**Suggested Readings**

**from**

**Blessed Louis Brisson**

**for use during the**

**2025 Double OSFS Jubilee**

150th anniversary of the death of

Ven. Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis

150th anniversary of the Official Foundation of

the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales

**I.**

**Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis**

**and the Trinitarian Origin of the De Sales Oblates**

**(Blessed Louis Brisson, Conference, no. 6, Oblate Retreat of 1885[[1]](#endnote-1))**

*Every religious order is linked to a notion distinctly its own. For some orders, it is poverty; for others, zeal for the salvation of souls; others practice painful mortifications; others devote themselves to a special ministry, such as the care of the sick. What, then, is our aim? For we have an aim that is distinctly our own. If we did not, we would have no reason for being (*raison d’être*). We would be no more than a group of individuals doing exactly the same things as others do, and would, as a consequence, have no special reason to exist, nor be in any way successful. It would be better to combine our forces, instead of dispersing them, and to join with others to obtain better results.*

*Let’s return to our origins, to our creation. Teaching based in history has, above all others, an immense advantage: it specifies with great precision the goal and the means to attain it.*

*The Good Mother. Why did God choose a woman?[[2]](#endnote-2) When does the history of our foundation begin? This foundation dates a long way back. In order to find the first thought of it, the first inspiration, we must go to a little Swiss village. With regard to the early years in the life of the Good Mother, I will pass over these in silence, for at that time she did not yet understand what God was asking of her; she had not received any positive revelations. But why was it that God chose a woman to bring about the foundation? And why wasn’t a man chosen? I know nothing about that. Let this be the first answer. As long as the foundation was not definitively established, it was possible to have doubts. But now I can say to you what Jesus said to the Jews: “If you do not believe in the words I say, believe at least because of the deeds that I do [John 10:38].” Yes, you can doubt, our Lord was saying; you can deny the truth, and no doubt your heart is evil enough to deny the truth. In the end, however, the deeds I have done will compel you to believe.* Propter opera ipsa credite*, “Believe Me because of the works themselves” [Jn 14:11]. I am here to tell you the same thing: Do not look at the person, look at what this person has accomplished.*

*The Novice at Fribourg and Bishop Yenni. One day, in the novitiate in Fribourg, Sister Mary de Sales Chappuis received some great lights from the good God; she already caught a glimpse of the foundation of the Oblate Fathers. God enabled her to see that this foundation was one of the fruits of the inner life of the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity, and especially of the Father in relation to the Word. These were sublime things. She reported everything to her Superior, following what was prescribed by the Rule. Her Superior, a very remarkable and saintly woman in her own right, did not trust her own judgment; she consulted Bishop Yenni,[[3]](#endnote-3) who had been educated in Rome, the source of doctrine. The saintly and learned bishop gathered around himself a group of the most distinguished priests, who had all been educated at the German College in Rome. These priests spent the greater part of their time not playing cards but studying, having serious conferences about theological and canonical questions, thus buttressing the learning that they had acquired at such a good school. The Mother Superior at Fribourg thus had recourse to the authority and learning of this bishop, who quickly understood and appreciated the value of the nun being submitted to him for examination. On his advice, the Superior said to Sister Mary de Sales: “You must write down and submit to me everything that God communicates to you.”*

*The Notebook of Fribourg. Under obedience, Sister Mary de Sales began to write. A first piece of writing, now in my possession, gives to the Mother Superior an account of some divine operations, of the part which the Sister is to play in them, and of the ensuing consequences. This first notebook provides us a complete overview of the work to be accomplished. God reveals to this soul that He has, in His charity, a particular view of salvation for the world, [and] that a great number of graces and spiritual favors remain in a state of preparation by His divine charity and are at the disposal of the world. She saw this very clearly, and, with even greater clarity, she put it into words. The bishop, to whose examination the Mother Superior submitted everything, studies this question in depth. […]*

*This, then, is the context within which Mother Mary de Sales came onto the scene. This is how judgment was passed on her, on her first communications with God. The notebook containing her manifestation of conscience speaks of the communications that she received from the divine persons, and particularly what God still intends to give to the world. This notebook states:*

*Behold, I am being called to be an apostle and to contribute to the work that God will establish in order to communicate His graces and to expand the diffusion of His divine charity. The Savior will bring to the fore merits not yet employed. The treasure of His charity will be lavished on the earth and given in all its fullness to the world.*

*This is what God told this novice in Fribourg. This is what the Mother Superior and the bishop accepted. No one said to her: “Good Sister, this is all well and good, but be good enough to let it remain there. Just limit yourself to mental prayer of the usual kind.” She was not told: “Take another road, strike a different note.”*

*Thus, she continued. From time to time, the bishop came to visit her, and he would then say to the Mother Superior: “Let her say and do what she wishes.” Often he would say: “You have a saint there. The good God is making use of her and will continue to do so in the future. Let her act; help her.”*

*These are, I believe, well-authorized communications, my friends. There is nothing dangerous in them, nothing contrary to the teachings of the Church. These revelations are supported by* *doctors in the sacred sciences who are in direct contact with the Holy See.*

*The Good Mother, nonetheless, did not wish to immediately busy herself exteriorly with this work and to make use of “the effects of the effect.” You must understand what she meant by this expression. The “effects” refer to what takes place in the godhead and was being communicated to the Good Mother. These are the contacts (*rapports*) with the three divine persons: that is the first effect. The second effect—resulting from the first—is the communication that God makes to the faithful called to profit from these things.*

*At Troyes. The Good Mother came to Troyes. […] On her arrival, she understood that this was the place that God had chosen for the accomplishment of His work, that in Troyes God had laid the first stone, and that there the effects of the blessed Trinity were to become manifest. “Here,” she said on her arrival, “is the place of my abiding rest.” She experienced this feeling very strongly. By this time, she already had, in her communications with God, something more positive and with greater clarity. […]*

*The Announcement of the Work at Paris. I was sent to the Visitation Monastery of Troyes while the Good Mother was in Paris. A year later, in 1842, I went to Paris to visit her. She told me: “You have been chosen by the good God to help me a great deal in the work that I have to do. The time has come when the good God is going to start His work. And when it will begin, when it was about to begin, there will be a sign.” […]*

*The Good Mother’s Entreaties. The Good Mother returned to Troyes, and there she speaks to me in more explicit terms: “I have begun,” she said, “but my mission is accomplished. At the present time, I have nothing more to say to anyone, nothing more to begin. The enterprise will be accomplished soon.” […]*

*I can tell you that I hesitated a long time before believing all that she told me. “God will give you an understanding of this during the celebration of Mass,” she assured me. During Mass, I had some enlightenment; after Mass, she would ask me: “Have you received anything?” “I do not know,” I would answer, “this is not always clear for me.” But she would go on, nonetheless, sure as she was of God’s promises. […]*

*Her Communications. If I had written down everything that she told me, whole books would not have sufficed to record it, but I did not write anything. Perhaps I was wrong, but nothing can be done about it now. To make reparation for my fault, I must in conscience declare today that, through her mediation, God wanted to entrust us with a mission. I repeat, the things that she told me were the most sublime, the purest kind of doctrine, the most precise description of what took place within the godhead. All this, as communicated by the Good Mother de Sales, is to come to fruition today. […]*

*The Words of Pope Leo XIII. Three years ago, I recounted these things to our Holy Father the Pope [= Leo XIII]. Then the Pope, in deep meditation, in a recollection that seemed to make him oblivious to everything, was silent for several moments, during which it seemed that his whole being had been annihilated, or at least withdrawn and totally absorbed in God. Then he said: “All that you do, you, in your apostolates, it is the will of God that you should do it, and all those who have worked with you have personally done what God wanted of them. What you are doing now, God wills it; and God wants it, not only of you, but of all those who work with you. What is left for you to obtain? The approbation of the Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church? I, the Pope, give it to you, and what is more, I am giving you a mission: Go to France! You will also go elsewhere. Spread your works. I love them!”*

*“Be men of sacrifice,” the Pope said, “you must be religious* usque ad effusionemsanguinis*, ‘even to the shedding of blood.’ And thus the Pope will be with you! . . .” You would have to see how the Pope’s stature was rising and rising. In truth, I say, it was the good God who was speaking.” […]*

*Faith in Our Mission. […] Our task, then, is all mapped out. […] I believe that now there is no longer room for doubt. In the sight of God, I make this declaration: Were I covered with all the sins committed in the world, I would be less ashamed to appear before God at the Last Judgment than if I should fail to put into practice what Mother Mary de Sales told me. I can certainly bring before God the stains of my life, but the failure to believe in these things, that I cannot do. We are not dealing here with an impression that comes and goes; this dominates my entire life. Over fifty years, I have had the time to look at things with a cool head and from a distance sufficiently removed to allow for a correct judgment. […]*

**II.**

**The Apparition of the Savior to Blessed Louis Brisson**

**(Blessed Louis Brisson,**

***Life of the Venerable Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis*, Chapter 32*[[4]](#endnote-4)*)**

*The Good Mother had sent for the young chaplain [Brisson], and told him in a kind of authoritative manner that he ought not to resist God any longer, but obey Him. She did so by stressing the motives of God’s will and the necessity of submitting to His supreme authority. Her words wounded the young confessor, who looked upon this solemn injunction as a restraint on his freedom. “Reverend Mother,” he said to her, “I shall never do what you want from me.” “But if God is leading you?,” she said. “Well, Mother, since you go that far, I declare to you that nothing will ever lead me to do it, and, even if I were to see a dead man resurrected from the dead, I would never give in.” After this remark, the Good Mother left the parlor without saying a word, and the young confessor found himself alone, discontented and irritated by the violence that she wished to do him.*

*He began to consider what he would have to do to put an end to all these incidents, which were disturbing his peace and which were making his existence bitter and intolerable. Just as he raised his eyes, he saw through the grill of the parlor, about two meters from the grill and one meter from the door leading to the boarders’ quarters (this door is on the right for anyone who is outside and looking into the parlor), Our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord was dressed in a tunic of wool similar in color to the fleece of sheep, and He wore a mantle of whiter wool. He seemed to be between twenty-five and thirty years of age. His beard and hair were chestnut blond, His countenance was open, but His glance toward the young priest was rather severe. He appeared without any rays of glory, as He was at Nazareth. His features were regular and perfectly harmonious. His height was not above average, and in His bearing there was an expression of simplicity and ineffable dignity. He was God with us, and God who became one of us.*

*The apparition lasted some time, during which the young priest was able to carefully take in all that he beheld. […] [N]othing escaped him, and it was after this minute examination that his gaze was arrested anew by the Savior’s glance, and he saw in the expression on His face and in His gesture what was His will. Our Lord was commanding Him to do what Mother Mary de Sales was telling him. The Savior’s visit had found the young priest agitated; it left him calm, without any physical emotion, in a state of deep recollection and in the most perfect consciousness of what he had seen.*

*The apparition then just disappeared; [the young chaplain] did not wish it to be prolonged any longer: that was how God wanted it. He adored, he loved what the Savior had just done; he wanted only what Christ wanted. After several minutes of this recollected adoration, the door alongside the infirmary opened and the Good Mother returned. She did not say a single word to the young confessor, and he said not a word to her. The Good Mother’s demeanor indicated that everything was finished, and she left immediately.*

**III.**

**The “Special Goal” of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales:**

***“To reproduce as completely as possible the interior and exterior life***

***of St. Francis de Sales****”*

**(Blessed Louis Brisson, Chapter Instruction of January 25, 1893[[5]](#endnote-5))**

*On Sunday, we will celebrate the feast of St. Francis de Sales. It is necessary that each of us prepare carefully for this solemnity, which will bring us very special graces. We have more reason than others to prepare well for this feast and these graces, since we can say, without any self-aggrandizement, that we are truly the children of St. Francis de Sales. […]*

*There are several religious congregations for which St. Francis de Sales is the patron and which have taken his name. They are more important than we; […] the good God blesses them greatly. But St. Francis de Sales is only their patron. They have placed themselves under his protection; they desire to enter his spirit, but their special goal is not ours, namely, to reproduce as completely as possible the interior and exterior life of St. Francis de Sales. Theirs is a patronage rather than the real continuation of his work and of his life. I cannot recall who it was that asked Father de Mayerhoffen:[[6]](#endnote-6) “What do you do in order to call yourselves Oblates of St. Francis de Sales? In what way do you seek to imitate him?” […] I believe that it was the Vicar General at Annecy. […] “We practice the* [Spiritual] Directory *that St. Francis de Sales practiced,” Father de Mayerhoffen replied, “and we try, by means of it, to resemble him in everything.” “I understand, then,” replied the Vicar General, “that you are achieving something special. You are continuing his work.”*

*We have, therefore, a right to very special protection from St. Francis de Sales insofar as we are his children, his sons. St. Jane de Chantal testified to me of this.[[7]](#endnote-7) The Good Mother very often gave me assurances of this. We are the true sons of St. Francis de Sales.*

*We, therefore, more than others must prepare ourselves for his feast, and the best means to do this is by trying to imitate him. In every imitation of an image or a portrait, two things are necessary: the features and the color. The features distinguish and delineate the shape of the face and the body; the color achieves the resemblance because it completes the particular and personal existence—the physiognomy of the subject. It is necessary, my friends, that we reproduce our holy Founder from this double point of view. […]*

*St. Francis de Sales tells us that St. Francis of Assisi received the stigmata as a result of contemplating Jesus crucified, and as a result of meditating upon Him lovingly.[[8]](#endnote-8) Likewise, let us contemplate St. Francis de Sales. Let’s imitate him, let’s work, and let’s faithfully practice, like him, the* Spiritual Directory*, and we shall celebrate a beautiful feast of St. Francis de Sales. Each solemnity of the Church brings us special and distinctive graces. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are of many varied forms,* multiformis Spiritus*. May the Holy Spirit, therefore, communicate to us on this feast day love and zeal for our ministry, fidelity to the* Directory*, taking thoughts, intentions, and affections from it. Note well that we shall desire absolutely nothing else but that.*

**IV.**

**The Oblate Priest: *“Imitate the mystery you celebrate”***

**(Blessed Louis Brisson, Chapter Instruction of December 19, 1894[[9]](#endnote-9))**

*The priesthood is certainly the first dignity among Christians, in this sense: that the priest is chosen by God, elected to consecrate the body and blood of Jesus Christ, to remit sins, and to bless the people. The bishop tells the priest whom he is going to ordain that he must pay careful attention, that he must fully understand his obligations, that he imitate the Victim of the sacrifice that he will offer to God:* Imitamini quod tractatis*, “Imitate the mystery you celebrate.”*

*This admonition by the bishop contains all the priest’s obligations. It is essential that the priest be well instructed in them, and that he be fully aware of what he does when he celebrates Mass, when he baptizes, when he hears confessions, when he instructs. Let him render a strict account of himself, and let him bring perfect dispositions. It is something so important, so great, that the entire life of a man who would consecrate all his thoughts without exception and all his efforts to this preparation would not suffice for it. He would never succeed in being worthy of the holy functions that the priest has to fulfill. One becomes accustomed to everything, my friends, if one is not careful, to celebrating Mass, to hearing confessions, to preaching: one is less and less impressed with everything.*

*Two obligations rise up before us that are very great and very important: to know what we are doing, and to do it worthily. It is necessary to know fully, it is necessary to understand, that we are doing something holy, to imbibe it, to speak of it. We must not do as certain preachers do, who, when speaking of the grandeurs of the priesthood to the faithful or to religious (male or female) say things so beautiful, so uplifting, so admirable, that they seem to want to have these things applied personally to themselves. The priest is very great, of course, but in his own eyes, he must be* servus servorum*, the servant of the servants. Yes, indeed, we are well aware of our grandeur and the eminent dignity of our functions, but only to better recognize our personal unworthiness, our incapacity. Let us not identify the priesthood with ourselves. Let us not take for our little person the praise that the priesthood deserves. Let us give an account, with regard to the sublime state to which we are called, of how much we fall short.*

*Some good priests give beautiful sermons about the above. They tell the truth, of course, but they ought to distinguish a little more clearly between the thing and the man. The thing is a thousand times beyond all human imagination, but the man is much below the degree of virtue and holiness that he ought to have. He should recognize this and not exalt himself too much.*

*I refer here to a sermon preached last Sunday to some nuns, and in a way that none of us must ever preach about the priesthood. The preacher made of the priest an extraordinary ideal. This ideal has been realized many times, undoubtedly: St. Vincent de Paul,[[10]](#endnote-10) St. Francis de Sales. That’s fine, they were at the summit; but we—are we at the summit? If we truly heed the injunction made by the bishop in the admonition in the Pontifical[[11]](#endnote-11) to be fully aware of what we are doing, and the manner in which we do it, we will only have to lower our head. The grandeur of the priesthood and its lofty dignity shows us at once the immense distance which exists between the thing and the person, between the sublimity of the function and the unworthiness of the minister.*

*[…] We are the successors of the seventy-two disciples [cf. Lk 10:1-24]. They aided the Apostles in their ministry; they had received—like the Apostles—the graces and powers of priestly ordination. We also have that grace of the Apostles and of the Disciples; it is the same because it has not diminished, as the Jansenists contend.[[12]](#endnote-12) No, certainly. The disciples had the same weaknesses as we, the same temptations, the same difficulties and discouragements, the same powerlessness […] we must hold fast to this conviction. […]*

*Doesn’t St. Francis de Sales tell us that in the confessional one must venerate the priest as an angel of God who has received from Him the mandate to come to purify us?[[13]](#endnote-13) All that is true. But this does not mean, however, that we are really an angel of God, alas, no! When we measure ourselves, and when we then try to measure an angel of God, we see clearly that we do not have the same stature. In the instruction that we give to the faithful, let’s really understand the dignity of the priesthood, of course, but let’s be very careful not to put ourselves forward and appear to say: “This is what I am, I who speak to you!”*

Imitamini quod tractatis*, “Imitate the mystery you celebrate.” Imitate our Lord Jesus Christ, Whom you touch, Whom you handle—this is the second obligation of the priest, to do worthily what we do, by imitating and reproducing our Lord. We touch and handle the Word of God, at Holy Mass, at Holy Communion. There is a very great distance between Him and us, and, nevertheless, He submits to our orders, He obeys us. […] We also go to Him. It is only by repeated and constant effort that we will succeed in imitating our Lord. If our Lord came on earth, it was not only to preach doctrine, it was also to give an example. Let us also give an example. It is essential that we priests be filled with that spirit. When we preach, when we catechize, let us truly recall that we are the providers of the divine Word and that it is He whom we must give to souls. When we are truly imbued with this thought, when we have truly meditated on the instruction in the Pontifical, we shall then understand how far the word that we give the faithful is from being what it ought to be. […]*

*Let us carefully consider the distance that exists between us and the things we do, and our ministry—when motivated by humility—will be extremely efficacious. Nothing touches the faithful like the humility of the priest. When one is truly little, when one puts himself in his place, when one really understands the distance that exists between himself and the sublime functions with which he is occupied, one achieves some good for souls, one gains their confidence; one gives them God. […]*

**V.**

**The Sacredness of Work**

**(Blessed Louis Brisson, Conference no. 7, Retreat of 1888[[14]](#endnote-14))**

*This morning I wish to say a word to you about work. I have no weighty considerations to make to you on work; I am not going to delve into history nor Sacred Scripture for good and excellent thoughts in regard to work. I shall limit myself to a few ideas from the Gospel, St. Francis de Sales and the Good Mother.*

*“My Father works until now, and I work,” said our Lord Jesus Christ [Jn 5,17]. “My Father works”: He works even until now […]; He makes light, He makes worlds, He kneads clay and fashions man out of it. “And I work”: I am with you; I speak to you in parables; I teach you. I do, as it seems, nothing else but evangelize the Jewish people, and yet at this moment, I am one with My Father in work—in material as well as supernatural work. It is I who operate the world.*

*We profess for work, which is specifically attributed to God the Father, an especially religious bent. We have learned that what God does merits our respect, our gratitude. When we work, when we set our hands to these material things that God has created, we return praise and honor to God, and we cause creatures to render this homage to the Creator, in their own secret and wonderful language. We look upon creatures as the property of God, we treat them with respect as holy and divine. Work makes us sharers in the divine action, and, consequently, in the holiness and grace that emanates from God the Father and that communicates itself not only through the ordinary means of the Redemption, but by the special channel of work—by contact with material things that are for our use. With us, work is a thing of awe, of blessedness. By work, we cooperate with God and with the Word. Now cooperation in the action of God is sanctifying. There is in it, we might say, something analogous to what occurs in the Sacraments or at least in the Sacramentals.[[15]](#endnote-15) Work with our hands is our way of honoring God the Father.*

*In God, there are three Persons, three co-equal Persons. No one of the three is inferior to the others. God forbid that I should belittle the work of Redemption, without which all men would be eternally miserable and reprobate. In this sense, the work of Redemption infinitely surpasses the work of Creation. If in God there is no differentiation, there is for us an immense difference between these two acts. But in that it comes from God, all work is excellent, and St. Francis de Sales and the Good Mother Mary de Sales desire that all that emanates from God be received with very great respect, with deep gratitude and love. By steeping ourselves in this doctrine, it will come to pass that our work of each day, whatever it may be—whether manual or intellectual—will take on a character so elevated, so complete in its union with God that we will treat all things as holy and sacred and as requiring our attention, our care, and our devotion. And in their turn, these things will bring us grace, the grace of God the Father. Let us make use of these material things for the honor of God the Father—* cum gratiarum actione*, with thanksgiving [cf. 1 Tm 4:3-4]. Let us use them, and turn them to our service as blessed things. […]*

*God’s creations carry within them their graces. As a matter of practice, then, preserve a deep respect for the material things that obedience and religious poverty put in your hands. In the use that we make of these things, there is a thanksgiving and praise that leap towards God, and which God hears, although our bodily ears hear them not. May the beating of our hearts, and the prayer that bursts forth from these hearts, be in union with that prayer of all creation that we hear not. We shall offer, then, to God not only the sacrifice of the morning and the evening, but a perpetual sacrifice, the complete holocaust of our entire life, and all our works. […]*

**VI.**

**Re-imprinting the Gospel**

**(Blessed Louis Brisson, Conference no. 10, Retreat of 1882[[16]](#endnote-16))**

*The Good Mother often said that it was necessary “to re-imprint the Gospel.” By this expression, my friends, she meant that the Gospel must be given a very broad meaning. The Gospel needs to be re-imprinted in our heart and in the world.*

*In order to re-imprint the Gospel, we must know it. It is impossible to print what we do not know. If we had lost the Gospel according to St. John and you were charged with re-imprinting it, the beginning would go all by itself because you know it by heart. But what about the rest? You must know it, therefore, in order to re-imprint it. In our studies, we learned a few verses each day; in that way we retained something of the Gospel. It is essential that you know the Gospel. Our Rule obliges us to read the New Testament daily. We are supposed to read a chapter per day. Let’s be very faithful to this, and let’s read it with attention and care so as to understand and retain it.*

*Bossuet[[17]](#endnote-17) was asked which was the best commentary on the Gospel. He did not reply. “Which is the one you use?,” they then asked. “A second reading?” He then answered, “a third, a fourth.” You also see how skillfully he worked his knowledge of the Gospel into his sermons.*

*We must, therefore, in order to re-imprint the Gospel, read it first and read it carefully. This should not be a distracted reading, not one that is simply pious, but a reading made with great attention, great relish, as if you were hearing it from the mouth of Our Lord Himself. You must then strive to carefully penetrate the meaning.*

*I recommend, nevertheless, that you make use of a few of the more renowned commentators. A good commentator provides the key to how we should understand and interpret the Scriptures. In our courses on Sacred Scripture, we were given the method of interpreting Scripture in its literal, spiritual, and accommodated sense. We must know about these matters. […]*

*Nourish yourselves with the Scriptures; read them slowly, three, four or five verses at a time; then pause, allow them to sink in, and ask God for understanding of them. You have read the Scriptures so many times, and it seems that that has produced nothing; pray, and you will be surprised at all that you find in the words of Sacred Scripture. Those who look for silver or gold are obliged to painfully dig through the earth’s crust formed by other baser metals; they have to leap over rocks, they have to sift the mud of streams, and it is only in this way that they find the silver-bearing lair, the flakes of gold which are worth a hundred times, a thousand times more than the trouble they cost. […]*

*If, until now, the Gospels have said nothing to your heart, this is because you have not yet opened the mine. Make use of prayer, and God will give you the key. Remove the obstacles, and you will find an immense mine full of enlightenment, consolations, and material for your instructions. You will never say anything to souls without Sacred Scripture.*

*The Good Mother loved the Gospels.[[18]](#endnote-18) During retreats, she used to re-read the Gospel according to St. John. She found in it the good God, the light. She reflected at length on it, and she had some very profound theological intuitions. Fr. Chevalier[[19]](#endnote-19) said to me several times: “What she says, we are unable to say; we are unable to plumb these matters, unenlightened as we are.”*

*It is not sufficient to read the Gospels in order to understand them, we must also put them into practice. The Gospel is the express story of the Word of God appearing on earth among humankind. It is the Gospel thus understood that we are supposed to make a new edition of among people, by prayer, by work, by the evangelization of nations, by sacrifice. […]*

**VII.**

**The Good Mother and “The Way”**

**(Blessed Louis Brisson, Conference no. 9, Retreat of 1900[[20]](#endnote-20))**

*In reading the* Life of the Good Mother*,[[21]](#endnote-21) notice, my friends, how very often it speaks of “the Way”: “One is in the Way. One must enter the Way. The good God asks us to sustain ourselves in the Way.” What are we to understand by this word, “the Way”?*

*This expression has struck all those who have read the* Life of the Good Mother*. Diverse appraisals and different judgments have been formulated about this word. Detractors have seen in this a kind of mystery which tended to the annihilation of human action and which have led inevitably to quietism. This critique appeared in an article which did cause something of a stir.[[22]](#endnote-22) It was successfully refuted by Fr. Fragnières, a doctor of theology and a professor at the Major Seminary in Fribourg. A Jesuit father, the Reverend Fr. Hagen, Director of the Observatory of Washington, replied no less successfully to these attacks.[[23]](#endnote-23) You have recently read, in the* Annales Salésiennes*,[[24]](#endnote-24) the work of Father Hagen, who is very solid and unassailable.*

*He [= Fr. Hagen] seems to have a good understanding of the Good Mother and the method of “the Way.” He is in contact with various Visitation monasteries in America. He has understood, digested, and practiced these things. We ought to have complete confidence in what he says about the doctrine. I shall say the same thing about Fr. Fragnières. But I do not know if each has completely understood everything that is contained in this idea of “the Way.” Fr. Fragnières sees in it, above all, the charity, goodness, and mercy of God.[[25]](#endnote-25) Fr. Tissot, the former superior of the Missionaries [of St. Francis de Sales] of Annecy said the same thing.[[26]](#endnote-26) He compared “the Way” to devotion to the Sacred Heart. He saw in it a new devotional food, a form of special devotion. All these interpretations are good, of course. However, I am going to say that there is in “the Way” what there is in a reflecting prism, a ray of light. Look at it diametrically before you, it appears blue. Tilt it to the right, there is a nuance of green; tilt it to the left and it appears violet. It changes color depending upon the angle in which you position your eye. “The Way” is a little like that, it seems to me. It is all that these worthy and devout authors have said it is, but it is still something more. This depends on the perspective, the point of view from which one sees it.*

*We Oblates, how are we supposed to understand and explain—in a practical manner—the Good Mother’s “Way”?*

*We must, of course, see the charity, the infinite mercy of the Savior in it; also new graces, intimate graces. Yes, but I desire that we see in it, above all, the correspondence that God demands by these intimate graces. Let us consider, especially, fidelity to following our Lord.* Ego sum Via*. “I am the Way,” He tells us.* Nemo venit ad Patrem nisi per me*. “No one comes to the Father except through Me” [Jn 14:6]. “The Way” is fidelity to walking with Jesus, to reproducing Him and to imitating Him in everything. “The Way” is loving obedience to all our obligations; it is correspondence to grace; it is fidelity to the* Directory*; to the direction of intention. As our Constitutions indicate, those who wish to advance and make progress in the Way of our Lord will find that it is also the most loving and faithful practice possible of our vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. “The Way,” for us, is, therefore, the Rule. “The Way” is the ensemble, the totality, of our life conformed to the life of our Savior.*

*There you have “the Way” as the Good Mother understood it from the first and before all. It is thus something clear, positive, practical. We realize it by devotion and by following the Savior; we profess to be faithful to and love the person of the Savior; we live in union of heart and action with Him. That is “the Way.”*

1. NOTES

   These texts were selected and translated by Joseph F. Chorpenning, OSFS. They were first published in a different format in *The Nineteenth-Century Salesian Pentecost: The Salesian Family of Don Bosco, the Oblates and Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales, the Daughters of St. Francis de Sales, and the Fransalians*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 2022), pp. 135-75

   Louis Brisson, O.S.F.S., *Chapîtres, Retraites, Instructions et Allocutions*, 7 vols. [Tilburg (The Netherlands): Maison “Ave Maria,” 1966-68], 4:123-33 [hereafter Brisson]. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “Male anxiety” about the foundational role that women sometimes have in a male religious order or congregation is well documented: see, e.g., Christopher C. Wilson, “Masculinity Restored: The Visual Shaping of St. John of the Cross,” *Archive for Reformation History* 98/1 (2007): 134-66. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Pierre-Tobie Yenni (1774-1845) was bishop of the Diocese of Lausanne and Geneva (1815-45), with residence at Fribourg. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Louis Brisson, *Vie de la vénérée Mère Marie de Sales Chappuis* (Paris: chez M. l’Aumonier de la Visitation, 1891), 259-61 (hereafter Chappuis Biography). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Brisson, 3:10-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Auguste-Marie de Mayerhoffen, O.S.F.S. (1856-1918), was chaplain to the Second Monastery of the Visitation in Paris and ministered to Brisson at the hour of his death. See Yvon Beaudoin, O.M.I., *Father Louis Brisson (1817-1908): A Documented Biography*, trans. several De Sales Oblates and ed. Alexander T. Pocetto, O.S.F.S., and Daniel P. Wisniewski, O.S.F.S. (Wilmington, Del.: Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, 2008), 301 (hereafter Beaudoin); [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. During a visit to Annecy in April 1869, Brisson had an apparition of St. Jane Frances de Chantal in the chapel of the Visitation Monastery. The saint communicated, among other things, how pleased she was by the founding of the Oblates since that had been the ardent desire of her life. See Beaudoin, 343-44. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book 6, chap. 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Brisson, 3:140-43. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Brisson’s linking of Francis de Sales and Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) is not accidental since the Doctor of Divine Love had served as a spiritual and priestly mentor to the Apostle of Charity: see, e.g., José María Román, C.M., *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, trans. Sr. Joyce Howard, D.C. (London: Melisende, 1999), 149-56. During his 1618-19 sojourn in Paris, Francis de Sales was invited to give a series of conferences for priests, which were the inspiration for Vincent de Paul’s later “Tuesday Conferences” that played an important role in the renewal of the clergy. See E.-J. Lajeunie, O.P., *Saint Francis de Sales: The Man, the Thinker, His Influence*, trans. Rory O’Sullivan, O.S.F.S., 2 vols. (Bangalore: S.F.S. Publications, 1986-87), 2:417-18; andAndré Ravier, S.J., *Francis de Sales: Sage & Saint*, trans. Joseph D. Bowler, O.S.F.S. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 227. For his part, Vincent sought to create a new type of priest, as would Chappuis and Brisson in their era: “When [Vincent] began to give the much-needed missions to the poor country people he made a discovery […] which revealed to him that there was urgent need for a new type of priest. This new type of priest must not be content simply to contemplate Christ the Eternal Priest offering Himself to the Father, but rather one who carries the living Christ into the market place of the neglected people, especially the poor and the destitute” (James Cahalan, “St. Vincent and the Priesthood,” *Colloque: Journal of the Irish Province of the Congregation of the Mission*, No. 7 [Spring 1983]: 51-58, at 53). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The *Roman Pontifical* is the episcopal ritual containing the rites (formularies and rubrics) for sacraments and sacramentals celebrated by a bishop, especially the consecration of the holy oils and the sacraments of Confirmation and Holy Orders. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The Jansenists held that the early Church was the model of perfection, which was gradually eroded by what they considered the usurping and ever more domineering papacy. See Dale K. Van Kley, *Reform Catholicism and the International Suppression of the Jesuits in Enlightenment Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 26-27. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part 1, chap. 4. However, Francis de Sales cautions confessors that they are not angels (Annecy edition, 23:282). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Brisson, 5:106-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. "Holy Mother Church has, moreover, instituted sacramentals. These are sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments. They signify effects, particularly of a spiritual nature, which are obtained through the intercession of the Church. By them men are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions in life are rendered holy" (*Cathechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., n. 1667). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Brisson, 4:209-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704), a French bishop and theologian, is renowned as one of the most brilliant preachers of all time. He was instructed in preaching by St. Vincent de Paul, specifically his “Little Method,” which, in turn, was influenced by St. Francis de Sales’s theory and practice of preaching. See Edward R. Udovic, C.M., “‘On the Eminent Dignity of the Poor in the Church’: A Sermon by Jacques Bénigne Bossuet,” *Vincentian Heritage Journal* 13/1 (1992): 37-58, esp. 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Chappuis’s Bible was a two-volume folio edition, illustrated with engravings by Gustave Doré (1832-83), the most popular French designer of wood-engraved book illustration of the mid-nineteenth century. Today this Bible rests on the table beside the Good Mother’s deathbed in her room in the Troyes Visitation Monastery which has been preserved intact. For a photo of this room, see *ICSS Newsletter*, No. 21 (March 2008): 6, fig. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Fr. Cyrille Chevalier (1801-61), a priest of the diocese of Troyes and professor of moral theology at the diocesan seminary, was the teacher and longtime friend of Brisson. Chevalier frequently visited the Troyes Visitation Monastery to confer with Chappuis. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Brisson, 6:315-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Brisson’s *Life of the Venerable Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis* was first published in 1886. A second edition appeared in 1891. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Here Brisson likely has in mind the article, “Une nouvelle école de spiritualité,” by the Jesuit Henri Watrigant, S.J., published in *Études publiées par les Pères de la Compagnie de Jésus* 79 (5 juin 1899): 614-32*.* Subsequently, Watrigant expanded his article into a book, entitled *Deux méthodes de spiritualité: Étude critique* [Two Methods of Spirituality: A Critical Study] (Lille-Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1900). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Johann Georg Hagen (1847-1930) was an Austrian Jesuit priest and astronomer. In 1880, he immigrated to the United States, eventually becoming a naturalized citizen. In 1888, Hagen was appointed Director of the Georgetown University Observatory, where he published a number of important articles and books in the fields of astronomy and mathematics. In 1906, Pope St. Pius X (1835-1914, r. 1903-14) appointed him as the first Jesuit director of the Vatican Observatory, in which position he served until his death in 1930. Hagen was also the spiritual director of Maria Elizabeth Hesselblad (1870-1957), who was baptized by him in 1902 and canonized a saint by Pope Francis in 2016. The crater Hagen, 55 km in diameter, on the far side of the moon, is named for him. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. The *Annales Salésiennes* is a periodical founded by Brisson in 1888. It is currently published under the auspices of the Association “Recherches et Études Salésiennes” (RES). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Fr. Joseph Fragnières’s assessment took the form of a sermon, preached in the church of the monastery of the Visitation in Fribourg on November 19, 1897, during the triduum celebrating the introduction of the Good Mother’s cause for beatification, and published in 1898 as a brochure by the *Annales Salésiennes*. Watrigant’s 1899 article was a reaction to the sermon by Fragnières, who had let slip into his praise of “the Way” remarks critical of St. Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, drawing Watrigant’s ire. For an account and critical analysis of the controversy, see Roger Balducelli, OSFS, *The Cause of the Beatification of the Venerable Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis*, trans. Alexander T. Pocetto, OSFS (Rome: International Commission for Salesian Studies, 2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Jean-Marie Tissot, MSFS. (1810-90), was a member of the first team of missionaries sent to India by the founder of the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales or Fransalians, Fr. Pierre-Marie Mermier (1790-1862). Tissot later served as the fourth Superior General of the Fransalians, as well as the second Vicar Apostolic and first Bishop of Visakhapatnam (1863-90). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)