

ST. LEONIE AVIAT: MOTHER FRANCES DESALES AVIAT

The Newest Salesian Saint

reflections by

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On November 25, 2001, The Salesian family will have a new saint! In honor of her canonization, I would like to reflect briefly on St. Leonie Aviat, Mother Frances de Sales. I will begin my reflections with a few remarks on the central place of “Nazareth” in the spirituality of our founders, for that appreciation provides a helpful clue into the “sleeves rolled up” holiness of that remarkable contemporary woman and saint.

You can learn much about the spirituality of saints from their favorite scriptural passages. Whenever I read something by St. Francis de Sales, for instance, I am careful to observe what Scripture he is quoting, or paraphrasing or alluding to. In this way, I have discovered that a particular favorite of our Patron is Galatians 2:20: “the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me.” This passage is central to an appreciation of his Jesus-centered spirituality: “Live Jesus!” In Galatians 2:29 St. Paul affirms that Christians are now dead, having been “crucified with Christ.” Dead, we no longer live; now Christ lives in us and acts through us. And this is how he continues to pour out the effects of his Redemption throughout time and history. Our role in all of this is a simple one: to “get out of way” to make room for the Savior to live and act in us and, thus, to be seen once again walking upon the earth. (Cf. Article 16 of the Constitutions) We know that because of the peculiar law of grace, we are in no way displaced when Jesus lives in us. On the contrary, it is only then that we are fully actualized as the unique persons we are meant to be.

According to the founder, we are to make room for Jesus by imitating both what he calls his “interior life” and his “exterior life.” We are to imitate his interior life by prayer and a continual union of wills. As for his exterior life, we are to reproduce it completely, the three years of his public ministry as well as the thirty years of his hidden life at Nazareth with Mary and Joseph. “Our existence in the totality of our life conformed to the life of the Savior.” (Article 16) The Good Mother and Father Brisson understand the imitation of Jesus’ “exterior life” in a very realistic, even tangible manner. Thus, according to Father Brisson, we are “to act as he acted and eat as he ate; we are to have his manner of seeing things, of thinking, of living, of speaking.... Jesus Christ is the great model which we give ourselves to imitate, my dear children. We must reproduce in our life his entire life, just as it has been revealed in Scripture. As he was, so must we be: in prayer, in his daily renunciations, in his intimate union with his Father, in his zeal for god’s glory and the salvation of souls.”

(Positio, 151, Instruction, March 7, 1869)

Again and again Father Brisson returns to the theme of “reproducing the Savior” in both his interior and exterior life. Originating with the good Mother, this theme is like a multifaceted diamond which he finds endlessly fascinating. I would like to explore just one of those facets here because I believe it can unlock for us an important aspect of the vocation and holiness of St. Leonie Aviat. That facet is “work” as it figured in the “exterior life of Jesus at Nazareth” (For much of what follows, see *Positio super virtutibus*, pp 149 ff, and the texts cited there.) Father Brisson often speaks of the spiritual meaning of work which he bases on the saving significance of every aspect of Jesus’ life. Including his physical labor. “It was not,” he taught, “only at the moment of his passion that he merited [redemption for us]; he also merited it by his work” during those thirty years of hidden family life at Nazareth. (*Positio*, p. 165-66; *Soeur Aimee de Sales de Cissey, Recueil de sourvenirs sur le pere Brisson, 1889-1908, vol. II, 1897, polyc, Pp. 41-42.*)

Thus, by our work we imitate Jesus. “Oblates have a special way of resembling the Savior and Our Lady. It is by work.” What did Jesus do for the thirty years prior to his public ministry while he lived a family life in Nazareth? “He worked.” “We Oblates must. Therefore, be inculcated with a love for work, for by it we imitate the Savior’s life at Nazareth.”

And why did Jesus work? To teach us the poverty which is experienced by working to earn our daily bread. Each time, then, that we pray in the Lord’s Prayer for our daily bread, let us think that “Today I must earn my bread.” In doing this, we imitate the Savior whose goal. While living in Nazareth, was also “to earn his daily bread.”

Because we imitate Jesus by our work, Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis “had a special appreciation for any money which is earned by a little hard work. She used to call such money, ‘Nazareth money’.” (*Positio*, pp. 165-66)

We are familiar with the social background which prompted the Founder’s frequent reflections on the role of work in the life of Jesus and in the lives of Oblates. The secularized atmosphere of mid-nineteenth century Troyes threatened the faith of many people, especially young people. That threat engaged the priestly zeal of Father Brisson. He saw in Jesus the Worker a way of realigning the workers of the industrial revolution with both the Savior and the saving mission of the Church. It was for this reason that he encouraged his Oblates of both Congregations to be in the forefront of the Church’s efforts to win back workers and their world to Christ. Armed with the Directory, they were to use every possible means, including work, to enter their world, just as it was, and save it. “We cannot change the material conditions [of our society]...Let us, therefore, enter it feet first, without reservation...in order to save it and direct it back to God. (Tilburg 3.14-19) The founder was very much aware that, in proposing this manner of acting, he was following the lead of Pope Leo XIII who “declared that it is work which must lift up the world.” (Tilburg 3.19)

While a young boarding student at the Troyes Visitation, Leonie Aviat came under the influence of Father Brisson’s celebrated ministry on behalf of working girls. The Visitation students lent their hands and support to the homes which their chaplain had established in order to provide these girls with a loving and supportive Christian environment. Leonie’s involvement in these projects caused “her social sense to develop.” (“To Forget Myself Entirely,” p. 23)

She soon felt the first stirrings of a call to religious life. Aware of parental, especially paternal, opposition to a religious vocation, both the good Mother and Father Brisson counseled her to wait until her 21st birthday before acting on that call. Shortly before that birthday, Leonie received a clear indication of the nature of her vocation. While waiting in an eyeglass factory for her mother's glasses which had been repaired, she took note of the young girls who were working there. She was particularly struck by the gentle and maternal manner with which their supervisor was caring for them. "For a moment, she imagined herself in the midst of these teenaged girls, and older sister counseling, encouraging, directing or consoling them." She exclaimed to herself, "How I would love to work with these girls and do them good!" Her vocation was born: She would be "a worker among workers!" (Cf. "to Forget Myself Entirely," p.7)

In fact, Father Brisson had already given her a hint of the nature of what he hoped they would one day realize together. His homes for the working girls of Troyes sorely needed the direction of solid Christian women who, in addition to teaching the faith and conveying values, would be undaunted by the hard work that such endeavors entailed. Hadn't he, as her spiritual guide, told her to spend the time while waiting for her 21st birthday to learn how to 'mend'? "Mend' in this sense was a specific term at the factory... Only the lower class women did this humble work!" (Ibid., p. 29)

The rest is history. The Oblate Sisters were soon founded. The new Congregation patterned its interior life and much of its religious practices after the Visitation sisters with whom Leonie, now Mother Frances de Sales, and her first companion, Lucie Canuet, had spent their formative years. But theirs would be an apostolic life. A new kind of religious, they would be "workers among workers," identifying in this manner with the young working girls for whom they ministered, while doing all in their power to keep practices of their faith. (See the title of chapter III of "To Forget Myself Entirely.")

Just one quote from the young Foundress will make it clear how totally she embraced this new form of religious life. In speaking to her early followers, she remarked: "Your principal occupation is work. Give yourself to it as graciously as possible. Go to your work when the clock chimes; set out joyfully, according to our Rule, as if you were going to the chapel to say the Office and make meditation, because for you, work is a continual meditation." (Ibid., p. 49)

Thanks to the reflections of Father Brisson, Leonie and all the Oblate Sisters who would follow her, had a model for the life they were to lead, Jesus himself. By interior prayer and a continual union of wills, they would imitate his interior life. By hard work, they would imitate his exterior life as it was symbolized for them by the Founder's emphasis on his life as a carpenter at Nazareth. Give the particular social needs of their day, this was how Jesus was to live in them and act through them and, once again, in their time and place, be seen walking in the earth.

And if there was ever any doubt as to the spiritual efficacy of this new form of religious life, a thoroughly apostolic life with a deeply rich contemplative core, the events of November 25, 2001, will lay that doubt firmly to rest. For on that day, the "worker among workers" will become St. Leonie Aviat, Mother Frances de Sales Aviat!