseph Rey (1770-1842), felt that the mantle of the Apostle of the Chablais had fallen upon them at that moment in Christian history. The Fransalians articulate their charism thusly:

The new text of our Constitutions, while emphasizing the fact that we are called to be missionaries following the way of St. Francis de Sales, qualifies and states that it is the “Apostle of the Chablais” that has to be the icon of our inspiration and imitation. This tiny phrase “Apostle of the Chablais” appearing first in the Prologue and then in Article 5 of the new Text speaks volumes of the specificity of the charism of being a Missionary in the spirit of St. Francis de Sales. The challenge for every MSFS is not only to imitate St. Francis de Sales but to imbibe and manifest the apostolic zeal as shown by him in his apostolate in [the] Chablais…. Therefore, a Fransalian, while fathoming the depths of Salesian spirituality is called to make the “Chablais experience” the spring and fountain of his missionary zeal.24

So that the Fransalians would always be mindful that theirs was the missionary spirit of the Apostle of the Chablais, Bishop Rey entrusted to them care of the fortress of Allinges, where Francis took refuge each night during his Chablais mission; it has continued under their care to this very day. At first, the Fransalians ministered in the same exact part of the world where Francis ministered as a priest and bishop. However, so successful were their efforts there, that they were soon asked to extend their ministry to Africa and India, where they principally minister today.25

The second of three working papers prepared for the Fransalians’ 2007 General Chapter exemplifies how this congregation assimilates the narrative of Francis’s Chablais mission as its charism (available on the Fransalians’ website: www.fransalians.com). This paper’s treatment of “St. Francis de Sales, A Missionary Leader” evinces how the Fransalians have integrated the outer and inner components of the Chablais narrative into the unified whole that is their charism. The following summary of this paper’s principal themes serves to make this process of integration accessible to the wider Salesian family.

After an introductory section on the Fransalians’ Chablais charism (quoted above), this paper orients the reader by giving basic information on the geographic location and history of the Chablais. As the paper progresses into the narrative of the Chablais mission, its method is, first, to offer an exposition of particular elements of the story of Francis’s Chablais missionary apostolate, and, then, to suggest its modern-day application to the Fransalian missionary vocation. For example, the difficulty of the Chablais mission, with the recent memory of the expulsion of fifty priests, and Francis’s initial reluctance and then affirmative response to Bishop de Granier, finds its counterpart today:

We should not be surprised that there will be few volunteers for difficult missions like that of [the] Chablais. Constant appeal to the missionary dimension of our vocation, the pride in the work of our frontier missionaries, the encouragement to see beyond the apparent futility of efforts to hide ‘seeds waiting to sprout with new life, these [are the] attitudes that will create a missionary climate in the Congregation to evoke a missionary response from the members (1.5.3).

Next, Francis’s thorough preparation for the Chablais mission is detailed. Primary, of course, was spiritual preparation for this mission: Francis not only asked all to pray for him, but also devoted himself to prayer, fasting, and penance, in order to dispose every fiber of his being to be filled with God’s “spiritual unction.” Other components of Francis’s preparation included: knowledge of the situation of the mission; intellectual and reflective preparation to confront the mission’s challenges; taking a companion with him to witness to living in communion (one of the Gospel’s powerful core messages) and to prevent “oneself from being a victim of self-righteousness and arbitrariness” (1.6.3); and mental preparation for physical hardship and deprivation.

Francis’s missionary approaches are then considered. The Salesian method of gentleness and approachability “is a simple approach but one which is valid for all times. Genuine, honest and respectful personal contacts pave the way to serious and frank dialogue even on issues on which we have disagreements, allowing truth to unfold itself” (1.7.1.2). Also highlighted are Francis’s perseverance, creativity, and, especially, discretion in the midst of a highly volatile environment:

Francis listened to the advice of Baron d’Hermance not to start the mission with the celebration of the Mass which was one important point of difference between the Calvinists and the Catholics. Instead he gathered the people and gave talks and conferences on [the] faith [and] sacraments, and answered their doubts and questions....
Discretion is a very healthy strategy of respect and concern for the other who has difference of opinion and belief. While it shows respect for differences, it paves the way for mutual dialogue and openness leading to the discovery of truth. When we launch into a new mission area, it should always be a matter of discretion to observe and study the local situation before starting anything that will antagonize the people (1.7.2.1-2).

Other approaches that Francis employed in his ministry in the Chablais were: dialectical preaching aimed at winning over his listeners' hearts and building up the Catholic faith within them; personal asceticism of prayer, fasting, and penance so that he could better serve as a spiritual instrument in God's hands; and readiness for temporary setbacks, wounds, hurts, and exhaustion.

Finally, the collaborative nature of the Chablais mission's second phase, and its enduring relevance, is treated. Francis's role in this collaborative ministry is a model for ministers and missionaries in every place and age.

Francis insisted on working together as a team of pastors. He gathered them together periodically and invited them to share their pastoral problems and experiences. He threw light on these pastoral issues. He deepened their knowledge and acquainted them with pastoral skills. He helped them to see power in unity.

At times mission work does not progress satisfactorily because of lack of unity among the priests and religious. Unhealthy competitive mentality, negative criticism of one another blocks them from using the strength and power of team work.... Where there is lack of organization of people and programmes mission work lacks direction, and there is dissipation of energy, time and talents of all concerned. We have much to learn from Francis in the way he organized the Chablais Mission (1.7.6.2-3).

V. Francis's Chablais Mission and the Salesian Charism

The portion of the Fransalians' working paper on Francis as missionary leader professes an engaging look at this Salesian missionary congregation's assimilation of the archetypal narrative of Francis's missionary apostolate in the Chablais as its singular charism in the Church. Other members of the Salesian family also exalt and accord great veneration to this episode, while integrating their reflection on it with their own particular charism. For example, the De Sales Oblates, founded in 1876, nearly four decades after the Fransalians, have their own distinct starting point. Like the Fransalians and many other members of the Salesian family, the De Sales Oblates are also part of the 19th-century "Salesian Pentecost."

Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis (1793-1875), the inspiration for the foundation of the De Sales Oblates, and Fr. Louis Brisson (1817-1908), their founder, regarded Francis de Sales's Christian humanism, with its generous vision of a world of divine and human hearts, as the remedy for the rigidity of Jansenism and the irreligious secularism of their day. Rather than singling out one episode in Francis's life (as did the Fransalians) or one theme in his writings, Mother Chappuis and Fr. Brisson embraced the rich whole of the spirit and doctrine of

Figure 3. Chapel of the fortress of Allinges (France).
Each night Francis sought refuge in the fortress of Allinges, where he spent long hours of prayer in the chapel before the Romanesque fresco of Christ in Glory (10th-12th century). The foundation and charism of the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales (also known as the Fransalians) was inspired by Francis as the Apostle of the Chablais. So that the Fransalians would always be mindful that their charism was the missionary spirit of the Apostle of the Chablais, the bishop of Annecy at the time of their foundation (1838) entrusted to their care the fortress of Allinges. It continues under the care of the Fransalians to this very day.
Francis de Sales (distilled in the Spiritual Directory), which was always greater than the sum of its parts, or any one of its parts.

The researches of Fr. Alexander T. Pocetto, OSFS, have meticulously documented that not only was Mother Chappuis steeped in Francis de Sales's writings and had a profound grasp of his wisdom, but also that she saw herself, and was likewise perceived by her contemporaries, as an ardent and indefatigable “Apostle of the Salesian Spirit.” Mother Chappuis had a very specific vision of what God was calling Fr. Brisson to do, namely, to establish the community of men that Francis had not lived long enough to found, and that this community’s singular charism and mission would be to live and to disseminate through their various ministries (“the Christian education of youth ... the missions [and] in all the forms of ministry” [Constitution 13]) the spirit and doctrine of Francis de Sales. This vision was fulfilled with the foundation of the De Sales Oblates, which Mother Chappuis felt was the work that the Lord was calling her to from the time she entered the novitiate of the Fribourg Visitation and which was her very raison d'être. Fr. Brisson sets forth the foundational vision for the De Sales Oblates thusly:

Let's be fully aware that we are Oblates of St. Francis de Sales....

There are, needless to say, other communities established under the name of St. Francis de Sales, and which stem from his doctrine. Others may have the doctrine of St. Francis de Sales—more or less; but it is certain that the Oblates are those who possess that doctrine in its integrity. The Visitation inherited it.... It is the Good Mother [Mother Chappuis] who has transmitted to us the understanding of this doctrine and of this treasure confided to the Visitation.

St. de Chantal asked St. Francis de Sales to form an institute of priests: “Form priests who will be like you, who will preserve your spirit.” And it is we who—three centuries later—have come to acquire this heritage....

Viewed from the perspective of the Salesian charism in its integrity (the spiritual patrimony of the De Sales Oblates), Francis's Chablais mission and “Chablis Spirit” take their place among a series of archetypal Salesian narratives, each of which captures the imagination and has compelling spiritual significance and power. Alongside the narrative of Francis the Apostle of the Chablais, there are the Salesian narratives of, among others, Francis the model post-Tridentine bishop, Francis the apostle of the spoken and printed word, Francis the spiritual director, Francis the champion and teacher of the universal call to holiness and the devout life, Francis the founder of the Visitation Order, Francis the theologian, Francis the Gentleman saint, Francis the doctor of the Church, Francis the patron of writers and journalists, and Francis the precursor of the Second Vatican Council.

Many of the constitutive elements of the Chablais mission, which came at the outset of Francis's ministry, presaged what would later become the essential elements of Salesian doctrine and spirituality, whose full maturity and richness unfolded in the remaining nearly quarter century of Francis's ministry—in his letters of spiritual direction, sermons, Introduction to the Devout Life, Treatise on the Love of God, and foundation of the Visitation Order. And, as the late Sr. Marie-Patricia Burns, VHM, reminded us, on the occasion of the fourth centenary of the initial encounter of Francis and St. Jane Frances de Chantal in Dijon in 1604, without this encounter that flowered into their spiritual friendship and the foundation of the Visitation Order, there would not be the Salesian charism as we know it, Francis may not have been canonized a saint and declared a doctor of the Church, and congregations such as the Oblate Sisters and the De Sales Oblates would not have been founded (a point likewise underscored by the above cited quotation from Fr. Brisson).

VI. Concluding Thoughts

As this issue of the ICSS Newsletter goes to press, the Church and the Salesian family celebrate the solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. There is a symmetry here, as this feast brings us back to the gentle and humble heart of Jesus that nurtured, sustained, and shaped Francis's ministry in the Chablais mission and in the years thereafter. Francis himself was forever changed by the transcendent and transformative power of the gentle and humble heart of his beloved Jesus. Francis labored tirelessly to turn the world that he inhabited from the violence that was omnipresent, so as to bring the hearts of those to whom he ministered to beat in harmony with the Savior’s gentle and humble heart. His “Salesian method,” which was the distinctive form that his imitation of Christ took, stood apart from, on the one hand, the force and violence used by the Calvinists to coerce the Chablais into submission, and, on the other, the aggressive strategy and threats employed by his fellow missionaries. Francis’s way of being in a violent world, his “Salesian method,” is as timeless and powerful a message to our equally, if not more, violent world, as it was to his own time and place.

Joseph E. Chorpenning, O.S.F.S.