

Thursday, January 24, 2019 – 7pm Mass at St. John Neumann Catholic Community

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It is a great honor to be considered a friend of the Oblate family, a diocesan priest, and I consider you dear friends. Over the years we have traveled to France twice, once for the 100th anniversary of the death of Fr. Brisson, and again for his beatification in Troyes a few years later. Then, a few years back, we traveled together on a tour to your missions in South Africa and Namibia to celebrate the dedication of the convent for the Sisters in Pella.

I am grateful for the strong role you have served in the formation of our diocese in parishes and schools. Your spirituality has become a real part of the fabric of our diocese, as I've personally experienced the legacy you have left at Bishop Ireton, where many of our students at Saint Bernadette go to high school, and in Fredericksburg with the Oblate Sisters at Holy Cross Academy. Not having any biological sisters, I consider you family.

The spirituality of Saint Francis de Sales is real and refreshing, very accessible and applicable to any time. In the time following the Reformation he responded to the need for a spirituality for the laity in the Catholic Church and promoted holiness for everyone. One of the reasons the Reformation caught fire so quickly was the Church's over-emphasis on the clergy and their power, and a de-emphasis on the common priesthood of the faithful by virtue of baptism. By that common priesthood we recognize our union with Christ and one another and we are one. I said recently at an address I gave to the Federation of Diocesan Liturgy Commissions that we should try to "bring back" Vatican II and have a "Lay Lives Matter" movement in the Church. Francis was a pioneer of the Lay Lives Matter Movement.

He challenged the belief at that time that only those who withdrew from society to pursue a religious calling could realize spiritual union with God. He declared that it could also be achieved by people busy with the ordinary affairs of the world: "It is an error to say devotion is incompatible with the life of a soldier, a tradesman, a prince or a married woman... It has happened that many have lost perfection in the desert who had preserved it in the world." Our perfection consists in fighting against our own imperfections. Our perfection lies in our potential: to choose God, to live lives of holiness, to love.

We visited the beautiful city of Annecy, where Saint Francis de Sales was in exile when Bishop of Geneva. I remember hearing about his struggles with the Calvinists. John Calvin himself lived in Geneva at the time. Do you see even at the darkest hour following the Reformation when the Church was torn apart by power politics, corruption and wars in the name of faith, God had a plan. Many scholars today will say that Martin Luther considered himself a Roman Catholic to the end, and that he never intended to start another church, but the reform became something else when Calvin and Zwingli fundamentally changed Christianity into what we think of as Protestantism today. God had placed Francis de Sales literally across the river from Calvin—if only he had listened, right?—as Francis de Sales said that some battles, such as these, can only be won by love. Benedictine Abbot Prosper Gueranger in the last century writes of him:

“Francis of Sales was sent, then, as a living image of Jesus, opening his arms and calling sinners to repentance, the victims of heresy to truth, the just to perfection, and all men to confidence and love. The Holy Spirit had rested on him with all of his divine power and sweetness. A few days back we were meditating on the Baptism of Jesus, and how the Holy Ghost descended upon him in the shape of a dove. There is an incident in the life of Francis which reminds us of this great Mystery. He was singing Mass on Whit Sunday at Annecy. A dove, which had been let into the Cathedral, after flying for a long time round the building, at length came into the sanctuary, and rested on the Saint’s head. The people could not but be impressed with this circumstance which they looked on as an appropriate symbol of Francis’ loving spirit.”

As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Live in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love.

Francis’ voice is as real today as it was 400 years ago. The motto of the Oblates, as you know, is “Live Jesus!” It is a call to be authentic and relevant in the way you live your life in the world today. All of us claim, as followers of Jesus, that his gift of himself—his love, as God is love—is the greatest gift we have ever been given. Jesus gives himself to us constantly. Certainly, God has given us many gifts and things that indicate his will for us in our life but the question that lies at the heart is how have we *received* them? In order to *live* Jesus, you first must consciously and lovingly *receive* Jesus.

Francis de Sales writes about this in his treatise on *The Love of God*, a theme that Saint Pope John Paul II takes up again 400 years later when he teaches that just because we have gone through the ritual doesn’t mean that we have really received its effect: grace must be received *and lived*. Here he is not speaking about those who, by their free will, choose to sin and rupture the flow of God’s life in them. That is another thing altogether. Rather, he is speaking about those who simply do nothing.

“The Holy Spirit, source of living water, embraces the heart of man to pour out his graces into it. However, he means us freely to consent to accept them, so he infuses them only as he pleases, and to the extent that we are disposed to cooperate with them.

“If medicine were placed in a sick man’s hand, but he did not put it into his mouth, he would have accepted the medicine, but not taken it—in other words, he would have received it uselessly; it would do him no good. We too offer God’s grace an ineffectual welcome if, when it is poured out into our hearts, we do not drink it in, do not consent to it. We receive, you see, but we do not take... there is no point in being aware of an inspiration unless we act on it.” He uses the example of the empty oil jars of the widow and her son visited by Elijah: because her jars were empty the oil continued to flow. *“Let our hearts be open: or rather, let us allow our hearts to open wide; let them remain empty by assenting to God’s mercy...”*

The gift must be unwrapped, not just enjoyed because it is wrapped in precious, beautiful paper.

Spirituality is the process of awakening. How much of the world goes through life asleep? ...being born, learning, becoming adults, marrying and dying—all still asleep. Our very life is something

charged with unbearable beauty given in perfect love. It may be beyond our understanding for most of us, but that does not prevent us from knowing the joy of experiencing it.

“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing.

Another of Francis de Sales’ sayings goes like this: “There are no galley slaves in the royal vessel of divine love: (remember the movie about Ben Hur in the bottom of the ship?) “There... everyone works his oar voluntarily.” Once love is found, there is no alternative but to love the same, to give completely, to live completely.

Jesus went to a lot of trouble to love us that we might have everlasting life—his life—but it is possible to say that many people today—if not most—see religion simply as goals to be achieved and not as grace to be lived. In Catholic faith, sacraments are only the beginning, calling us to sacramental *life in order that we be conformed to him: literally, to live Jesus. To be Jesus.*

I believe this is a realism that so many young people look for today but don’t find in the practice of religion. Belief in God is something external to them, and does not prove to be useful.

But religion isn’t something you do to become someone you aren’t. It is something we do because of who we already are, and want to live more fully. So Francis de Sales.

I have preached all year on this idea in one way or another. In all my ecumenical work I believe we are beginning to discern a new understanding of unity. Unity isn’t about agreement, or everyone just tolerating each other or getting along, or deciding that personal choices do not matter. Otherwise, we are still divided by individualism. *We are already one* in baptism. If we have really *received* the gift, we must *live* out of it. Our unity must be an expression of who we already are. We are not called to be Christians, *we are called to be Christ.*

It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain

By not opening this priceless gift, we underestimate its value and too often we settle for second best. “I chose you...” What does that mean? Most people are hoping that they will somehow deserve just to get an invitation to be a guest at that eternal wedding feast in heaven—which will be quite an affair, to be sure—not even realizing that God has something completely different in his plan, something far greater: he has not chosen you to be guests of the bridegroom at the wedding feast, *he has chosen you to be the bride...*

Saint Francis de Sales knew the secret, and now you carry it within you. As an Oblate community, may we have the confidence and fortitude to be the gifts we are. Live the life you have and there will not be enough seminaries and convents, or churches for Masses. Live Jesus, Be Jesus.