



THE SALESIAN CENTER
FOR FAITH AND CULTURE

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The “Eighth Sacrament” as a Key to Oblate Formation

I can say to you truthfully that there is no great difference between ignorance and malice, except that ignorance is to be feared even more, especially when you consider that not only is it offensive in itself, but it also leads to contempt for the ecclesiastical state.

For this reason, my very dear Brothers, I implore you to attend seriously to study, because **knowledge, to a priest, is the eighth sacrament** of the hierarchy of the Church.

ST. FRANCIS DE SALES
“Exhortation to Clerics” – OEA 23:303-305

Introduction

In his presentation dealing with “conformation to Christ in the priesthood and religious life,” Fr. Ryan reminds us of the need to adopt the peculiar lifestyle of our Savior, as we endeavor to make Christ’s redemptive grace available and fruitful for the People of God. Why this dual way of life is indispensable in the present day is something for us all to consider as we strive to formulate international plans for Oblates in formation.

In this “Salesian insight,” my hope is to address one element that is indispensable for that formation – namely, the study of Theology. While, indeed, there are other pillars to our formation programs (i.e., the human, the spiritual, and the emotional), in our limited time today, I wish only to explore the intellectual or academic dimension. Drawing from the lives of our Patron and our Founder, I hope to inspire thought and conversation about the necessary role that the study of Theology can and should play in our Salesian/Oblate formation. In some respects, this focal point takes up again our Patron’s famous battlecry.

Call to (Theological) Arms

While we know and promote him to be “the gentleman saint,” recent studies disclose that Francis de Sales also possessed a seriousness that at times appeared rather stern.¹ Especially in his episcopal role of governing the clergy and religious in his diocese, our saintly patron did not hesitate to say what had to be said, no matter what reaction might follow.

In one of his residential conferences, Francis de Sales utters the maxim that “knowledge ... is the eighth sacrament.” Often quoted out of context, we should realize that this sacramental view of the intellectual life is intended, properly, for the clergy. But why does he bestow upon knowledge the character of a sacred encounter?

In his talk, Bishop DeSales exhorts his “very dear brothers” in the Genevan clergy to study precisely because their lack of knowledge is detrimental to the work of the Church. Denouncing those whose theology is deficient, he refers to them indirectly – as “those who are not our brothers except in appearance” – and he opines that they actually cause a more sensible oppression than do the heretics of that age! Years before, in his famous opening address as the new Provost of the cathedral chapter, he excoriated those in his midst who should have known better: “It is our fault,” he says in reference to the canons, “if the name of the Lord is blasphemed among the nations.”² The loss of Geneva to the Protestant Reformers was, in his view, a result of the sloth, no less intellectual than moral, of those who should have taught and lived the faith responsibly.

One could reasonably argue that the stakes remain the same in our own day. In the USA, the Church has suffered from the scandal of child abuse by clerics, one response to which has been the proscription that each of us must now complete a monthly training guide (with compliance being monitored by computer). While that may have a valuable and legally necessary purpose, I often muse on what benefit there might be if we were to keep up with our understanding of theology in the same way! Globally, the Holy Father has called to our attention that “dictatorship of relativism” which, contrary to theology, “does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.” To counteract this, he exhorts us to develop an adult faith and “guide the flock of Christ to this faith,” for “it is this faith – only faith – that creates unity and is fulfilled in love.”³

To champion that faith – in ourselves and by our work – the study of theology is paramount, and, thus, it plays a critical role in our formation programs. For this reason, my little insight today seeks to draw a few possible lessons from our Patron and our Founder (despite their very different historical contexts) about theology *for* Oblate priests and about a theology *of* the Oblate priest.

Let me pause here to explain why I have chosen to focus on clerical formation. It is not meant, in any way, to denigrate the formation of brothers or to ignore our formation as religious. Rather, it stems from the simple fact that the vast majority (88%) of our perpetually professed confreres are clerics and that our apostolic works consist primarily of priestly ministries. With only 2¼ men in each Oblate residence, on a worldwide average, questions about formation into the life of a religious community take on their own concerns, which my time here does not permit me to explore, though indeed we, as a Congregation, must do so eventually.

Characteristics of Theology *FOR* Oblate Priests

With this limited focus, let us first consider the historical experiences of St. Francis de Sales and Fr. Louis Brisson. There we will find four aspects of their theological education that may yield useful guidelines for our own formation programs.

In the first place, it is quite evident that our Patron and our Founder both shared a **love for learning**, particularly in their study of Theology.

We know, of course, that Francis de Sales received a nobleman's education, learning all that characterized the *honnête homme*. We know, too, that he studied law to please his father (and himself, too⁴), but he studied theology for himself ... and on his own! A desire for knowledge must have motivated this duplication of scholarly efforts, and the entire Church continues to reap the benefit of his mastery of the subject!

Similarly capable, though not as widely-acknowledged,⁵ Fr. Brisson also demonstrates a passion for study. Repeatedly, he writes to his parents about his joy at learning both philosophy and theology in the seminaries (minor and major) at Troyes.⁶ Later, in one of his chapters to the early Oblates, he tells them how he loved that "living, concrete (and) practical" theology, which to his mind was "the true manner of teaching, of studying, and of understanding."⁷

- *In today's culture, beset as we are with numerous obligations and potential distractions, how might we cultivate this love for learning in our men in formation?*
- *Beyond the completion of academic credits, how might we consider the desire for education as a guideline for advancement in a formation program?*

Secondly, in addition to their personal predilections, both our Patron and our Founder benefitted in their studies by the presence of influential **mentors**.

The young Francis de Sales was accompanied in Paris by Fr. Jean Déage; in Padua he was guided by the Jesuit Fr. Antonio Possevino, considered “the most distinguished papal diplomat of the day.”⁸ As academic tutors or spiritual directors or personal confidants, the former played an important role in the discernment of Francis’ priestly vocation, while the latter prepared him for his eventual triumph in the Chablais.

Similarly, Fr. Brisson writes about the profoundly positive influence of his theology professors, especially M. Sébille and M. Chevalier, whom he admired and with whom he would develop friendships beyond the seminary.⁹

- *Looking back on our own vocations and educations, are there priestly “mentors” we can identify as having had a significant influence on us?*
- *Should we consider implementing a “mentoring” or “apprenticeship” process in today’s formation programs, whereby the young could more directly learn from the lived experience of well-established, exemplary Oblates? Are there some among us, on a global scale, whom we could identify and engage in this formative work?*

Thirdly, even with these friendly guides, both our Patron and our Founder learned that the study of theology can, in a sense, be its own “**via crucis.**”

For Francis de Sales, the burning theological questions of predestination and the relationship between nature and grace played at least some role in the personal crisis that plagued his student days in Paris and would continue to haunt him in Padua. Nevertheless, it was through the resolution of that theological quandary that he would develop an experiential understanding of optimism that was to be the hallmark of his spiritual direction.¹⁰

No such personal agony by way of theology affected Fr. Brisson, though he does admit of a certain pain at being away from home, about which he was known to shed a few tears.¹¹ Nevertheless, he speaks of the diligent labor it takes to render theological questions useful for our ministries. Contrary to the supposed suffering of those who see no practical purpose in academic debates, he reminds the Oblates in one of his chapters that all such teaching can be useful, if we would but put forth the effort to figure out how it will profit us in our work.¹²

In today’s world, burning theological questions are still asked, as evidenced by the publication of doctrinal and disciplinary notes on Christology, ecclesiology, liturgy, politics, and homosexual tendencies among seminarians, to mention just a few examples.

- *In what ways can we build into our formation programs both critical dialogue and faithful understanding about contemporary theological issues, beyond the treatment these questions may receive in theological schools?*
- *To what extent, if any, should theological dissent be a factor in decisions about progress in formation?*

Finally, we should note that our Patron and our Founder both emphasized the need for **ongoing and continuing education**.

His biographers and others deposed in his cause of canonization tell of the practice of Francis de Sales, when, as bishop, he would host conferences during which he would provide lessons in theology to the clerics of his diocese ... as frequently as three times a week! These lessons “on all that concerned their conditions, their responsibilities, and their obligations” were considered necessary “because this holy Bishop could not suffer the ignorance of his clergy.”¹³

Likewise, and perhaps with even more vigor, Fr. Brisson emphasized the importance of the traditional “chapter” of instruction. As he says to the early Oblates, “I desire that the explanation of the rule which I am giving you should be a teaching which endures. ... As Founder, I have a mandate to implement, a mandate for the implementation of which I am responsible to the Church, to my own conscience, and to you.” In his commentary on this foundational teaching, Fr. Roger Balducelli highlights the significance of this stance. “[Fr. Brisson] does not use the expression ‘normative tradition,’ but a normative tradition is certainly what he has in mind, for he requires that his instructions be a teaching ‘which endures,’ which has ‘the force of law,’ which is ‘the core and substance’ of every member of the Congregation. Note also,” says Fr. Balducelli, “the contention that, in the act of deviating from that teaching, the Congregation would forsake its own chances to survive.”¹⁴

- *While continuing education is, no doubt, an emphasis in all our provinces and regions, might there be ways that we can expand and deepen this in our formation communities?*
- *What role might the “chapters” and retreats play in formation on a regional, provincial, or even international level?*

Having considered a few characteristics by which theology might be of formative and normative value for Oblate priests, let us now turn to the more challenging of our two questions ...

Toward a Theology *OF* the Oblate Priest

The origin and nature of our Congregation make it clear that priesthood holds a central place in our existence as religious. We are, as the very first article in our Rule states, a clerical congregation of pontifical right. Yet, our tradition and our history reveal a potentially confounding truth: both our Patron and our Founder were diocesan priests! Both founded religious orders, and both desired a more contemplative life, but the fact remains that Francis de Sales and Louis Brisson were, themselves, formed in the diocesan priesthood.¹⁵

This historical note underscores the dual challenge of our own Oblate lives – we are **both religious and priests**. With others who are in this same existential boat, we struggle with the reality described by Brian Daley, SJ, namely, that our way of life “yokes together discipleship and apostleship: being ‘called’ and being ‘sent,’ the relational and the structural, following Jesus on his way and being officially delegated by him to do his work.”¹⁶ Religious life is our vocation; priesthood is, for most of us, our office. The former represents the qualitative intensification of our baptismal vows, while the latter reflects our particular position in the institutional Church.

Two difficulties emerge from this tension. On the one hand, our Salesian heritage is profoundly lay in orientation, with its emphasis on practicing “devotion” no matter what one’s state-in-life. Rightly do we emphasize collaboration with the laity in the various forms of our ministry. But a certain irony suggests, at least in theory, that if we become very successful at empowering others in this realm, we risk collaborating ourselves right out of existence! We can and should disseminate our charism so that others may live by it, but the fact remains that, in faithfulness to our priestly and religious vocation, who we are and what we do must remain distinct from that of any of our lay associations.

On the other hand, our Oblate life must also remain distinct from that of other clergy, despite the fact that our ministry, like theirs, is commonly practiced in parishes, and notwithstanding the truth that many people do not understand the difference between diocesan and religious priests. As Stephen Brevans, SVD warns: “When religious priests tend to ‘blend in’ with the diocesan clergy, and have nothing about them that is particularly unique ..., not only are their respective communities ‘deprived of spirit,’ but so is the local church. Certainly,” Brevans continues, “if a community fails to develop a clear corporate identity, there would be ‘little to attract the commitment or capture the passion of potential new members’.”¹⁷

Identifying what makes an Oblate priest distinct from all others, and then inculcating that in our men in formation, is the grand challenge to which we must respond. In the long run, it demands an elaboration on the theology of the priesthood according to

Salesian spirituality, a task far too grand for this humble presentation. But, at least as a first step in response to this challenge, let me pose two reflection exercises for your consideration.

The first reflection is concerned with **models of the priesthood**, as developed by the master of ecclesiological models, Cardinal Avery Dulles.¹⁸ He offers the rudiments of four different interpretations of who a priest is. The first emphasizes that of priest as minister of the Word. The second considers as primary the cultic or sacramental ministry of the priest. The third sees the priest as pastoral leader of a community. And the fourth, which Dulles himself prefers, recognizes the priest as representative of Christ.

- *The question for us to consider is this: which of these four models best reflects who the Oblate priest is (or should be)?*

It would be interesting, I think, for each of us to answer that question personally, to offer some justification for our choice, and then to see whether we share a common perspective across the Oblate world or where our provincial and regional viewpoints diverge. Keep in mind that there is not necessarily one, correct answer or model. Personally, I think two of these models compete for our attention, but since I do not wish to prejudice your selection, I shall not elaborate ... yet!

The second reflection is a bit more concrete and is concerned with our Founder's contention about what is essential to our Oblate identity, what makes us distinct from all other clergy and religious, even from those who share the doctrine of St. Francis de Sales. In one of his chapters on this subject, Fr. Brisson makes it clear that others "do not have the intimacy of the thought, life and spirit of the saintly Doctor. We, on the contrary, force ourselves to convey and realize in ourselves the life of the Saint, his thought, his intentions, his conduct and manner of acting, his soul in its totality. That is our task, our ministry."¹⁹ And the mechanism for fulfilling this task, says he, is the practice of our **Spiritual Directory**.

- *The question, in this case, is: how might we adapt the Spiritual Directory specifically to our life and work as Oblate priests? Though this question was treated nearly a century ago,²⁰ it behooves us to consider it again for priestly ministry in today's world.*
- *With reference to the models mentioned above, how does the Oblate priest distinctively function? How does an O.S.F.S. preach the word, celebrate the sacraments, lead a community, or represent Christ in the world? And how might we better inculcate this distinctive approach to the priesthood among our men in formation?*

Conclusion

For such a brief talk, I have raised many questions, hopefully not so many as to be overwhelming. But if the end result that we start with this week is the common formation of the next generation of Oblates, most of whom will be priests, then we have our work cut out for us, and these questions may inspire some worthwhile thoughts that may even lead to practical guidelines. Frankly, whatever progress we make in promoting theology for Oblate priests and elucidating a theology of the Oblate priest will be of benefit to our Congregation.

Let me conclude, then, with a reference to how important this process is for all of us. The words are not mine, but those of Fr. Brisson, who tells us, just as he told our first confreres:

The Congregation of the Oblates, today, is you. The Congregation in ten years will still be you; in a hundred years, in two hundred years – if it still exists – it will still be you, yourselves. Understand that well. It is a heritage that you have received and which you will pass on to others. Let it not deteriorate in your hands! No one will reassemble what you will have dismantled; no one will rebuild what you have worn out; no one will reconstruct what you have broken down. It is as terrible a responsibility as one can incur.²¹

I hope and pray that our work during these days in Center Valley has been a help toward fulfilling that responsibility.

+ May God Be Blessed +

ENDNOTES

1. See the three unpublished letters of Francis de Sales to Antoine Favre, readable online at <<http://www4.desales.edu/SCFC/Studies/toFavre.html>>.
2. OEA 7:100.
3. JOSEPH CARDINAL RATZINGER, homily during the Mass "Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice," 18 April 2005.
4. MICHAEL DE LA BEDOYERE, *SaintMaker: The Remarkable Life of Francis de Sales, Shpherd of Kings and Commoners, Sinners and Saints* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1998), p. 28: "De Sales might well have thought that this degree would be of value if and when he became a priest, for as a priest, he would inevitably receive quick preferment because of his birth and connections."
5. CONGREGATIO DE CAUSIS SANCTORUM, prot. N. 645, Aloisii Brisson, *Positio Super Virtutibus* (Romae 1998), p. 36: "Dans le registre des élèves présentés à l'évêque pour les ordinations, on lit: 'Brisson: intelligence plus qu'ordinaire, application très soutenue, piété solide'."
6. Cf. *Positio Super Virtutibus*, pp. 11-12, 28.
7. *Positio Super Virtutibus*, p. 31.
8. *SaintMaker*, pp. 29-30.
9. *Positio Super Virtutibus*, pp. 30-31.
10. THOMAS DAILEY, "The 'Real' Story on St. Francis de Sales," *Theological Review of the Episcopal Academy* 1/1 (December 2005) online: "It's hard to judge what actually caused such a traumatic event in Francis' young life. It may have been physical fatigue, the energy of his many youthful endeavors finally wearing him out. It may have been intellectual consternation, the theological debates just not sitting well with him. It may have been a psychological complex, his naturally high anxiety yielding its destructive force on his delicate conscience. Whatever the cause, this crisis would prove to be a spiritual "conversion" for Francis. Only after his prayer of abandonment to God's will, made before the statue of *Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance*, was he relieved. And from then on, he no longer sought holiness in the naïveté of romantic fervor; instead, he realized that whatever good he can muster, and whatever bad he might suffer, are far and away surpassed by the mercy of God."
11. Cf. *Positio Super Virtutibus*, pp. 11, 37-38.
12. *Positio Super Virtutibus*, p. 31, with reference to the chapter of 22 May 1896.
13. OEA 23:303-305, note 1.
14. ROGER BALDUCELLI, "The True Understanding of the Congregation according to Father Brisson" (privately published), no. 15-16, pp. vi-vii.
15. Francis de Sales did not, we know, attend a seminary. As DE LA BEDOYERE notes, "no special training was then required in the Geneva diocese for the priesthood, least of all for a graduate of two great universities" (*SaintMaker*, p. 45). That his was a Jesuit education remains significant, inasmuch as the Society of Jesus trained the majority of the new Tridentine clergy.

16. BRIAN E. DALEY, S.J., "The Ministry of Disciples: Historical Reflections on the Role of Religious Priests," *Theological Studies* 48 (1987): 627.

17. STEPHEN BEVANS, S.V.D., "Learning to 'Flee from ... Bishops': Formation for the Charism of Priesthood within Religious Life," *Australian EJournal of Theology* 10 (Pentecost 2007): online p. 7, citing PAUL PHILIBERT, "Conclusion: Road Signs at a Crossroads," in Paul K. Hennessy (ed.), *A Concert of Charisms: Ordained Ministry in Religious Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), and DAVID NYGREN AND MIRIAM UKERITIS, "Religious Life Futures Project: Executive Summary" (Chicago: DePaul University Center for Applied Social Research, 1992).

18. AVERY DULLES, S.J., "Models for Ministerial Priesthood," *Origins* 20 (1990): 284-2889.

19. "True Understanding of the Congregation," no. 9, pp. 31-32.

20. Cf. R. PERNIN, *Spiritual Guide for Priests: The Spiritual Directory of St. Francis de Sales, adapted to the Use of Priests* (New York: Paulist Press, 1918).

21. "True Understanding of the Congregation," no. 22, p. 80.