



COMPASSION IN OBLATE MINISTRY

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One of the proposals from the General Chapter last summer directed "the General Council to consider as a theme for the next meeting of Major Superiors the topic of "compassion" from a Salesian point of view and with the objective of raising the Congregation's consciousness of the need for this quality given the effects of neoliberalism."⁽¹⁾

As one means of honoring the intent of this proposal, I have decided to address the theme of compassion in the context of Oblate ministry today. To accomplish this task, this paper will look, first, at the compassionate God of Scripture: at the God of the Exodus event and then at the incarnation of divine compassion in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. After that, it will consider the ministry of compassionate love and apostolic zeal in our patron, St. Francis de Sales. Following that, it will turn to a brief study, from the perspective of compassion, of several Oblate Constitutions, considering what they have to say regarding the manner of Oblate ministry today. Finally, this paper will consider how to express compassion in the face of the devastating effects of neoliberalism, looking for guidance here in the Founder's dedication to a ministry of presence and compassion among the workers of 19th century France.

THE COMPASSIONATE GOD

Etymology, or the study of the linguistic history of words, is often helpful in discovering what the words we employ frequently really mean. We all know that the etymology of the word, "compassion" comes from two Latin words which mean "to suffer with." To be compassionate, then, means to be willing to suffer along with someone else, to be willing to freely join them in their painful experience so as to share that pain with them and thereby to lessen it for them. Scripture frequently reminds us that ours is a compassionate God. Psalm 78 tells us that God is "full of compassion" (Ps 78:38); and the Book of Sirach proclaims

that the Lord is "compassionate and merciful" (Sirach 2:11). As psalm 145 puts it, God's compassion extends "toward all his works" (Ps.145: 9). In fact, the many references in the Old Testament to a kind, merciful and compassionate God are far too numerous to list.

What is new about compassion in the New Testament is its conviction that it is in the person, life and ministry of Jesus that God's compassionate love for the human family has been fully revealed to us in human form and given to us for our imitation: "be as compassionate as [the] Father is compassionate" (Lk 6: 36). In looking at Jesus as the compassion of God in human form, let us remember that if compassion means "to suffer with," it implies, before that, "to be with." That is why Jesus is first called *Emmanuel*, God **with us** (Mt 1: 23). Thus, the Incarnation means, before all else, that God's compassionate love for us is first manifested to us precisely in the ordinary human life which Jesus lived among us. Thus, it is disclosed in those thirty hidden years of family life in Nazareth during which Jesus lived fully immersed in the daily give and take of relational life, in the hard physical labor of a carpenter, and in living among the poor and little ones of Israel, as one of them.

"To be with" also implies "to be in **solidarity with**." In Jesus, God is no aloof and distant deity. He is, rather, fully engaged in the life and struggles of his people. After all, he is the same God who revealed his name to Moses not simply as "I AM" but more fully as "I am concerned about you" (Ex 3:14, 16) and acted on that concern by liberating his people from the slavery of harsh political oppression. Forever after, the God of Israel would be recognized as a God who is in solidarity with his people and whose compassionate love for them reaches not only to the spiritual, by which he saves them from their sin, but also into the very fabric of their everyday life, bringing dignity, justice, and freedom into its every nook and cranny, including the political, cultural, and economic. (Incidentally, it is this aspect of divine compassion which will speak most directly to the plight of those who suffer from the pervasive evils of neoliberalism, of which more will be said later.)

Since God's compassionate love reaches into the very fabric of human life, it is not surprising that Jesus not only redeemed his people from sin by his death for them on the cross, but also addressed their human needs. Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, befriended the alienated, and spoke out in defense of the poor and the disenfranchised. As Emmanuel, he was both God among his people and also God in solidarity with his people. In him, the poor found a friend and the marginalized an advocate.

We must go further. As the human life of Jesus makes clear to us from Scripture, "to be with" not only means "to be in solidarity with," it also means "to suffer with." And Jesus suffered greatly because of his decision to be identified with and to be a special advocate for God's people. That suffering culminated in a terrible agony and the ignominious death of his final passion. But the fullest meaning of divine compassion goes beyond suffering *with* and becomes a redemptive suffering *for others*. For this reason, the one who is

Emmanuel is also Savior. Thus, because God is love, and divine love is compassionate, the world and the whole human family are saved on the cross of Christ.

St. Francis de Sales was fully aware of the significance and true character of Jesus's compassionate love for the world. It was for this reason that he chose these words as the title for the final chapter of the last book of the Treatise on the Love of God: "That Mount Calvary is the True School of Love." There he writes that "Mount Calvary is the mount of Lovers." For this reason, he adds, "the children of the cross glory in this, their wondrous paradox which the world does not understand: Out of death, which devours all things, has come the food of our consolation, and out of death, strong above all things, has issued the all-sweet honey of our love. O Jesus my Savior, how worthy of love is your death, for it is the supreme effect of your love!"

Treatise, Bk 12, ch 13

For de Sales, then, the death of Jesus is the "supreme effect" of his love. Through it, the compassionate love of God brings forth life from our death and grace from our sin. It remakes a fallen world into the new creation and refashions each person into the bride of Christ and a living temple of his Holy Spirit!

THE COMPASSIONATE MINISTRY OF ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

In 1623, just a year after the death of St. Francis de Sales, St. Jane de Chantal wrote, in response to a request from Dom Jean de Saint-François, her reflections on her special spiritual friend. She concluded that letter with these words: "*many people have told me that in seeing him they seemed to see our Lord [walking once again] upon the earth.*"⁽²⁾ Thus, what the Good Mother would later say in prophecy of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales was already being said centuries earlier of their Patron, St. Francis de Sales. Because Francis so perfectly lived Jesus and modeled his ministry after his, we would fully expect him to possess a compassionate heart and to exercise a ministry of compassionate love similar in every way to that of Jesus. And so he did. It was Francis, after all, who gave as heraldic shield to the Order of the Visitation a pierced heart crowned with thorns and mounted by a cross. With that shield, he gave them the heart of Jesus, symbol of compassionate suffering, as food for their prayer and as model for their lives with one another. In giving them that symbol, he was also describing for them the characteristics of both his person and his ministry. Let us now reflect a bit on the compassionate character of his ministry.

What I believe is of central importance in appreciating the compassionate character of the ministry of de Sales is to remember what occurred during his ordination as bishop on December 8, 1602. On that occasion Francis had a religious experience which was to set the apostolic agenda for the rest of his life. He was later to describe this experience to his fellow saint, Jane de Chantal:

"God had taken me out of myself in order to take me to Himself, and then He gave me back to the people. That is, He converted me from what I was for myself into what I was to be for them."⁽³⁾

God took Francis out of himself in order to take him to Himself. In this action, Francis experienced in a special manner what is meant to be the single most important goal of every person: union with God for whom the human heart is created. He was henceforth tireless in teaching this truth to the people of his day, and particularly to the laity to whose spiritual nourishment he was especially dedicated. He did this by preaching, by spiritual guidance, by catechizing, and by writing religious classics.

The principal means to union with God, he taught, are: prayer, both personal and liturgical, frequent use of the sacraments, the practice of virtue, and a generously creative openness to the divine will as it is made known by the duties of each person's state in life, as well as by the demands of charity which are disclosed in each succeeding present moment.

Union with God, he taught, leads to a personally transforming experience. It results in a deep inner peace which is manifested outwardly by an unfailing gentleness towards others as well as by a spirit of joyful optimism even in the midst of difficulty and challenge.

After taking Francis to Himself, God returned him to the people. This experience taught Francis that one is to leave union with God to go out to others in a generous sharing of the benefits of that transforming union. He did this himself by a life of a compassionate love and apostolic zeal.

An early expression of this compassionate love and apostolic zeal manifested itself when, as a newly ordained priest, he volunteered for a difficult and dangerous missionary assignment in the region of the Chablais, then a Calvinist stronghold and militantly anti-Catholic. After four years of exhausting and innovative missionary activity, the whole region returned to the Catholic faith. This generous apostolic spirit continued when Francis became a bishop. He gave himself totally to his people, spending himself in their behalf. Preaching frequently, he visited every town and hamlet of his mountainous diocese, often on foot or by horseback. He personally taught catechism to the youth of Annecy. While teaching them, he enjoyed playing the clown, thereby more easily winning their young hearts to Christ.

Like ours, his was a post-conciliar age. He was therefore conscientious in implementing the decrees of Trent and modeled its ideal of a resident bishop, personally seeing to the theological education of his clergy and the spiritual and sacramental nourishment of his people.

He and Jane de Chantal became great spiritual friends and co-founders of the Order of the Visitation. The friendship between them is celebrated throughout the Church even today as an outstanding example of how a deeply satisfying human relationship can, when centered in Christ, lead to great sanctity as well. A major arena for Francis's apostolic zeal and compassionate love was the spiritual guidance of men and women from every walk of life. He was a master

of this spiritual art. He respected the primary role of the Holy Spirit in guiding the life of each person, and deeply regarded each one's unique dignity and inalienable freedom. These were principal characteristics of his spiritual guidance. They led him to make use of persuasion, never force, in his attempt to win hearts to God and to His will for them. Francis was convinced that this is how God had first dealt with us in Christ. It has become identified with what is now known as the Salesian spirit.

Francis died on December 28, 1622. Following the impulse of his 1602 religious experience, he had given himself throughout life both to God in intimate prayer and to God's people by living among them as Jesus had: in filial obedience to the Father's will, and in self-less service to His people, being among them always in gentleness and humility of heart.

OBLATES AND THE MINISTRY OF COMPASSION

Our Constitutions remind us that we are to imitate St. Francis de Sales in his own imitation of the compassionate love of God as manifested in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. This will mean, first of all, that as apostolic religious we are to enjoy being *with* the people we serve. Constitution 211 expresses it in this way: "Oblates will keep in mind that they are...at the service of all people." Because we are to serve all people, we are to make a serious effort "to meet them, to listen to them, to understand them, in their living conditions," and to help them.

Let us be clear as to what Constitution 211 means here: we are to take the initiative in meeting, listening to, understanding and helping our people. Ministerial *initiative* is envisioned here. Therefore, it is vitally important that we Oblates be self-movers as ministers. It is not envisioned by our spirit that we will wait in some regal isolation for people to reach out to us, to break through our resistance, or to beg us to serve them, No, we are to go to them eagerly and we are to find joy in being among them, just as Jesus did, just as Francis did. In that way, we are to be ready to meet, listen, understand, and help them.

Following the biblical model given us in Constitution 206, we are to imitate the Good Shepherd "who knows his flock and gives his life for it." The Good Shepherd not only goes in search of the lost sheep, at great personal risk, but he literally spends himself for his flock, ultimately surrendering himself in death so that they may have new life in abundance.

We are called to suffer with and for the people we serve, spending ourselves in a manner similar to that of the Good Shepherd. Like him, we are to willingly lay down our lives for our sheep in a dying which is daily. What is this daily dying? It is all those sacrifices which we are called upon to embrace in a lifetime of service to others: getting up early so we can celebrate Mass for the faithful before they begin their work day; frequently giving up our evenings so as to be available to our people at a time which is more convenient for them; being there

for them whenever a crisis or an emergency strikes, as well as when they are celebrating life's happier moments; it is a spirit which accepts, even embraces, the countless interruptions which our lives become because they are apostolic. The examples could be multiplied for they are countless. We know them from experience. Dying for us, then, is the frequent stretching which, with the passing years, makes us increasingly available to those we serve. Using St. Jane de Chantal's expression, the sufferings and stretchings associated with a ministry of compassionate love no longer constitute a martyrdom of blood as they did for Jesus, but rather a "martyrdom of love." ⁽⁴⁾ For us apostolic religious, then, to live is to serve and to serve is to suffer for others.

Constitution 207 gives us St. Francis de Sales to imitate as the "faithful image" of the Good Shepherd. It describes his apostolic philosophy and ministerial manner and, in doing so, describes Oblate ministry as well. Let us study it more closely.

Inasmuch as love "constitutes the center of [de Sales'] teaching," it comes as no surprise that love was also "the driving power of his pastoral activity." That love was manifested particularly in "his zeal for souls" which was, according to St. Jane de Chantal, "his most outstanding [pastoral] virtue." She writes in her 1623 letter to Dom Jean de Saint-François that it

"seems to me that zeal for souls was our Blessed Father's dominant virtue, for in a way, one might sometimes have said that he left the more immediate service of God to give pride of place to his neighbour. Dear God, how tender he was, how gentle and how strong to help, and how he laboured! His zeal burned him up in the end." ⁽⁵⁾

Francis knew from Scripture that Jesus was zealous for the salvation of souls and followed his lead here. Zeal for the salvation of his people led him to spend himself entirely for others, not just now and again, not just in certain areas or for certain people, but continually, in all circumstances, and for everyone.

I have always been intrigued by the five chapters in the Treatise on the Love of God which are dedicated to an exposition of zeal (cf. Book 10, chapters 12-16). Those chapters underscore the importance for de Sales of the virtue of zeal in our love of God. It is in his pastoral practice that the Bishop of Geneva shows us the importance of zeal in our love of neighbor as well. Zeal "impelled him to '*be all things to all men*' and thus to win all to Christ" as we are reminded in Constitution 207. So must it impel us. I am reminded here how, as novices, we were encouraged to do all things *passionately well*. This takes on added significance in understanding how zeal is to characterize our ministry as Oblates in which *passion* for the salvation of others is linked so closely to the *compassion* with which we are to serve them.

The ministry of de Sales was also characterized by "a joyful optimism, confident in the effectiveness of God's grace and believing in the good which is the human person" (Constitution 207). What was the source of this joyful optimism in the ministry of de Sales but his unbending confidence in the power of God's grace, coupled with an unflappable belief in the basic human goodness with which

every person is gifted by the Creator? Let us believe, as did Francis, that when grace meets human goodness in our ministry on behalf of others, wonderful things happen, things which far exceed the sum total of the human talent and effort involved. Let us be confident that whenever grace meets good will, it always triumphs. That belief will enable us, as it did our Patron, to be joyfully confident ministers despite failure and flaw, despite disappointment and discouragement, even despite sin and evil.

"His profound ability to understand the feelings of the people with whom he was concerned as pastor gave him access to souls" (Constitution 207). Rarely in the annals of the saints has a clearer example of the pastoral gift of "reading hearts" been found as in that superior spiritual guide, Francis de Sales. His ability to read the human heart speaks to his great faith in the intimate presence of the Holy Spirit as well as in the pastor's ability to draw upon the power of that Spirit in both discerning and addressing the deepest human and spiritual needs of those he serves.

"But this ability also inspired in him respect and esteem for the dignity and value of everyone" (Constitution 207). Knowing with faith that the Holy Spirit lived deep within each of those whom he served prompted in Francis a profound reverence for the dignity and value of his people, no matter how they stood relative to any other standard. This is our legacy as Oblate ministers. Frequently, we may be tempted to use some other standard by which to decide who are worthy of our ministerial attention. The only standard by which God decides such worthiness is their dignity as His *imago*. That was the standard which Francis used and it is to be ours as well.

Let us sum up the characteristics of an Oblate ministry of compassion based on these several Constitutions. Oblate ministers are to enjoy being with the people they serve, taking the initiative to be among them so as to serve them. Like the Good Shepherd, we are to know our sheep by name.⁽⁶⁾ We are to go out in search of them and are to suffer for them in a daily dying which, in our tradition, results in a martyrdom of love. As with our Patron, zeal for the salvation of those we serve is to consume us. Despite sin and failure, ours will be a ministry which rings with joyful optimism and addresses our people's deepest spiritual yearnings. We will respect the dignity, worth, and freedom of each human person as made to God's holy image and we will work to bring that image to perfection within them. We will do this not only for their salvation but also for the world's betterment, believing that holy people will transform the world according to gospel values.

THE MINISTRY OF COMPASSIONATE LOVE IN FACE OF NEOLIBERALISM

In the course of their ministry, both Jesus and Francis faced evil which was largely either personal (such as personal sin) or relational (such as sinful

behavior between people). But for the most part they did not have to confront evil which is inherent in political or economic structures themselves. Thus, they did not have to minister in the midst of what today is often expressed, somewhat misleadingly, as *structural evil*. At their May, 1995, meeting in Mexico, the Bishops of Latin America decried the structural evil inherent in neoliberal Capitalism which, insisted Archbishop Oscar Andrés Rodríguez Maradiaga, "carries injustice and inequality in its genetic code."⁽⁷⁾

How can one show compassion when it is not a single person but an entire system which is the source of evil, in this case, an economic exploitation which results in "the terrible marginalization that beats down the countries who have a large indigenous population"? ⁽⁸⁾ In their concluding statement, "*Latin America: Arise and Walk*," the 70 bishops from the Caribbean, and Central and South America passed a moral judgment against neoliberal Capitalism which they said has caused "the impoverishment and misery of millions of Latin Americans." ⁽⁹⁾ Perhaps, for us Oblates, the first place for compassion in the face of such massive evil is for Oblates from all over the world to make a sincere effort to understand one another. Those of the first and second worlds, for example, need to understand the unique socio-politico-economic context in which many of their confrères minister today in the third world. Those confrères living and ministering among the oppressed peoples of the third world must not easily succumb to the temptation of identifying their confrères in the first and second worlds with the values espoused by neoliberalism. In other words, compassion will mean an open and honest exchange among confrères with neither hostility nor judgment, and always in charity and mutual trust.

Secondly, we can heed the advice of Pope John-Paul II who remarks in *Redemptoris Missio*⁽¹⁰⁾ that the most effective ways to confront evil of this kind is to convert human hearts. Once converted, those hearts will foster structures which further gospel values. This approach becomes clear when the pope addresses the phenomenon of liberation in the Church's evangelization efforts, particularly in the southern regions of the world "where action on behalf of integral development and liberation from all forms of oppression is most urgently needed" and where missionaries are frequently "recognized as *promoters of development*" (RM, 58). He reminds us that, although missionaries are not, as such, qualified to "work directly on the economic, technical, or political levels, or to contribute materially to development," they are, nevertheless, eminently qualified to form consciences through their preaching of the Gospel. And since "*man is the principal agent of development*," as the human conscience is formed after the pattern of Christ, man himself will, in turn, transform society along the lines of gospel values.

The Pope reminds us that the Church is concerned not only with changing behavior --through conscience formation-- which contributes to material poverty and underdevelopment in the southern hemisphere. It is also committed to changing behavior which contributes to the consumerism of the northern

hemisphere and which leads to spiritual poverty caused by overdevelopment. He writes that "an excess of affluence is as harmful as excessive poverty" (RM, 59). To those who believe that all human ills can be addressed simply "by increasing wealth and the promotion of economic and technical growth," the Holy Father says this: "Fight hunger by changing your lifestyle." A conversion of heart through the embrace of gospel values will "create among the wealthy a realization that the time has arrived for them to become true brothers and sisters of the poor through a conversion of all to an 'integral development' open to the Absolute" (RM, 59).

In addition to the ministerial approach described by Pope John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio*, there are important elements in our own spiritual tradition which can greatly assist us Oblates in making an important contribution to the articulation of a ministry of compassion in the face of today's social and economic oppression of the poor, especially of the indigenous peoples of the third world.

In the ministerial efforts of our Patron, for instance, the poor were a particular object of his compassionate love and apostolic zeal. In her testimony at the process for his beatification, St. Jane speaks frequently and eloquently of his love for the poor. She does this in points 27, 36 and 49. Let me quote from point 49 here:

"I declare that...his charity to the poor was beyond compare. He looked after them so tenderly and showed them even more than fatherly care, especially distressed and gentle-people, widows and orphans whom he helped generously and charitably to the utmost of his power; and I heard that he kept a list of such people, getting their names from his priests. It is true and public knowledge that no one ever turned to him in vain and without receiving all the help he was able to give."⁽¹¹⁾

Our own Constitution 12 echoes that Salesian preference for the poor in the larger sense of today's context when it affirms that the "Congregation of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales is committed, in a particular way, to promote justice with regard to the oppressed and downtrodden by whatever form of apostolate or activity [is] recognized as appropriate."

It seems to me that what Father Brisson attempted to do in meeting the social challenges of 19th century industrial France, along with their threat to the morals and faith of working men and women, can serve as the best model for how we Oblates can continue the ministerial tradition of de Sales's preference for the poor and implement our own commitment as a Congregation to "promote justice with regard to the oppressed and downtrodden."

COMPASSION AND WORK WITH WORKERS

There is, in our present Constitutions, a particular focus for our ministry of compassion and love which I would like to signal out at this point. Constitution

214 lists several forms of specialized ministries. First among them is the ministry of work with workers. It says, simply, that Oblates "will work with working men and women."

We know that our Founder often spoke of our particular sphere of ministry in the contemporary world as ministry or work with working men and women. ⁽¹²⁾

Let us reflect here on what he meant and how we may appropriate his meaning today, especially in our concern to exercise a ministry of compassion in the face of neoliberalism.

Father Brisson took his role as Founder seriously. Part of a founder's task, he knew, is to make the mission of the Institute very clear right from the start. He does that in a special manner in the fourth instruction of his 1891 Retreat to his earliest followers. ⁽¹³⁾

He tells them that he is not unaware that his new Congregation is being assessed by many people as nothing more than "one of hundreds of little Congregations that have swarmed in recent times." He also knows, he tells them, that the religious who belong to all the newer congregations are very similar to one another in their basic identity as apostolic religious and in the nature and observance of their vows.

Yet, he assures them, there **is** something very special about the Oblates. That specialness is to be located, he insists, not in their common identity as apostolic religious, but *in the particular sphere of their ministry in the contemporary world*. He believes with all his soul that "we are called to achieve something special in the world and in the Church. We have received a mission which is in touch with the needs of our era." And he is about to make the nature of that mission unambiguously clear to them and to invite them to endorse that special character of Oblate ministry.

Their mission, he tells them, is to be responsive to the unique needs of their times. He reminds them that they are living at a time when people are no longer eager, as in ages past, to go off on a crusade to fight infidels and to liberate the Holy Land. Nor are they preoccupied with heresy, willing to fight all comers in defense of the least nuance of doctrine. No, the contemporaries of the first Oblates "only speak of work and workers. They think only about organizing labor." *The* great contemporary question, then, "is labor, the organization of labor."

Father Brisson is not afraid to face the implications of that question, nor does he seek security in the familiar and comfortable. Therefore, he refuses to see the labor issue as some newfangled intrusion upon the world scene that, if studiously ignored, will hopefully soon go away. He neither resists it nor ignores it. Rather, he whole-heartedly embraces it because he sees the contemporary fascination with work and the rise of the working classes, along with all the social unrest accompanying it, as "a disposition of Providence." In that light, it is to be welcomed and brought under the redemptive sway of Jesus. The sole instinct of *this most pastoral of founders* is to see this new movement within the provident designs of an all-good God and, in His name, to run to embrace it,

bringing with him members of a new congregation founded precisely to assist him in winning workers to Christ by helping them to direct their labors towards His glory and to help bring about the world's betterment through work.

His strong belief, he tells his confrères, is *"that the thought of the Good Mother was that the Oblates, created at this time, ought to act decisively....They have a role to fulfill in this great question of labor and of workers."*

What does he think they ought to do to embrace the workers' movement in Christ's name and in that of the Church? He isn't exactly sure at the time of this conference (*"Only God knows!"*). But he is sure of this much: "It is important that we be involved with the workers, and that we be workers ourselves."

We know that he was an example of both. He had already spent many years in providing a Christian environment for young working girls, and had even founded a new Congregation, the Oblate Sisters, to provide a lasting basis for that effort. Nor was he a stranger to manual labor on behalf of those workers. One familiar example will suffice. He invented a device whereby hot food which was prepared in a central kitchen could be kept warm as it was transported to the many Brissonian apostolates throughout Troyes. Obviously this Founder was not afraid to use his hands, as well as his head and his heart, in ministry on behalf of the new working classes of the Industrial Revolution.

He meant his example of manual labor to be followed by us "if circumstances permit and if God and obedience call us to that." Work of every kind, even manual work, is to be "our great mission." By it we will have an avenue by which to approach "the workers more closely" so as to exercise the Redeemer's ministry among them and to "exert a salutary influence on them."

In these remarks he reminds his first confrères again and again of his conversations with the former Nuncio, Cardinal Czacki, who insisted on the need for "the Church to go to the people" and, "if necessary, to leap feet first into the muddied streets...in order to reach these poor people and rescue them....The Church must put herself at the head of the movement in order to lead it."

It was obviously the Founder's vision that his Congregation would be right at the head of the Church's response to this new movement. Indeed, it would spearhead that response.

What a bracing vision! Father Brisson knew history well. He knew, therefore, that throughout the history of the Church there had been a number of major evolutions in the political, scientific, and socio-economic spheres which, unfortunately, the Church had tended either to resist or to side with the *status quo*, often resulting in the loss of many to the faith. After all, during his time French Catholicism was still suffering the negative, anti-clerical effects of ecclesial resistance during the French Revolution.

In this conference Father Brisson is sharing with the first Oblate confrères his strong conviction that another such major movement is in progress in their very midst: "today this evolution is affirmed in the sense of labor." This is to be assessed as something positive. He is convinced that even future spiritual

accomplishments will be realized by "the power of labor" and, thus, will be the result of "the action of workers." He is eager, then, that his Oblates should be right there at the beginning of this new future, carefully mid-wifing those accomplishments and ministering to their creators by being the new kind of religious he envisions, especially equipped to meet today's challenges head on and with bold enthusiasm and generous creativity.

How does he suggest that they actually do this? By preaching? Preaching, at least in the classical sense, will, he feels, accomplish very little in this arena: "We would achieve an insignificant task." "We must get to work! That is the first, the most important thing to do." Again he quotes his like-minded friend and apostolic mentor, Cardinal Czacki: "Let your religious be workers and, if necessary, let them don work clothes!" The Founder is not frightened by the new kind of religious these words envision. His only comment is that it is good for priests and religious "to associate with the worker's pain and labor."

That remarkable retreat conference took place in 1891 when the social evils of industrialization were robbing workers of their dignity by throwing them into poverty. It was breaking their backs as well as enslaving their wills. The Founder's vision remains a bold and bracing one. It confronted the actual life-situation of the people the Oblates served in its concrete actuality. It envisioned going to those people in the name of Christ, identifying with their plight by suffering with them in the social and human hardships of industrial Europe. It was the Founder's vision that the best way to assist this new flock was to preach to them, not from church pulpits where they were rarely to be found, but by joining with them in their work and by preaching to them from the pulpit of solidarity. His goal was to win that initially hostile movement to Christ so as to transform it into a means of fostering the gospel of Christ for a new age and a very different world.

We are well aware that in many ways the Congregation took a different course, no doubt due to circumstances and opportunities which the Founder accepted as providential. Yet, perhaps that vision, which is still among our foundational texts as a Congregation, can give us the guidance to minister with compassion in yet another very different world, where even greater forces are aligned against human dignity and Christian values.

In our Founder, Louis Brisson, we are not without a daring vision nor a wise guide.

REFLECTIONS

The context for Oblate ministry today varies greatly throughout the world, from the affluence, overdevelopment and consumerism of the first and second worlds to massive injustice, economic oppression, acute poverty and racial bigotry of the third world. It is obvious, therefore, that Oblates will exercise their ministry according to the exigencies of their particular context as well as the concrete

needs of the people they serve. Yet, there are characteristics which are common to all settings of Oblate ministry. Let us look at those common characteristics and thereby express in broad lines the distinctive manner of an Oblate ministry of compassion in the contemporary world.

From what has been said about the approach of the Founder to the plight of the laboring classes in 19th century Europe, we learn that Oblate ministry is to be a ministry of ready responsiveness to the unique needs of time and place. We are, thus, to "enter society just as it is, feet first." It was the working people of the Founder's day whose faith was most threatened by the social upheavals of industrialization. It was, therefore, to them that Father Brisson wanted his Oblates to go. Perhaps his spirit can be best preserved among us today if we too respond to the needs of those whose faith is most threatened in the areas in which we minister: by the evils of materialism, consumerism, and by the breakdown of family and morality in the first and second worlds; and by the economic exploitation, racial bigotry and social injustices of the third world. These needs can be met through any of the many ministries envisioned by Constitutions 179-215.

Ours is to be a ministry of presence, solidarity and advocacy. We are to be eager to be among those we serve, ministering to their human and spiritual needs with zeal, joy, and optimism. Salesian confidence in the power of grace to awaken and enable human goodness will assure us of the triumph of love over evil of every kind. That will be the source of our ministerial optimism despite flaw and failure. We will reverence those we serve and will be dedicated to the divine image with which they have been graced by the Creator, determined to bring that image to perfection in them.

We will serve our people with a gentleness which in unfeigned and which finds its strength in the gentle heart of Christ (cf. Mt. 11:29-30). Therefore, we will use the power of love, which is "stronger than death," to persuade, never force, the human heart. We will attempt to "win" its freedom and thus set it on a course of gospel values which, in time, will refashion a new earth. Therefore, Oblate ministry, even in the midst of massive injustice, will always exercise itself as a "gentle force in a violent world."⁽¹⁴⁾ This will mean that we will resist the easy route of meeting violence with violence, preferring instead to draw upon the gentle, persuasive power of love which knows that when hearts are freely won over to Christ they are also, at the same time, won over to the promulgation of the gospel values of love, justice, and peace. Converted to Christ, people will in turn convert structures, systems and governments from instruments which hurt and oppress peoples to instruments which uplift the human spirit, enable human betterment, and empower good in people. Thus, in our capacity as apostolic religious, we are to work to convert the human heart to the spiritual, social and human betterment of all peoples, but especially of "the oppressed and downtrodden" (Constitution 12).

We are to be advocates of those we serve and are to be in solidarity with them over against the forces which demean their dignity and abridge their freedom.

But we are to do this as a "gentle force in a violent world." Thus, we are resolved to eschew force in the face of misunderstanding, opposition, and even rejection. Such a manner of advocacy will often result in suffering as it did for Jesus. But when our sufferings are joined with His suffering, the power of the Spirit will transform apparent human weakness into a power which saves people and refashions society. To those who believe, the power of the cross of Christ is the only force strong enough to disentangle human freedom from its enslavement to sin and death and to redirect it to a new life and a new world, one envisioned by Jesus and enabled by his suffering love for others. In short, Oblate ministry will follow the Lord's lead in a service which suffers for human and spiritual betterment.

Finally, Oblate ministry will have, whether in the midst of poverty or affluence, a particular focus on nourishing the spiritual hunger of those we serve. We will give them a spirituality especially fashioned for the laity by our Patron. He knew as we know that the human heart is not nourished on bread alone but on every word of God, even on God himself. Thus, like Jesus, we will teach our people to pray and, thus, to enter into a union of loving friendship with their God. We know that they will be transformed by that union. They will be refashioned into those who live Jesus and who, in collaborative ministry with us, will bring his compassionate love to a world which is so much in need of it today.

MAY GOD BE BLESSED

1. "Proposals Approved by the XVI General Chapter," page 5 (English Edition).
2. St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony by St. Chantal, translated, edited and introduced by Elisabeth Stopp (Hyattsville, MD: Institute of Salesian Studies, 1967), p. 172.
3. Francis de Sales: Sage and Saint, by André Ravier, S. J. (Translated by Joseph D. Bowler, OSFS) (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 115.
4. Françoise-Madeleine de Chaugy, *Mémoires sur la vie et les vertus de Sainte J.-F. de Chantal*, III, 3: 3e edit., Paris 1853, pp. 306-307.
5. St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony by St. Chantal, translated, edited and introduced by Elisabeth Stopp (Hyattsville, MD: Institute of Salesian Studies, 1967), pp. 171-172.
6. see Treatise on the Love of God, Book 12, chapter 12, p. 280 of Vol. II of the Ryan edition (Rockford, Illinois: TAN Books and Publications, Inc., 1975).
7. As quoted in the May 19, 1995, issue of the *National Catholic Reporter*, p. 8.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. cf. John Paul II's December 7, 1990 encyclical letter, *Redemptoris Missio: On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate* (Washington, DC: USCC Publications).

11. St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony by St. Chantal edited, translated and introduced by Elisabeth Stopp (Hyattsville, MD: Institute of Salesian Studies, 1967), p. 143.

12. See the Vol. V of the *Works of Father Brisson*, the Fourth Instruction of his 1891 Retreat. This same Instruction is found on pages 229-232, Vol. V, of the Allentown Edition of his *Works* and, in a shorter version, on pages 109-111 of the English edition of the Foundational Texts (# 30) as prepared by Father Roger Balducelli, O.S.F.S..

13. Ibid.

14. "A Gentle Force in a Violent World" has been chosen as the theme for the June, 1996, Assembly of the Second Federation of the Order of the Visitation in the United States.