

BLESSED LOUIS BRISSON (1817-1908), THE LAITY, AND THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

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Salesianum 76 (2014) 121-140

The recent beatification of Fr. Louis Brisson,¹ founder of both the Oblate Sisters and the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, has brought to the attention of the Church and to the general public his heroic virtues, his many and varied apostolic endeavors and his engaging approach to evangelization which effectively involved close collaboration with the laity. These aspects of his evangelizing ministry can contribute to the Church's emphasis on the New Evangelization in this Year of Faith. This study intends to concentrate primarily on his work as Diocesan Director of the Catholic Association of St. Francis de Sales and the *oeuvres ouvrières*,² clubs and shelters for young working girls in the textile industry of Troyes, France during the latter part of nineteenth century.

¹ For biographies of Louis Brisson see Yvon BEAUDOIN, OMI, *Father Louis Brisson (1817-1908): A Documented Biography*, trans. by several Oblates and ed. by Alexander Pocetto, OSFS, and Daniel Wisniewski, OSFS (Wilmington, DE: Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, 2008); Françoise BOUCHARD, *Father Louis Brisson: A Heart that Beats in Rhythm with God* (Paris: Salvator, 2011); Katherine BURTON, *So Much So Soon, Founder of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales* (New York: Benzinger, 1953); Prosper DUFOUR, OSFS, *Le Très Révérend Père Louis Brisson, Fondateur des Oblates et des Oblats de S. François de Sales (1817-1908)* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1936).

² BEAUDOIN, 61: "This expression is not readily translatable. It is a unique apostolate or institution that involves paid work by girls for the factories in Troyes, spiritual and social support and catechetical instruction by Fr. Brisson and the Oblate Sisters."

The religious situation at the time of Fr. Brisson parallels that of the United States and Europe in our day with regard to affiliation with a particular church. The institutional Church or the Catholic religion as an institution was losing a great number of its adherents, primarily due to the influence of the French Revolution throughout the nineteenth century.³ A recent survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life noted an increase in the number of young people between the ages of 18-34 who marked their religious preference as “none.” Among those characterized as “nones” there are a number who are baptized Catholics. This is not to say that this group does not pray and believe in God, but that they do not see the necessity or importance of being affiliated with any particular institutional church.⁴ For the nones to believe does not necessarily mean to belong. This attitude toward institutional religion or church affiliation is epitomized by the YouTube video, “Why I Hate Religion but Love Jesus,” which at one point had an incredible number of more than 24 million viewers!⁵ Of course, this attitude is not new, as evidenced by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Evangelii nuntiandi*, published in 1963:

We can hear people – whom we wish to believe are well-intentioned but who are certainly misguided in their attitude – continually claiming to love Christ but without the Church, to listen to Christ but not the Church, to belong to Christ but outside the Church. The absurdity of this dichotomy is clearly evident in this phrase of the Gospel: “Anyone who rejects you rejects me” [Luke 10:16]. And how can one wish to love Christ without loving the Church, if the finest witness to Christ is that of St. Paul: “Christ loved the Church and sacrificed himself for her” [Eph. 5:25]?⁶

³ Richard GIBSON, *A Social History of French Catholicism 1789-1914* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 30: “The nineteenth century was thus lived in the long shadow of the Revolution; the religious divisions of the revolutionary decade would constitute the major fault-line in French politics until the First World War: In all matters of the public role of the Church in society, it was the legacy of the Revolution that mattered.”

⁴ See “Nones” on the Rise,” www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx. For Catholic Church affiliation in Europe, see “During Benedict’s Papacy, Religious Observance Among Catholics in Europe Remained Low but Stable,” online at www.pewforum.org/Christian/Catholic/During-Benedicts-Papacy-Religious-Observance-Among-Catholics-in-Europe-Remained-Low-but-Stable.aspx.

⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IAhDGYlpqY.

⁶ *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 16.

Paul VI's thought has recently been echoed by Pope Francis: "It is an absurd dichotomy to think of living with Jesus without the Church, of following Jesus outside of the Church, of loving Jesus without loving the Church."⁷ So one of the major obstacles to evangelization in both Fr. Brisson's day and ours is to show how Jesus cannot be properly understood and embraced without also embracing the Church that he loved so much because all that we know about Jesus has been preserved and has come down to us through the Church, the assembly of love.

The Catholic Association of St. Francis de Sales⁸

The revival of interest in and influence of St. Francis de Sales in nineteenth century France has been called the "Salesian Pentecost."⁹ The saint was greatly admired during this period not only for his down-to-earth and attractive teaching on holiness, but also for his work as a missionary in the Chablais region of Savoy where, against great odds and much opposition, he was able to win thousands of Calvinists back to the Catholic fold by an irenic and truly pastoral approach that respected and highlighted human freedom and dignity and that presented the Church as the assembly of love¹⁰ and the visible resurrected body of Christ¹¹ without compromising its hierarchical and institutional aspects.¹²

⁷ Speech to the Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (8 May 2013), available online at www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130508_uisg_it.html.

⁸ For more detailed information on this association, see BEAUDOIN, 39-44; LOUIS BRISSON, OSFS, *La Vénérée Mère Marie de Sales Chappuis de l'ordre de la Visitation Sainte-Marie* (Paris: Chez l'Aumonier de la Visitation, 1891), 127-129; Dufour, 82-103.

⁹ See Wendy W. WRIGHT, "To Live with One Heart: Louis Brisson and the Salesian Pentecost," *ICSS Newsletter*, no. 29 (Feb. 2013), online at www.franz-von-sales.de/icss_en/index.html.

¹⁰ See Alexander POCETTO, "An Introduction to Salesian Anthropology," *Salesian Studies* (Summer 1969):43. Online at web1.desales.edu/assets/salesian/PDF/PocettoAnthropology.pdf.

¹¹ See Alexander POCETTO, *The Ecclesial Dimensions of Salesian Thought* (Hyattsville, MD: Institute of Salesian Studies, 1972). Online: web1.desales.edu/assets/salesian/PDF/Pocettoecclesial.pdf.

¹² See FRANCIS DE SALES, *The Catholic Controversy: St. Francis de Sales' Defense of the Faith*, trans. Henry Mackey, OSB (Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1989).

The Catholic Association came about through the efforts of Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon (1810-1880) and Archbishop de Ségur (1820-1881) to respond to the concern of Pope Pius IX about the physical and spiritual plight of the working class, of workers' ignorance of the faith. D'Alzon expressed to de Ségur his desire to establish what he called a kind of internal Propagation of the Faith intended to defend and spread the faith in Christian countries. To get it established in the diocese of Troyes, de Ségur asked Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis, superior of the Visitation monastery in Troyes, to use her influence. She was totally sold on the idea and called it "*une grande oeuvre*,"¹³ a great apostolate. Its general purpose was to renew the Catholic faith and restore religious practice. It was launched in Troyes on the feast of St. Joseph at a Mass in the Visitation chapel in 1858 by Bishop Coeur, who appointed Fr. Brisson as the diocesan director.

Under Fr. Brisson's leadership, the Association increased rapidly, from three thousand associates in twenty-two parishes the first year to six thousand in thirty-five parishes after three years. An associate was simply required to say one "Hail Mary" daily and contribute one French franc a year. The monies collected were sent to the central office in Paris and then distributed as various needs in different dioceses required. Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis, the diocesan Treasurer of the Association, enlisted the assistance of the boarding students of the Troyes Visitation to promote the evangelizing work of the Association. They helped mail and distribute to the alumnae a monthly newsletter that recounted various activities of the Association, namely, the heartwarming stories of people being converted and of various blessings people received for themselves or their families. This proved to be an effective way of establishing this apostolate in parishes.¹⁴

To renew the faith and restore religious practice, the Association supported the following activities:

1) the founding, maintaining or development of all educational endeavors and Christian perseverance: shelters, schools, clubs, work rooms, circles for young workers, military apostolates, etc.; 2) distribution of good books for the working class, of parish libraries, of evangelical projects; 3) preaching missions and

¹³ DUFOR, 127.

¹⁴ BRISSON, 127-128.

retreats for the working class either in cities or rural areas; 4) financial assistance to churches so poor that the celebration of Mass becomes practically impossible, as well as the sanctification of Sunday.¹⁵

The Association gave Fr. Brisson some financial support in establishing clubs and shelters for young working women. He extended the activities of the Association and did not confine himself to its statutes but “added the works of spiritual charity: Catechism for the young, for married women to prepare them for First Communion, encouragement to indifferent households to bring them back to the right way,”¹⁶ and social outreach, especially to help the plight of young women workers.

This apostolate had the beneficent effect of strengthening the faith of the members themselves. In a report submitted by Fr. Brisson to the Central Council, he noted the following:

Among the many results of the Apostolate (*l’Oeuvre*), we should note a felicitous effect on the members in general. For a large number, it was quite a revelation. It made them understand that it is not indifferent to belong to such and such a religion. For several, it was a means of overcoming a too common apathy, even for a certain number of practicing Catholics. They came to understand that it is not sufficient to be a Christian for oneself, but that good example, the zeal for the salvation of one’s neighbor constitute a true obligation.¹⁷

He is emphasizing here that the Association was evangelizing and making the members aware of the danger of religious indifference that was widespread in view of the various Protestant churches that were springing up in France and to which a number of Catholics succumbed by not concerning themselves with what religion or church they resorted to for certain religious rites such as marriages and funerals.¹⁸ A good number of the members manifested their faith by coming to the meetings on the first

¹⁵ *Manuel des oeuvres et des institutions catholiques pour la ville de Saint-Étienne* (Saint-Étienne: Chartier & Le Hénaff, 1880). All translations are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

¹⁶ DUFOUR, 87.

¹⁷ DUFOUR, 84

¹⁸ Joseph Roselot DE MELIN, *Le diocèse de Troyes des origines à nos jours (IIIe à 1955)* (Troyes: La Renaissance, 1957), 313: “Des catholiques en arrivent à ne plus faire de différence entre l’un et l’autre [protestant] culte: il leur suffit d’obtenir une cérémonie ‘religieuse’, quel que soit le *credo* de l’officiant.”

Tuesday of the month in the Visitation chapel, during which they held religious exercises and heard reports about the conversions through the intercession of St. Francis de Sales, the apostolates undertaken and sponsored by the members, and effective ways to combat the irreligious. This was followed by a sermon delivered by one of the priests of the city.¹⁹ In effect, the members, in addition to assisting actively in the evangelizing endeavor of the Association, were themselves being evangelized by attending these monthly meetings.

Bishop Coeur commended Fr. Brisson for his leadership: “I am delighted by your success in the Association of St. Francis de Sales. You have all you need to guide it well.” He showed his appreciation by making him an honorary canon of the cathedral. Archbishop de Ségur, the Director of the Central Council of the Association, was equally pleased with Fr. Brisson’s work: “We have read at the Council of St. Francis de Sales,” he wrote, “your excellent last newsletter, and admired everything. Permit me to compliment you strongly on the intelligence and ingenious zeal with which you accomplish your ministry as Diocesan Director of the Association. You have understood this ministry better than any of our directors, and we shall most certainly profit from your good example to inspire others to actively and prudently do the work of God.”²⁰

The Origin and Purpose of *Oeuvres Ouvrières* (Apostolate for Young Women Workers)

One day, Fr. Brisson had a chance encounter in a local shop with two young women who expressed to him the need for clubs for young women like those that existed for young men. He engaged them in conversation by asking what they do on Sundays since he was well aware of the dangers that these young women encountered without a place to recreate, relax, and develop good relationships and also of the great moral dangers that they faced in the workplace.²¹ “On examining the number of young women who remain Christian in our manufacturing cities at the present time,” Fr.

¹⁹ See DUFOR, 85.

²⁰ As cited by BEAUDOIN, 40-41.

²¹ See DUFOR, 90.

Brisson noted, “one is really frightened about the future. Hardly a quarter of them practice their faith and adhere to their religious principles. So here we have three quarters of the future generation who will never hear the word of God, who will cause their own mother to blush, or will not recollect from her lips a single one of those words that make the Christian an upright person.”²²

Canon Boulard’s map of religious practice in nineteenth century France shows Troyes to be a lukewarm area surrounded by mission territory.²³ Although not as de-christianized as the diocese of Orléans, the characterization of this area by Bishop Dupanloup in a pastoral letter could readily be applied to the diocese of Troyes: “It is prodigious to see to what degree the most knowledgeable are ignorant of the Christian faith, even of its rudiments. They know neither its language, nor its simplest terms, nor its elementary symbols. Christianity is for them like a book written in a foreign language.”²⁴ A large number of Frenchmen were conformists or *saisonniers* and very loosely affiliated with the Catholic Church. As the saying goes they were “hatched, matched and dispatched” – that is, they were baptized, married and had a religious burial in the Catholic Church.²⁵ This was the extent of their affiliation.

Catechism in the first part of the nineteenth century was mostly taught by rote. “An Ursuline catechism of 1840 for teaching the catechism to girls prescribed that it should be taught: ‘by sticking to the text, without adding any explanations or complex questions, repressing the curiosity of the mind, so as to accustom them to treat matters divine with respect, and to make them more humble and more submissive to the simple beliefs of our faith’.”²⁶

Moreover, Catholicism was seen by many to be unappealing and unattractive. One historian attributes this to three factors, namely, *contemptus mundi*, a contempt for the world and a tendency to see it primarily as inimi-

²² As cited by BEAUDOIN, 45-46.

²³ See GIBSON, 171. See also *La carte de la pratique religieuse dans la France rurale*: www.jpriissoan-histoirepolitique.com/articles/analyses-politiques2/chanoineboulardlreligion-variablepolitiquemajeureatlas.

²⁴ GIBSON, 161, citing C. MARCILHACY, *Le diocèse d’Orléans sous l’épiscopat de Mgr. Dupanloup* (Paris: Plon, 1962), 171, note 1.

²⁵ See GIBSON, 163.

²⁶ GIBSON, 167.

cal to the practice of the faith; a rigorist view of moral behavior, especially in the area of sexuality; and a *pastorale de la peur*, i.e., using fear to motivate the people to live their faith so as to avoid the horrors of hell or eternal damnation.²⁷ Gibson tries to show that there was a basic evolution from an emphasis on the *pastorale de la peur* to that of love of God, attributing this primarily to the efforts and effects of the great orator Lacordaire, Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon, and Archbishop de Ségur.²⁸ We hope to show that Fr. Brisson also greatly contributed to this evolution not only as diocesan director of the Catholic Association of St. Francis de Sales, but also as founder of the *oeuvres ouvrières*.

Our study is primarily concerned with the plight of the young working women in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In his *ad limina* visit of 1857, the Bishop of Die vividly described the terrible working conditions in the textile factories:

The last thirty years have seen the constitution in our valleys of a very large number of workshops and factories which spin or weave cotton by mechanical means. It is hard to believe how great are the evils engendered by these centres of Mammon. Here the working together of men and women, often even nocturnally, the indecent conversations, the always easy opportunities for sin corrupt almost everybody and, what is most fatal of all, the young people and children, inflicting upon them the defilement of impiety, immorality and every form of perversity.²⁹

As noted above, Fr. Brisson was well aware of the environment in these textile mills and the many moral dangers it presented to young women. So he set up a number of the young women's clubs, *patronages* or shelters in the diocese of Troyes, one of the largest centers of the textile industry, to counteract their evil effects. These clubs or shelters had the primary purpose of preserving and strengthening the faith of the young women. Fr. Brisson describes their goal in this way: "We have to fashion her for this life of work which fills her existence; we have to teach her how to be a good worker and to make her efforts fruitful by sentiments of faith contrary to the perverse examples, corrupt conversations, an atmosphere of immorality in which she lives." There were two groups of girls in the *oeuvres ouvrières*

²⁷ See GIBSON, 241ff.

²⁸ See GIBSON, 253.

²⁹ GIBSON, 223-224.

– the ones who resided in the house (the *pensionnaires*) and the other externs or *patronnées*, “who met each Sunday in a special house under the supervision of devoted directresses, whose goal and efforts tended to preserve and augment the faith and religious practices in their young protégés.”³⁰ In the beginning years, the directresses were laywomen; later they were replaced by Oblate Sisters.

Fr. Brisson’s emphasis on practicality in fashioning his method of evangelization to fit the everyday needs of the young women workers whom he understood extremely well was the hallmark of his approach. He gives a detailed description of his method: “Our principle is to have the young girl begin, as soon as she arrives at the house, her apprenticeship for the practical life and by that means to truly and completely educate her, to raise her by her very work itself, by the responsibility which already weighs her down, by concern for the present and the future, at the same time by faith, piety and good example.”³¹ More than job training, it was what we would call “good upbringing” or Christian formation.

At the very outset, Fr. Brisson wanted to inculcate individual responsibility. The *pensionnaire* who lived in the house was given responsibility to manage her own money and to take care of all of her expenses. Fr. Brisson believed that in this way,

She soon learns from this experience the cost of negligence, laziness, lack of organization and care, expenditures and vanity. She soon comes to appreciate the benefits of economy, organization, cleanliness; she causes to increase little by little in her heart all the virtues of the worker, of a household, of the future mother of a family. She is the one, I repeat, who educates herself, with the safeguard, of course, and the vigilant supervision of the directresses.³²

Fr. Brisson’s Approach to Evangelization

To understand Fr. Brisson’s method or approach to evangelization, we must first note that he was schooled and steeped in Salesian spirituality, the spirituality of St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) and St. Jane de Chantal

³⁰ BRISSON, 130.

³¹ As cited by DUFOR, 94.

³² As cited by DUFOR, 94-96.

(1572-1641), by Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis (1793-1865), over a period of more than forty years as the chaplain of the Troyes Visitation monastery. Over and over again, he gratefully acknowledges in his many instructions and conferences to the first Oblates his great debt to her. He was very conscious of the way in which he spoke to the young women workers in his sermons and retreat talks to them. Understanding the psychology of young girls or women, he explicitly tells them that if he were preaching to students in school he would begin by showing how reasonable the teachings of the Church are. “But to you, my children, I will not speak in this way. Man is won over by conviction. This is what leads him to faith. For the young girl this is not what occurs. She begins to believe; she arrives at conviction by way of the heart, the mind then follows. She gives her will, her feeling after giving her heart. This is why I begin to speak to you by saying: ‘My children, love the good Lord with all your heart.’”³³ He is echoing here the teaching of St. Francis de Sales, who tells us in his letter on preaching that our words must come from our heart because “heart speaks to heart and the tongue speaks only to the ear.”³⁴

Fr. Brisson’s preaching style was naturally affected by the principal objective of preaching, namely, to appeal to one’s heart. He believed that this is to be done with great simplicity, not by trying to imitate the great French preachers like Bourdaloue and Lacordaire who appealed primarily to the learned and elite of Paris. He states that their style of preaching may be useful for an educated audience. But he preferred the down-to-earth style of St. John Chrysostom. So he exhorts the early Oblates to imitate him instead of the great French orators. “This is an orator who knows how to talk to his audience, who does not leave them isolated, who knows how to question them, to excite them, to get their attention.” He then proceeds at length to describe this saint’s method by a telling example very close to his heart – manual labor:

He preached on manual labor, on the blessings that it brings, on the maledic-

³³ *Résumé des Retraites Prêchées aux jeunes Ouvrières des Oeuvres des Oblates de Saint François de Sales à Troyes de 1870 à 1901 par leur Fondateur Le Vénéré Père Brisson* (Perous, Imprimerie G. Squartinini 1927), 118-119.

³⁴ François DE SALES, *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales*, Edition Complète, 27 vols. (Ancey: J. Niérat et al., 1892-1964), 12:321.

tions of laziness and vanity. He addresses the ladies of Constantinople who went to excess of having the luxury of beautiful hands: “Show me your hands,” he exclaimed. “Here is a callous, rugged, blackened hand. What is this hand? It is the hand of a father of a family. It is the hand of a saint; it is the hand to be kissed and venerated. Show me your hand. It is white, manicured, perfumed, adorned . . . What does that hand do? It serves vanity; it is the instrument of hell.” . . .

It is in this way that John Chrysostom understood his audience, addressed them encouraged and supported them.³⁵

This is precisely the method that he follows in evangelizing the young women workers whom he understood so well.

Addressing His Audience

Let us now consider how Fr. Brisson evangelized the young women workers. He keeps the talks rather simple and direct and dwells on basic Catholic teaching and religious practices. Unlike the approach mentioned above of the Ursuline catechism of 1840, he does not confine himself to merely repeating the words of the text but expands upon and clarifies them.

The catechism says that we are in the world to know, love and serve God. However for the young girl, there is more. She has been created not only to know, love and serve God, but moreover to make him known to others, to make him known to her friends, to a mother or father, not by lecturing them but by showing them respect, by affection, by her good services, by the example of her edifying life that it is good and profitable to serve and to love the good Lord. This is the way that you can make God known to those around you.³⁶

In very few words, he tells them the reason why God created them but

³⁵ Le Très Révérend Louis BRISSON, *Chapitres aux Oblats*, édition millénaire texte intégral établis par le P. Roger Balducelli, OSFS, avec la collaboration du P. Jean Gayet, OSFS, et des Sœurs Oblates de la Maison Mère (Troyes, Maison Mère des Oblates, 2000), Tome 2, 304. Hereafter *Edition millénaire*. On one occasion, Fr. Brisson addressed a group of workers : “Workers, you are our brothers. Jesus Christ worked just as you work. Like you he handled tools. And when I see a laborer who works, I bow to him respectfully because labor is for me, something holy and sacred,” Beaudoin, 45.

³⁶ *Résumé*, 72.

expands on the text in explaining that by this very fact we become evangelizers ourselves, that by our fundamental purpose of being created to know, love and serve God, we are also called to make him known, loved and served by others, particularly in one's own family. Those who do so, he calls "apostles of the love of God."³⁷ He makes them understand that other-awareness goes hand-in-hand with God-awareness and self-awareness. So our faith or our relationship with God has to include our relationship with others, especially those very close to us. We are by nature and by grace relational beings.

Fr. Brisson makes this evangelizing mission clearer to them in another talk in which he explicitly calls them to be "fishers of souls."

Every page of the gospel teaches us a lesson. The Savior also calls you to be "fishers of souls" (*pêcheuses d'âmes*), each in the situation in which he has placed you, to the extent of the influence that he gives you. You can rightly say perhaps, like St. Peter: "But we haven't caught anything up to now." This is because you don't use the right means.... To fish for souls, you have to be with Our Lord. You cannot refuse him anything. Then he will give you the power to attract hearts and wills and to accomplish his work in souls."³⁸

So their method of evangelizing is "to attract hearts." This means that it has to be done out of love because we do not attract hearts out of fear. So the *pastorale de la peur* has no place in his evangelical method.

You may be asking: "But how does he teach them 'to be with Our

³⁷ *Résumé*, 118. The word "apostle" had a special endearing meaning for him which he closely associated with Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis and his conception of the Church. He tells the early Oblates that they are called to be apostles. "It is no doubt the general teaching of the Church, but it is a teaching particularly dear to the heart of the Good Mother Mary de Sales that we are the continuation of the primitive church; we continue the work of the apostles, the work of the Savior; we exercise on earth, his action, his influence, his mission." (*Edition millénaire*, Tome 2, 34). The Church's mission of evangelization not only continues the mission of the apostles, but also the work of the Savior. So to evangelize is to continue Jesus's work and thereby extend his love to all those whom we are called to evangelize. Brisson extends this same idea to the young women workers when he characterizes them as "apostles of the love of God." So the laity are also called to be apostles, to be evangelizers, thereby continuing the work of the Savior. For the importance of the word "apostle" to Mary de Sales Chappuis, see Alexander POCETTO, OSFS, "Mary de Sales Chappuis (1793-1875), Apostle of the Salesian Spirit," *Salesianum*, 71 (2009): 323.

³⁸ *Résumé*, 13.

Lord?” He does this by emphasizing their basic human dignity, how to pray, the importance of the Sacrament of Confession, how to receive and honor the Holy Eucharist and regularly resort to common religious exercises or practices, the necessity of good friendships, and the importance and sacredness of manual labor. In other words, he gives them the teaching and the means that the institutional Church or the Catholic religion provides and promotes but through the lens of Salesian spirituality.

Given the low social status of most of the young working women and their deplorable family situations, the way they were exploited and treated by their employers, we can readily appreciate that their sense of self-worth had to be boosted. So Fr. Brisson stresses the importance of their basic human dignity and that of others, especially the downtrodden, for the work of evangelization: “Understand well the dignity of your soul visited by God, divinized in a certain way by the intimate union with God. Take the Savior with you, keep him not only for yourself but for all the souls that you can be called to support and to later assist. Do not let them go through life alone without knowing and loving God.” He then adds this prayer: “Come, Lord, be our strength; come not only in us but in all those whom you love and for whom we pray to you.”³⁹

Fr. Brisson profoundly felt and movingly portrayed this sense of our human dignity, especially as Christians, in one of his talks to them:

I feel myself carried away to adore God present in your souls. How is God present in your souls? Listen to this account by one of the first Fathers of the Church. A simple layman called Léonide came at night to his son Origen and kneeling down near the cradle of this little infant, he lovingly kissed the breast of his son, saying “I love and adore God in this tabernacle which is most pleasing to him. Ah! By the grace of baptism this little infant possesses God in his heart, and I love to adore him there.” I myself ... adore God present in you by faith.⁴⁰

A sense of our own dignity based on God’s visiting or coming to us forms the basis or motivation of supporting and assisting others. It helps us to be other-oriented or other-aware. This other-awareness motivates them to be evangelizers.

³⁹ *Résumé*, 5.

⁴⁰ *Résumé*, 143.

Prayer and Evangelization

The goal of the *oeuvres ouvrières* was to form Christian women strong in faith. “To achieve this goal, there were first of all brief morning and evening prayers in the chapel. The more devout girls could take part in two societies, that of the Infant Jesus for the youngest, and the Children of Mary for older girls.”⁴¹ For morning prayer, Fr. Brisson emphasized the preparation of the day in the form of directing our intention and so preparing ourselves to do and accept with love all that we have to face on any given day. In as much as most of the day of the young women was taken up with long and arduous work, he helped them to make this work pious or devout – that is, done conscientiously and lovingly. “What prevents you, when you begin your day of offering your work to the good Lord, to say to the Holy Virgin: ‘My good mother, I give you all the stiches that I will sew; I unite myself to you as you worked in the little house of Nazareth for the baby Jesus?’” Notice the simplicity, directness and concreteness of this short prayer which far from exhibiting a *contemptus mundi* shows how the mundane world of work can sanctify us. He advises them to make the morning prayer very brief but to make it every morning and gives them this example: “My God, I place my soul, my entire will into your hands. I ask for your grace, bless me, and do not leave me during this day. I don’t have the time to speak to you about many things now, but I’ll get back to you during the course of the day.”⁴²

As we look closer at this simple prayer for preparing the day, we notice the rudiments of meditative prayer or “prayer of the heart” as St. Francis de Sales calls it.⁴³ The young girl’s imagination is enticed to look closely at the common, everyday household chores performed by the Blessed Mother, details with which the young girl could readily identify. Fr. Brisson recommends to them the prayer of meditation because it is “the nourishment of the soul.” He anticipates their objection or their hesitation: “But you would say to me, ‘I don’t know how to meditate.’ Come now, suppose one of your neighbors speaks a word that hurts you. You certainly know how to meditate on it for minutes, hours and perhaps days.”⁴⁴ This is a very

⁴¹ BEAUDOIN, 50.

⁴² *Résumé*, 15.

⁴³ FRANCIS DE SALES, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, translated with introduction by J.K. Ryan, (New York: Doubleday, 1972), part 2, chapter 1. Hereafter IDL.

⁴⁴ *Résumé*, 69.

practical way of explaining meditation because it is something we all do when we are offended or praised. This same mental process can be applied to considering and reflecting on the many God given truths and our daily blessings and responsibilities.

Interestingly, Fr. Brisson strongly recommends to the young working women spiritual recollection and spiritual aspirations. Anyone familiar with the heavy burden of work in the textile mills that they had to endure - long and exhausting hours (about 12 hours a day), unhealthy and unsanitary working conditions, unsavory conversations and crude behavior – would hardly think that such an environment would be conducive to spiritual considerations. Yet, what Fr. Brisson is echoing here is the teaching of St. Francis de Sales on the indispensability of spiritual aspirations which can be practiced in the midst of great busyness. It can replace any prayer but no other prayer can substitute for it.⁴⁵ So he says to them: “Every half-hour say an aspiration to Our Lord, the Blessed Virgin or one of the saints.”⁴⁶

Fully aware that oral prayer can easily become routine and unreflective, especially recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, Fr. Brisson in very touching terms describes how the Our Father can be very helpful in making spiritual aspirations:

My children, say the Our Father as an ejaculatory prayer throughout the day. When you feel sad, abandoned, that no one thinks about you, does not concern themselves about you, so that you feel all alone, isolated on the earth like poor little exiles, which happens very often, consider that there is always someone who understands you, who takes constant and affectionate care of you, who gives you all that you need; “Our Father who art in heaven...” He has a heart that loves you unselfishly, chastely, who loves you with a pure disinterested love. This heart is that of the Savior who prays with you: “Our Father who art in heaven...” In heaven! But where the Father is, the daughter also must go. It is heaven then that is my homeland! Then, I am not an abandoned child, without parents, without heritage.⁴⁷

These words must have certainly resonated with his listeners because the family situation of many of them did not foster a sense of security, of being loved and cared for. Moreover, Fr. Brisson illustrates here a profound

⁴⁵ See IDL, part 2, chapters 12 and 13.

⁴⁶ *Résumé*, 176.

⁴⁷ *Résumé*, 127.

understanding of the young girls' heart and family circumstances and the importance of a father figure to give them a sense of their innate dignity and self-worth. Modern sociological and psychological research corroborates the deep-seated need of children, both boys and girls, for the presence of a father in helping them to grow and mature into healthy human beings.⁴⁸

The reception of the Holy Eucharist is also viewed as a means of evangelization. It is not intended merely for one's own personal devotion but must make us more aware of others and their needs. It makes us "become more charitable, generous ... makes us see God in others." As a result, we are to hold on to the truth that we "must take God wherever we go."⁴⁹

We can only "take God wherever we go" if we are not encumbered by sin. So in his many talks, Fr. Brisson explains the importance of the Sacrament of Confession not only for personal holiness, but also for bringing the good news of God's love to others. We can only take God to others if we have God with us.⁵⁰

This evangelizing role that Fr. Brisson proposes to the young women is particularly supported by developing true and solid friendships. He keenly understood their need to form the right kind of friendships in which their faith would be supported and strengthened and by which they would be helped to remain faithful.

Your enemies are powerful; how will you repulse them? Follow Jesus's advice "Watch and pray." It will be easy for you to follow this advice if you keep returning to *l'Oeuvre* (apostolate for young women). It is at *l'Oeuvre* that you will find solid friendships, that will draw you together so that you have courage. Your fidelity to *l'Oeuvre* will be the surest measure of this perseverance which I desire for you, my children, by calling upon you the choicest blessings of the Savior.⁵¹

We see here once more a clear reference to St. Francis de Sales' teaching on the importance of having like-minded friends who share our values and

⁴⁸ See Anna SARKADI, Robert KRISTIANSSON, Frank OBERKLAID, Sven BREMBERG, "Father's Involvement and Children's Developmental Outcomes: A Systematic Review of Longitudinal Studies," *Acta Paediatrica*, www.rikshandboken-bhv.se/Dokument/Sarkadi_fathersinvolvement.pdf.

⁴⁹ *Résumé*, 53.

⁵⁰ *Résumé*, 21.

⁵¹ *Résumé*, 112.

goals to strengthen and encourage us in facing our daily struggles with a hostile and de-christianized culture.⁵² Fr. Brisson's words here also convey the importance of a sense of belonging, of being part of a group or institution. So he implicitly is saying here that believing does involve belonging and that belonging strengthens our believing.

Fr. Brisson's long experience as confessor to not only the Visitandine nuns, but also the girls in their boarding school taught him how dangerous and disastrous bad company can be. "Avoid bad company," he remarks, "as you would avoid a serpent. Avoid also the company of a dangerous friend to whom you have become attached because of some attractive exterior quality which you find pleasing in her. I don't forbid you to have a friend, but you must choose her among thousands, for if you only love her because you find her attractive, you will soon fall into sin."⁵³ He is apparently alluding here to what we call today same-sex attractions not based on a true love of friendship because they are not only spiritually detrimental to oneself, but also run counter to fulfilling their mission as "apostles of the love of God."

Evangelical Impact of the Young Women Workers' Movement (*Oeuvres Ouvrières*)

By all accounts, the *oeuvres ouvrières* overall had a great effect on the lives of those whom it served. One priest who gave them a retreat remarked: "These young girls truly have a vibrant faith! I didn't believe it was possible to demonstrate so much virtue when one lived in such an environment, when one worked in the shops so disastrous to a moral life! I left profoundly edified by what I had seen and heard during this retreat."⁵⁴ In a letter, Pope Pius IX expressed his esteem for Fr. Brisson and praised his zeal and his work in the "Apostolate of the children of St. Francis de Sales."⁵⁵ Piety, industriousness and mutual affection were exhibited by "the children of St. Francis de Sales," as Fr. Brisson frequently referred to them.

This expression indicates how much the influence of Salesian spiritual-

⁵² IDL, part 3, chapter 19: "For those who live in the world and desire to embrace true virtue it is necessary to unite together in holy sacred friendship."

⁵³ *Résumé*, 63.

⁵⁴ As cited by DUFOR, 96.

⁵⁵ DUFOR, 98.

ity played in shaping the lives of these young working women. Although Fr. Brisson recommends that they read the *Imitation of Christ*, curiously, he makes no mention to them about reading the *Introduction to a Devout Life*, which was available in editions published during the nineteenth century, one of them for use in Catholic schools.⁵⁶ And yet, his teachings are essentially those of the *Spiritual Directory*, a distillation of Francis de Sales' spirituality found particularly in his *Introduction to a Devout Life*. We see this in his teaching on prayer, especially the preparation of the day, meditation, spiritual recollection and ejaculatory prayer, and the Direction of Intention which is the very center piece and heart of the *Spiritual Directory*.⁵⁷ However, the significant difference between Fr. Brisson's instructions and teachings is his emphasis on and explicit references to the evangelical and social dimensions which are less explicit in the saint's spirituality. The tone and approach of Fr. Brisson's talks are fatherly, folksy, and familiar and strike just the right note to touch and move the hearts of his charges. It is like a father talking to his children across the kitchen table.

Following the teaching of Francis de Sales that holiness is accessible and adaptable for people in all walks of life, Fr. Brisson stresses how this can and must be achieved in the sacred realm of the world of work. It is by the work of our hands that we are to get close to God and also help others to make this journey of faith and love. We do this by acknowledging our own

⁵⁶ See Viviane MELLINGHOFF-BOURGERIE, "Four Centuries of Editions of the *Introduction to a Devout Life*. Bibliographical Lessons," trans. Guillaume Kambounon, OSFS, in *Encountering Anew the Familiar: Francis De Sales' Introduction to the Devout Life at 400 Years*, ed. Joseph Chorprenning, OSFS (Rome: International Commission on Salesian Studies, 2012). "An edition of the *Introduction à la vie dévote* for use in the schools deletes the chapters on chastity and some on temptations in which the saint becomes more explicit on the matters of sins against chastity than people of that era were comfortable dealing with, especially in a classroom setting. However, it is difficult to fathom why the chapter on 'Propriety in Dress' would be considered dangerous or offensive, except, perhaps for the statement: 'More freedom in the way of ornament is allowed to young women, since they can lawfully desire to appear pleasing to others although there must be no intention except that of holy marriage'" (Alexander POCETTO, "Living the Mystery of the Visitation: The Early Visitandines as Educators," web1.desales.edu/assets/salesian/PDF/ATP-VisEducators-en.pdf).

⁵⁷ See Alexander POCETTO, OSFS, "The *Spiritual Directory* in the American Oblate Tradition" (web1.desales.edu/assets/salesian/PDF/PocettoDirectory.pdf) and Thomas DAILEY, OSFS, "The *Spiritual Directory* as a Privileged Means of Propagating the Salesian Spirit" (web1.desales.edu/assets/salesian/PDF/DaileyPropagating.pdf).

inherent worth and value and by affirming the value of others in sharing God's good news with them, i.e., by evangelizing them.

This work of personal sanctification and evangelization cannot be accomplished apart from the Church or the Catholic religion because, like a nourishing mother, it guarantees the truth of our faith and provides all the needed graces and blessings. So, by deepening the young women's love and understanding of the sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and Confession, Fr. Brisson demonstrates how we cannot possibly love Jesus without also loving the Church which he founded and which he loves so dearly. "Every day," he tells them, "let us thank God for making us children of Holy Church, for it is the grace of graces."⁵⁸ In stressing the social dimension of faith by providing various institutional means (clubs, *patronages*, shelters), Fr. Brisson concretely demonstrated the necessary social outreach of evangelization. This is the underlying truth that has to be an essential part of renewing and reinvigorating evangelization in our day and age, especially among the young.

Of course, working closely with the laity was an essential part of his evangelizing endeavors. We should particularly note that the members who regularly attended the monthly meetings were deeply edified by all the accomplishments of the Catholic Association of St. Francis de Sales; they heard and, in some instances, personally witnessed the heartwarming conversion stories. It involved them more directly in this great work of evangelization and effectively, as noted above, evangelized them as well in the sense that they grew in the love and knowledge of their faith. It should also be pointed out that initially, Fr. Brisson had dedicated lay women serve as directresses of the *oeuvres ouvrières* who effectively catechized and evangelized the young working women by their wise and motherly supervision.

Above all, he was convinced of the indispensable role of the laity in the work of evangelization by inculcating this truth in the hearts and minds of the young women workers. Most of them would soon become mothers and, therefore, would be in the best position to evangelize their families, "the domestic church."⁵⁹ The number of fragmented and dysfunctional families in our society is one of the more important and essential areas of

⁵⁸ Ed. millénaire, Tome 3, p. 32.

⁵⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11: www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

the New Evangelization, which experience tells us is most effectively accomplished by the mother. Fr. Brisson prepared them extremely well for this vocation. He noted: “A good number of the young girls remained supporters of the family of their paternal household, and they helped raise the youngest children of the family, and protected them. Blessed were the parents who had at their bedside one of these souls formed in the gentle spirit and charity of St. Francis de Sales and of the Good Mother.” Above all they became Christian wives and mothers: “But it is especially in the married state that the upbringing of the young girl of the ‘*oeuvres*’ was felt. How many young children owed to the ‘*oeuvres*’ of having a Christian mother! How many men owe their faith under the influence of the young woman who remained a child of the ‘*oeuvre*.!’”⁶⁰ So to educate young people about their vocation and mission to be evangelizers is absolutely essential for the New Evangelization.

To sum up, Fr. Brisson could be described in the terms of one writer as one of a “new breed of priests” in nineteenth century France. This historian describes them in this fashion: “A new clerical ideal began to spread, according to which a priest, instead of shutting himself off from the world as in the Sulpician tradition, should involve himself actively in the economic and social lives of his parishioners. He should organize what were called *oeuvres sociales*.”⁶¹ The numerous social works Fr. Brisson established were imbued with a particular Salesian fervor based on the inherent dignity of each human being and our basic mission of evangelizing others as “apostles of the love of God.” When formed by an acceptance and appreciation of our particular station in life brought about by the daily Salesian practice of prayer and a devotion to the Sacraments of Confession and the Holy Eucharist, we thereby make it the very locus of spiritual growth and the spring board for evangelization, taking ‘God to others’ not so much by our teaching as by our witness. And as Pope Paul VI wisely observed: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”⁶² The manner, method and spirit by which Fr. Brisson evangelized others can serve, in many respects, as an excellent example and an attractive guide for the New Evangelization.

⁶⁰ BRISSON, 134.

⁶¹ GIBSON, 98-99.

⁶² *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 41.