



## STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

**JOSEPH A. DIMAURO, O.S.F.S.**

### *School Leadership Formation in the Salesian Tradition*

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#### *The Problem*

The goal of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales is expressed in the first paragraph of the Constitutions which reads: “Their whole-hearted endeavor will be to sanctify themselves, in order to aid more efficaciously the sanctification of their neighbor, through the different functions of the sacred ministry, the Christian education of youth, and missions in foreign lands” (Dufour, 1933/1994, p. 53). Since the 1903 foundation of Salesianum School in Wilmington, Delaware, the Oblates continue to commit themselves to the work of Catholic education in America.

In the early history (1903-1970) the majority of the staff in schools operated by the Oblates were members of the religious community. This was typical of most other schools sponsored by religious communities. In the 1960’s, with the impact of the Second Vatican Council, the institutions owned and operated by religious communities began to undergo change (Brigham, 1989; Herb, 1997; Magnetti, 1996; McDonald, 1996). Catholic secondary schools suffered the loss of religious priests, brothers, and sisters for many reasons. Some examples include the following: the increased involvement of laity in the ministries of the Catholic Church; the decline in the numbers of candidates for priesthood and religious life; the departure of many priests and religious from active ministry; the increased need for priests and religious to staff other ministries; and the increase in lay involvement in the Catholic secondary schools (Guerra, 1996; Hunt & Kunkel, 1984; Kelly, 1996). Since that time the Oblates, as well as other religious communities, continue to grapple with issues of mission, governance, and the influence of the religious community within sponsored institutions (Fitzpatrick, & Gaylor, 1990; Gray, 1996; Guerra, 1996).

According to the apostolic exhortation on the renewal of religious life promulgated by the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, “the obligation of religious (is) to be faithful to the spirit of their founders, to their evangelical intentions and to be the example of

their sanctity” (Flannery, 1975, p. 683). Religious communities hope to spread the spirit of their founders to all personnel involved in their apostolates. This spirit is the character of the community and makes each religious community distinctive, both from other religious communities and from the diocesan clergy.

Religious are educated for several years in special formation programs that emphasize the spirit of their founder and Catholic tradition. Most Catholic secondary lay teachers and lay administrators have not experienced formation programs of that nature (Clark, 1989). A study done to examine lay and Jesuit administrators in Jesuit schools in the United States regarding their level of understanding of the Jesuit philosophy of education found that the lay administrators’ understanding was less than adequate (Carey, 1987). Catholic secondary schools operated by a religious community associate Catholic identity with the religious community’s distinct philosophy of education. “It is . . . appropriate for a religious community to assess how authentic a school is living out the characteristics of its mission statement and goals” (Gray, 1996, p. 21). Mission statement and goals flow from the educational philosophy of the religious community.

If the lay staff members in a school operated by a religious community do not have a clear understanding of its educational philosophy based on the spirit of the founder of the religious community, the school’s specific expression of that philosophy of education may be in jeopardy (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982).

### *Decrease in the Number of Oblate Educators*

Salesianum School and Northeast Catholic High School in Philadelphia were part of a study regarding the lay administrators’ understanding and enactment of the Oblate philosophy of education. The total number of Oblates staffing these schools declined from 47% in 1968 to 7.7% in 1998. The number of Oblate administrators staffing these schools declined from 80% in 1968 to 37% in 1998. Table 1.1 shows the number of Oblate faculty and lay faculty every five years from 1970 to 2000.

**Table 1.1. Five Year Comparison of Oblate Faculty to Lay Faculty from 1970-2000**

Year	Northeast Catholic High School		Salesianum School	
	Oblate Faculty	Lay Faculty	Oblate Faculty	Lay Faculty
1970	49	51	35	17
1975	43	61	29	31
1980	34	85	27	39
1985	26	71	15	51
1990	20	57	10	54
1995	14	50	9	57
2000	5	35	6	60

The principals and presidents of these two Oblate high schools are Oblates, while 40% of the assistant principals are laymen and/or women. The president of Father Judge High School and one of the assistant principals are Oblates. The principal and the other three members of the administrative team are laymen. The assistant principal in all the Oblate schools is expected to assume a definite leadership role with a clear job description. Leadership is shared among the administrators of the Oblate schools with identified responsibilities, assigned tasks, criteria of success, and recognition (Gorton & Kattman, 1985). The role and the influence of the assistant principal in Oblate schools is best described in the following quote:

The assistant principal is an important link among teachers, students, and the principal, with emphasis on interpretation of district goals and values through support for instructional practice, curriculum development and modification, and student learning activities both in and out of the classroom. (Cantwell, 1993, p. 65)

In place of the phrase “district goals and values,” one could easily substitute “the goals and values of the Salesian philosophy of education” with regard to the Oblate schools. The behavior of the assistant principal has a decided impact on the members of the Oblate school community. Today one principal and most assistant principals in Oblate schools are lay people. Can the philosophy of education of the Oblates be transmitted to lay administrators to preserve the unique character of the Oblate schools as fewer and fewer Oblates are available to run these schools?

Many lay administrators working in “religious” schools, as well as board members, parents, alumni, and even bishops, in the case of diocesan schools, would prefer to have the

philosophy of the religious order preserved and operative in these schools. A business education teacher working for the archdiocesan school system in Philadelphia had been transferred from an Oblate school to another archdiocesan high school for several years. He was eventually transferred back to the Oblate school. When asked about his comparison of the two schools, he remarked,

There is a definite spiritual philosophy operative in . . . (the name of the Oblate school), it drives the faculty and the students to produce their best, 'to be who they are and to be that well,' as St. Francis de Sales says. At the same time, it is clear that we are encouraged to work at being charitable toward each other and to treat each other almost like members of a household, a family. Humility towards oneself and charity towards the neighbor. (W. Fox, personal communication, May 18, 1999)

Many religious communities, such as the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Herb, 1997), are working to educate the laity in the philosophy and spirituality of their communities, especially administrators and faculty members of the schools that the religious community operates.

### *The Oblate-Salesian Tradition*

It is imperative that the Oblates educate the administration, faculty, and staff of schools that they own and/or operate in the mission of the congregation. The Oblates need to instill the mission of the congregation in those working in Oblate schools, particularly as it pertains to the Salesian philosophy of education. This philosophy can be cultivated from the mission of the congregation, the writings of the founder, Fr. Louis Brisson and other Salesian scholars.

Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis, the inspiration of the foundation of the Oblates, and Father Brisson echoed the tradition of St. Francis de Sales in their life and in their writings. Central to that tradition is the union of the person's will with God's will. The very name, Oblate, signifies "consecrated, immolated to the Divine Good Pleasure, chosen for this holy service of the will of God" (Bowler, 1985, p. 44). The Spiritual Directory of the Oblates is the heart of the identity and mission of the congregation. Each Oblate is to be his own person, an individual who has a personal identity as well as a religious identity.

The Oblate is to be a religious whose life as a religious fully prepares him for service to the *contemporary* world, "to enter society such as it is" (Bowler, 3, 30; Constitution 16) and to be ready to go anywhere he's needed . . . and to go there totally equipped to live his religious life, even if alone, to the full. *He seems to be creating a new kind of religious and to be doing so with full awareness.* (Fiorelli, 1987b, p. 17)

Brisson was in touch with his changing world in the latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Industrial Revolution, colonialism, democratization, incipient communism, and anti-clericalism were issues to be faced in his native France. He was conscious of the need to raise up a new religious congregation especially equipped for ministry in the present times. This new religious was a person able to go it alone, e.g., as a missionary, and, at the same time, able to live in a community. The early Oblate responded to the demands of the Catholic Church in the latter

decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Part of the Oblate identity and mission is to reflect on the vision of the founder and to model his spirit by preparing boldly for the future through a critical awareness of and reflection on the present.

The mission of the Oblates is to take the Spiritual Directory to the world. “In fact, the call of Constitution 18, to spread the doctrine and the spirit of Francis de Sales, becomes focused in its call for us to spread the spirit of his Directory to the contemporary world” (Fiorelli, 1987b, pp. 18-19). The decisions at the Fourth General Chapter at Albano, Italy in 1908 included the spread of Salesian spirit and the Spiritual Directory. The raison d’être of the Oblates “is to teach the laity the major principles of our life, specifically the Direction of Intention, the presence of God, the will of God, the duty of the present moment, etc.” (Proceedings, fourth general chapter, 1908, p. 15). At the end of the Chapter of 1904, the Oblates made a promise to the Pope that:

We will work valiantly to diffuse the spirit of St. Francis de Sales in the religious and priestly life and, more fully than ever before, in the Christian life of the simple faithful. This is the goal proposed by our inspiration and foundress [an honorary title], the Venerable Mary de Sales Chappuis. (Proceedings, Third General Chapter, 1904, p. 36)

Francis de Sales was prophetic in his life-long dedication to the spiritual and ministerial empowerment of the laity. The Oblates of the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are pressed to invite the laity with whom they work in collaborative ministry to embrace the key elements of the Salesian life and mission and to the active promotion of the Salesian spirit among the people whom they serve (Fiorelli, 1987a, pp. 3-4). So it is the mission of the Oblates to educate the laity according to the spirit of St. Francis de Sales.

The Wilmington-Philadelphia Province of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales issued a mission statement in 1987 in an attempt to implement a program on Salesian life and mission to be shared with the laity, especially coworkers and those whom the Oblates serve. The mission statement can be broken down into five distinct parts:

1. Union with God and contribution to the salvation of their neighbor means the living out of one’s vocation and the practice of the virtues of patience, humility, gentleness, and charity. One must seize the moment and live fully in the present. One must be attentive to the needs of the neighbor. The fulfillment of God’s commandment to love consists in perfect love of our brothers and companions, for to love our neighbor in charity is to love God in man and man in God (Saint Francis de Sales, 1974). Finally, one must be ready to accept as coming from the loving will of God the painful, difficult and demanding moments in life, as well as those that are joyful.

2. Dedication to the overall vision and mission of the Church is an important aspect of the call to be Christian.

3. To spread the spirit and doctrine of the Christian humanist, Francis de Sales, as intended by Father Brisson means many things. “From all eternity, creation is willed by God with Christ as its alpha and omega, and union with God in Christ as its perfection” (Fiorelli, 1987b, p. 18). The divine plan is realized in the human person and brings him/her a dignity,

worth, and responsible liberty that must be respected. The person responds to God and humanity with love, a gentle force that “is stronger than even death itself and is the ultimate power for good and life, even risen life in the world and in creation” (p. 20). The Salesian spirit, therefore, is an optimistic one with regard to God, creation, and human potential. God loves creation and humanity, has redeemed them, and works through the free and creative activity of human love.

4. People are worthy of immense respect and reverence because they are precious in God’s eyes.

Given their freedom, which even God respects, they are to be dealt with in a gentle manner, in a loving, persuasive fashion, and absolutely never with the force of power, especially if they are young or weak or otherwise powerless. (Fiorelli, 1987b, p. 25)

People are unique; to be taken as they are, unrepeatable. The good in them is to be affirmed. They are individuals, free, loving, and good. Each person is called to be a saint. Francis de Sales in the Introduction to a Devout Life is quite emphatic about the fact that no state in life precludes sanctity (Saint Francis de Sales, 1982). In the Treatise on the Love of God, he asserts that no temperament or personality type precludes sanctity (Saint Francis de Sales, 1974). “All are called! Now! In this vocation! In this stage and state in life! With this personality! Under these circumstances!” (Fiorelli, 1987b, p. 26). Each person is approached in gentleness, i.e., with respect for his or her dignity, and humility, i.e., the truth that the person is a creation of God and has a vocation from God.

5. Fostering peace and justice in the world means responding to God’s concern for his people. Literally, God saved his people; he liberated them from slavery through Moses, a free person that creatively and dynamically cooperated with God. “God works on behalf of his people, in their concrete need, in their hurt, their hunger, their oppression, through others like Moses, like Jesus – like us!” (p. 27). Father Brisson focused on the poor working classes of 19<sup>th</sup> century France, laboring for them and their children for fifty years. His legacy is evident for those bold enough to follow the Salesian spirituality of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales. How does this mission translate to a philosophy of education? Once again, several scholars have worked to formulate such a philosophy.

### *Educating the Administrators*

The mission of the Oblate schools is shaped by the philosophy of education of the Oblates, called the Salesian method of education. Lay leaders in Oblate schools must learn the mission of the Oblates and model the Salesian philosophy of education if the schools are to maintain their Oblate identity. Many lay administrators attended and graduated from an Oblate school. They were exposed to Salesian spirituality in an Oblate high school and/or at Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales/DeSales University. All lay administrators of Oblate schools received some training and were indoctrinated in the Salesian tradition at some time in their professional careers with the Oblates. The means by which the Salesian philosophy was transmitted formally included workshops, retreats, in-service days, ceremonies, worship services,

and even academic courses; however, there is no one official formal training and indoctrination program for lay administrators of Oblate secondary schools.

Oblate colleagues and mentors (for example, a department head or lead teacher who happens to be an Oblate) and lay colleagues and staff who practice the Salesian educational philosophy make up part of the informal transmission of the Salesian philosophy of education. Bits and pieces are exposed during department meetings, during the mentoring process, through relationships with coaches and moderators of student activities who have been trained and through Oblate friends.

The literature on the role of lay administrators in Oblate schools is almost nonexistent, save the notes that some Oblate administrators have kept on file for orientation meetings. Nevertheless, the philosophy that influences the attitude and behavior of lay administrators can be found in the writings of the founder and those who have interpreted his work for the present age.

### *The Salesian Philosophy of Education*

Father Louis Brisson, the founder of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, wrote and spoke extensively about Oblate education. He stressed in his conferences and retreat talks the necessity of teaching the students to live as true Christians faithful to their calling in Baptism (Bowler, 1982, 1984, 1986; Fiorelli, 1994; Lawless, 1953). The unique work of the Oblate educator, whether teacher or administrator involved, above all, being a good role model for the students.

What really makes an impression on a . . . [student] is not so much what you say as what you are. Words are only words. It is the realization of what you are that reaches deep into the hearts of your pupils. . . . What makes a lasting impression on these . . . [pupils] is not so much what you tell them in the classroom as your devotion in the chapel, a kind work you may have given them in the confessional, your spirit of piety . . . your recollection. (Lawless, 1953, p. 88)

Brisson also stressed that the Oblate must devote himself to his students in such a way that he brings education to youth through his life of prayer. He strongly advised the Oblates to pray for their students. The spirit of prayer provides the Oblate with the “proper interior attitude” and the “action performed in a spirit of prayer” (Lawless, 1953, p. 89) that imitated St. Francis de Sales, St. Jane de Chantal, the Oblate patrons, and Mother Marie de Sales Chappuis, the inspiration of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales. “It is the interior disposition of your soul which gives efficiency to your words and to your commands” (p. 90).

Thirdly, Brisson demanded that the Oblate educators respect the soul of their students.

Don't look upon these children as inferior beings. Respect the gift of God in them, respect their intelligence . . . respect their faith, their good will. Have a lot of respect too, of course from a different point of view, for their weaknesses and for their defects. Never neglect this sacred reverence for the child and the student. (Lawless, 1953, p. 89)

Brisson exhorted the Oblate to exercise a special kind of discipline over his students. He was not to be overly indulgent with them. However, while being firm and fair, the Oblate must be consistent, he must always have great respect for the student as a person.

Fourth, the Oblate educator was to have a high regard for the virtues, the good qualities, and the gifts of the students, and to be sympathetic and understanding about their weaknesses and tribulations. The Oblate must see the good in the student and work hard to develop that goodness. As Francis de Sales was known for his optimism about human nature, the Oblate must focus on the positive, stress the strengths, develop the good qualities, while playing down the negatives and weaknesses of the person. Brisson urged the Oblates to have an open mind and sound judgment when it came to ministering to students and to the school community. In 1896 Father Brisson was instructing the Oblates about the value of having high expectations for their students and coworkers. He stressed that this was the essence of true Salesian education. They were to gain the confidence of their students and coworkers “by means of kindly, affectionate, persevering stimulation” (p. 90).

Finnegan (1962) enumerated the unique characteristics of the Oblate philosophy of education. He developed a specifically unique interpretation of the Oblate way of dealing with youth. He proposed a Salesian system of spirituality as it applies to the education of youth. He wrote that:

Salesian spirituality does not begin with the systematic cutting away of affections in the hope of attaining love. The system begins with love and grows in love. Every effort is made to be come increasingly conscious of the goodness of God and to love this goodness with an ever deepening love. . . . The emphasis is on love rather than on obedience; instead of demanding a blind submission to authority, the Salesian approach prompts the soul to give in to the persuasion of love. (p. 1)

The Salesian method of dealing with youth emphasizes that the use of persuasion is more effective than the exercise of authority. “By using the persuasive power of the Salesian method, one can bypass, to a certain extent, youth’s natural suspicion of authority” (p. 1). Young people are not the only ones who are suspicious of authority.

Finnegan stressed that the Salesian educator develop and perfect the image of his or her own personality while taking the time to study and evaluate the personalities of the students. The spiritual system based on the image of authority commands respect in a cold and impersonal manner. Authority commands attention while persuasion attracts attention. The Salesian educator must “develop within himself a persuasive image which is capable of winning the respect and love of his young people” (p. 2). The effective Salesian educator accommodates the needs of the youth and models the virtues and qualities needed by young people in a way that insures their love and respect. Consequently, the youth are motivated to imitate these virtues and qualities and are persuaded to detach from “anything which would hinder the personal imitation and cultivation of these same qualities” (p. 2),

The Salesian educator must develop, through prayer and good works, a healthy image of Christ mirrored in his or her own personality. S/he must be dedicated to the religious values of

the Catholic Church and the spiritual teachings of St. Francis de Sales in such a way as to reflect these values and teachings to the students in his or her professional behavior. The Salesian administrator must develop a healthy image of Christ within his or her own personality. Mary de Sales Chappuis clearly stated that those who encounter the Oblates (for that matter, anyone practicing Salesian spirituality) would see Christ walking again on the face of the earth. The Salesian administrator must do all he or she can to reincarnate Christ in him/herself. The final goal of Oblate education is the salvation of souls. "Oblates are to reproduce Jesus so that, through us, he might once again be found among his people saving them, now through us" (Fiorelli, 1994, p. 15).

The Salesian educator must be willing to adapt to the needs of the student. Respect of the individual student, his or her unique personality, and the changes that each youth must go through demand patience and study on the part of those engaged in the Salesian method. Finnegan asserts:

For this reason, to remain effective in the use of the Salesian method, one can never become so absorbed in the exterior duties of his office so as to exclude time for fresh thought about new and more effective approaches to a constantly changing youth. (p. 2)

It is imperative that the administrator makes a deliberate effort to study the personalities of those under his or her charge and to adjust his or her personal approach to each person as soon as possible. The successful Salesian educator is always ready to learn about the personalities and behaviors of his or her students and to make the necessary adjustments in professional approaches for the sake of the student. The same can be said of the successful Salesian administrator with regard to the members of the school community. The administrator would do well to take Father Brisson's advice to concentrate on those who are the weakest and least favorable or least lovable persons in the school community. These are the ones who most need good solid Salesian leadership.

Another aspect of the Salesian method of education is to establish contact with the student. According to Finnegan "youth itself, and not books, will provide the richest source of that knowledge which will enable a youth worker or teacher to vary his [or her] approach" (p. 2). Salesian educators need to be somewhat extroverted, willing to chat with students and to give up their preparation time or paperwork to listen to them. The same can be said of the Salesian administrator with regard to his or her relationships with students, faculty, and staff. The administrator who "hides" in his or her office all day, completing paperwork at the expense of forming healthy relationships with members of the school community is not following the Salesian philosophy of education.

The Salesian educator must be optimistic about the good qualities of the person. The method calls for respect for, recognition of, and praise of these good qualities while overlooking for a time what may be lacking in the youth (or adults). First, win the trust and confidence of the student, eventually the student will be persuaded to correct any weaknesses and cultivate the opposite virtues. Francis de Sales points out in the Introduction to a Devout Life that concentrating on the opposite virtue is the most effective way to correct any weakness. The Salesian educator works to provide ample opportunities for the youth to practice virtue both

within the curriculum and through extra curricular activities where the youth will receive respect, recognition, and praise. The Salesian administrator must work hard to empower the members of the school community. He or she must provide them with opportunities to share their strengths and gifts with the school community. Empowerment also brings enlightenment. Hopefully, through the professional behavior of the Salesian administrator, the weaknesses and shortcomings of those who are empowered will be corrected in the process.

The more these virtues and good qualities are utilized and esteemed by one working with youth, the stronger they will become in the personality of the youth and the deeper will become his own realization of their true value. In the ideal, the goal of the Salesian approach is to bring the young person to love and respect his own gifts to such an extent that this love and respect will persuade him [her] not only to work hard at the further development of these gifts, but also to correct the failings in his personality. Instead of demanding a blind submission to authority, the Salesian method instead encourages youth to give in to the persuasion of love and self-respect. (Finnegan, p. 2)

Again, the elements of the Salesian approach to the education of youth presented by Finnegan can be applied to all the members of the school community, especially the administrators.

### *Themes of Salesian Educational Philosophy*

Four themes of Salesian education emerge from the study of the literature of Father Louis Brisson, the founder of the Oblates of Saint Francis de Sales, and of those who have worked to translate and transmit his spirit for the Oblates and their coworkers of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. These themes should provide an outline for programs dedicated to educating administrators and, for that matter, anyone employed in a school owned and operated by the Oblates in order that they might model the charism of the institute to all.

*Salesian spirituality* is the first theme that emerges. It is a distinct system of spirituality based on the teachings of Saint Francis de Sales, Saint Jane de Chantal, and others who subscribe to their spirituality. Much of it is lay-centered, making it uniquely valuable at this time in the history of the Catholic Church when religious and clerics are declining in numbers and more and more laypersons are taking on responsible positions as a result. The mission and ministry of the Oblates are based in Salesian spirituality.

A second theme, *Salesian leadership*, includes the qualities, attitudes, and behaviors that are present in and valued by administrators who desire to lead in the Salesian tradition. The Salesian leader uses gentle persuasion instead of relying on authority. The Salesian method obliges the leader to develop a persuasive image that is capable of winning the respect and love of all. The Salesian leader has many duties of office, but he or she does not allow them to stand in the way of developing healthy relationships with the students, parents, faculty, and staff.

A third theme, *the imitation of Christ*, is extremely central to the Salesian philosophy of education. This theme stresses that the leader develops and perfects the image of his/her own personality, deepening the sense of his/her own personal worth. The Salesian leader takes the time to study and evaluate the personalities of those with whom he or she comes into contact as a

professional and to pay attention to the individual needs of each person. Being an effective role model for the members of the school community is the primary objective, equal to or more important than teaching. The healthy personal development of the individual is emphasized over the grasp of academic course content. There is no room for artificiality here, simply genuineness. The phrase “Live Jesus” sums up the third theme. The Salesian leader must mirror the natural image of a healthy personality and the supernatural image of Christ Himself through his/her own personality.

The fourth theme, *motivating others to be holy*, to be all that they can be, to be who they are and to be that well, is the driving force behind Saint Francis de Sales’ first spiritual treatise, Introduction to a Devout Life. The Salesian educator takes the time and makes the effort to cultivate a spirituality that motivates others to strive for personal holiness. Prayer and spirituality are topics for sharing and open discussion; however, personal privacy and confidentiality are always respected. Because the Salesian leader is encouraged to make contact with as many members of the school community as is possible to know the differences and similarities of their personalities, his/her approach must always be flexible, adaptable to those differences. The Salesian leader is always studying fresh ideas about new and more effective approaches to dealing with people. By paying attention to the person’s good qualities, the Salesian leader hopes to motivate him/her to practice virtue. Because all humans have personalities and gifts suitable for the practice of virtue, the Salesian leader values the importance of providing his people with a variety of opportunities for the practice of virtue. The fourth theme may be summarized by stating that the goal of Salesian education is to bring the person to love and respect his/her own gifts to such an extent that he or she will not only work hard to develop these gifts further, but also to correct any personal weaknesses and shortcomings.

The formation program for leaders in Oblate schools should incorporate elements of all four themes. The development and application of a clear and consistent formation program for school personnel is key to maintaining the school’s Oblate-Salesian character. Thus the Oblates would be faithful to their mission to spread the spirit and doctrine of Saint Francis de Sales.

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