

# THE SPIRITUAL DIRECTORY IN THE AMERICAN OBLATE TRADITION

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## The Directory - What is it?

For the uninitiated the term "Spiritual Directory" might readily connote some sort of register containing the names of heavenly spirits. In our computer-conscious society the phrase might make one think of a special source on a hard drive containing all kinds of files on spiritual or arcane subjects. The word "directory" caused confusion even in the early days of what was later to become the American Province of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales. This was noted and clarified by Fr. John J. Isenring, OSFS, a co-founder of the Province. "We have just now spoken of the *Spiritual Directory*. Some readers will ask, 'What is it? Anything similar to a City Directory?'" He goes on to explain:

No, indeed, nothing of the sort. It is a very small book composed by St. Francis de Sales, both for himself and for the souls whom he guided. It is intended to give us for each occupation the proper interior spiritual dispositions, and to lead us gradually by means of oft-repeated communication with God to a habitual intimate union with God, which more and more instills into the faithful soul the Divine.<sup>1</sup>

This description is essentially accurate but will have to be refined in order to appreciate the impact of this little book on the American Oblates and the various peoples to whom they minister. Of course, the term Spiritual Directory does not cause the same problem for those familiar with the religious life. Along with Custom books (*Coutumiers*) and Ceremonials (*Cérémoniaux*), Directories served the purpose of giving more precise details of how the daily spiritual life of the religious was to be carried out since the Rule was more general and more concise. The Directory or Custom Book had a twofold purpose: (1) to give the Rule and the Constitutions of a particular order or congregation its specific and distinguishing characteristic, and (2) to create a common spiritual life that would transcend cultures and countries.<sup>2</sup>

A directory also listed the duties of a particular assignment in the monastery. The word *Directoire* in St. Francis de Sales' writings as well as those of St. Jane and the other Visitandines more frequently means a list of duties and obligations of the particular work assignments in the monasteries, e.g., Directory of the Treasurer, Porter, Sacristan, etc. We read in the Constitutions of the Visitation that it is the superior's job to see to it "that all those who have a specific assignment have a particular directory of all the things they are supposed to observe in their jobs" (Const. XXIX, Cf. OEA, vol. XXV, p. 89). We would call it today a kind of job description. The relation to the notion of a Spiritual Directory would be a specification of the spiritual obligations one is required to perform

out of love for God. So the latter gives the *raison d'être* and the motivation for performing all of one's obligations.

### **The Directory and the Founding of the American Province**

It is no exaggeration to say that the Spiritual Directory played a major role in bringing the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales to America and establishing the American Province. The importance of this little book in the life of the Oblate is emphasized by Fr. Anthony Dougherty, OSFS, historian for the American Province, in the very first paragraph of his work on the "Pioneers of the American Province." "The practice of the Spiritual Directory of St. Francis de Sales is what makes an Oblate distinct from any other religious. It is the soul of the spirit and teachings of St. Francis de Sales ... and the heritage that Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis gave to Father Brisson when he founded the Oblates."<sup>3</sup> It was because the Oblates were seen as the apostles and practitioners of the *Spiritual Directory* that in 1892 Mother Alexandrine de Butler, newly elected Superior of the Wilmington Visitation, was prompted to request of Fr. Brisson as a chaplain an English-speaking Oblate well-versed in the *Spiritual Directory*.<sup>4</sup> Fr. Brisson was able to comply with this request four years later and sent Fr. John J. Isenring, OSFS, a native Swiss. (See *Pioneers*, 4 and 8).

Fr. Isenring was to be one of the foremost promoters of the *Spiritual Directory* not only in his role as Chaplain of the Visitation, but also as the first Novice Master of the English-speaking Province, as it was then known and constituted, and principally as the editor of the first Oblate organ in America - the *Echo of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales*. There has come down to us in unpublished form his talks to the sisters simply entitled "Instructions Given by Father Isenring to the Sisters of the Visitation Wilmington, Delaware." Just as Fr. Brisson did in his talks to the first Oblates, Fr. Isenring refers to St. Francis de Sales as "our Holy Founder." His solid theological and biblical background comes through in these talks as well as his penchant for using examples taken from the natural sciences.

A number of his insights build on and expand upon those of Fr. Brisson, notably the idea of the practice of the *Spiritual Directory* as continuing the work of God's creation. (See *Instructions*, 4-6 *et passim*). Fr. Isenring has an intriguing way of speaking of the presence of God:

We are not united to God by our understanding but by our will. It is not necessary to always think of God to keep ourselves in the presence of God. Not at all, it is not our understanding that keeps us in the presence of God. We might think of God or be copying sermons and not be in the presence of God. We would not be in His presence if we were not doing the Will of God and if our will was not united to His Will [...] (*Instructions*, 29).

This insight can be helpful to those who are worried and bothered by distractions and feel that these make it difficult to remain in God's presence.

## Formative Years

The *Echo*, the first organ of the Oblates in the United States, was first published in 1906 and continued for a period of 10 years. It was distributed gratis to friends and relatives of the Oblates. The magazine's purpose was "to spread the doctrine and spirit of St. Francis de Sales and for the furtherance of his work" (*Echo*, Vol. 1, Introductory Number, (September 1906), 1). The inside cover of the April, 1907 issue explained how the quarterly would accomplish this purpose:

### NOTICE TO THE READERS

The "Echo" will give Missionary (South Africa, etc.) and other news of the Congregation of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales and the Visitation order; articles of St. Francis de Sales, St. Jane de Chantal; Blessed Margaret Mary and from their works; comments in answer to questions on the Spiritual Directories of the Visitation, of Priests, of the Oblates, of Persons in the World (see advertisement back page), puzzles, curiosities about art, science, arithmetic, algebra, etc.

For our purposes, it is important to stress that the various Spiritual Directories then available in English were to be featured in this publication.

Its indefatigable editor, Fr. Isenring, wrote almost every article. "The publishing of the *Echo* for all practical purposes was the work of one man. With few exceptions every article, translation or compilation which appeared in the *Echo* was the work of Fr. Isenring. In its entire life span, other than Fr. Isenring's contributions, only nineteen additional names appear as authors of articles or poems, four were Oblate priests, five were Oblate scholastics or apostolic students, seven laymen, one Jesuit, and one woman" (Pioneers, 51). This is all the more remarkable when you consider that his native language was not English!

The readership of the *Echo* was rather modest but extensive. In 1909, records indicate that there were 300 paid subscriptions with a peak circulation in 1915 of around 450 subscribers in 18 states and 6 foreign countries. The *Echo* had available for sale *The Spiritual Guide for Priests*, *Directory or Spiritual Guide for Persons in the World* as well as a biography of St. Francis de Sales and one on Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis. These items were no longer advertised after the January, 1910 issue. The advertisement on the back cover of the July, 1916 issue has a notification that only the copies of the *Spiritual Guide for Priests* as well as back copies of the *Echo* were still available. The other items were out of print. "There is no information about the quantity of each type of Directory. A good number of the *Directory or Spiritual Guide for Persons in the World* was awarded as a bonus for people who obtained five new subscriptions to the *Echo*" (Pioneers, 52-53).

From the very outset of his arrival in the United States, Fr. Isenring was engaged in promoting an appreciation and the practice of the *Spiritual Directory* not only among the Visitation sisters, but also the diocesan clergy and the laity. As a gifted linguist, he provided in 1899, a mere three years after his arrival, the first English translation of the *Directory or Spiritual Guide for Persons in the World*.<sup>5</sup> It is very likely that Fr. Isenring was encouraged and helped in the publication of this translation by the sisters of the Wilmington Visitation.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the writer was not able to consult a copy of this translation.

The *Spiritual Guide for Priests: The Spiritual Directory of St. Francis de Sales adapted to the Use of Priests* by the Rev. R. Pernin, OSFS. Was also translated by Fr. Isenring. First published in 1906 and reprinted in 1918 by the Paulist Press, it follows exactly the French original. It contains numerous references to the *Introduction to a Devout Life*, especially on prayer, the virtues and interpersonal relations. Some aspects of the Constitutions of the Oblates were also incorporated, e.g. daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament. (Cf. p. 49 of the 1918 edition). We find in the supplement excerpts from St. Jane's deposition, presented according to his (priestly) virtues. It also has the very laudatory episcopal approbation of John J. Monaghan, Bishop of Wilmington as well as those of the Bishop of Troyes, France and the Bishop of Linz, Austria translated into English.<sup>7</sup> Apparently the two latter ones were included to impress upon American priests the wide acceptance that this little Guide had among priests from other countries. In order to show the ready adaptability of the Directory to the busy life of the diocesan priests, it included the Exercise of Union with God, which is found in the very early French Oblate Directories.

Although Fr. Pernin states in the original French version of the *Spiritual Guide for Priests* (*Le Directoire Spirituel Pour Les Prêtres Associés de François de Sales*. Paris: 1986) that "the articles printed in large letters are the very text of the *Spiritual Directory* written by St. Francis de Sales . . . (*Les articles imprimés en gros caractères sont le texte même de S. François de Sales . . .*)" (p. ix-x), some minor additions appear. For example, the opening paragraph on Article IX (VIII in the English edition) Work and Silence (p. 42.), as well as Article X [XI] On Visiting the Blessed Sacrament.<sup>8</sup> This was very likely taken from the Constitutions of the Oblates and inserted here.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that Fr. Pernin incorporated into the *Spiritual Guide for Priests* aspects of the Constitutions of the Oblates which he thought appropriate for the spiritual life of priests under the guise of the *Spiritual Directory*.

### **Influence of Fr. Brisson**

We cannot speak of the *Spiritual Directory* in the American Oblate tradition without signaling out the considerable influence that the Founder of the Oblates, Fr. Louis Brisson, had in shaping this tradition. This influence was particularly exercised in the very early years by the *Echo*. Fr. Isenring made the first English translation of Fr. Brisson's various comments on the *Spiritual Directory* given to the first French Oblates and made excerpts of these available to the readers of the *Echo*. In the second issue of the *Echo*, Fr. Isenring included Fr. Brisson's commentary on the first article of the

Directory on The General Intentions of the Oblates under the rubric of "A Day with the Directory." Fr. Isenring justifies the inclusion of Fr. Brisson's commentary in the following way:

Although the following comments of Father Brisson, Superior-General of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, refer to the Spiritual Directory of the Oblate Fathers of Francis de Sales, they will prove no less useful to the Sisters of the Visitation, the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales and to the laity and the priests outside of our Congregation who practice the Spiritual Guide adapted to their condition of life ... (*Echo*, Vol. 1, 43)

The reason for beginning this series on the Directory with Fr. Brisson's commentary on Article I is that it deals with the essential goal of the Directory, viz., "Let all their life and exercises aim at uniting them with God" and also sets for the Oblate Founder's view on the importance of the practice of the Directory.

The Directory is of the utmost importance in our Congregation; you might say it is the Directory that makes the Oblate of St. Francis de Sales. An Oblate who does not practice it is, in a certain sense, outside the community. In fact, the Directory is the substance of the life of our Lord; it leads us to God by the same means as our Savior employed to commune with His Father. (*Ibid*, 44).

This first installment in the series is followed by two formulas for making the Direction of Intention before our actions, the very essence of the Spiritual Directory (*Ibid*, 45). The other topics treated by Fr. Brisson under the rubric of "A Day With the Directory" are: the articles on Rising preceded by a little poem expressing the essence of this article by Fr. Henry Vergeiner, OSFS, who was a seminarian at the time; On the Celebration of Holy Mass; The Direction of Intention; On Saying the Divine Office; On the Manner of Hearing Holy Mass; On Meals and On Recreation. These cover practically the entire Spiritual Directory.

We can capture the flavor of how Fr. Isenring impressed upon his readers the effectiveness of practicing the Directory by citing one example. He illustrates this by describing in detail how important and how necessary the little earthworm is in continuing God's work of creation in a quiet, unobtrusive but necessary way. After an explanation of the hidden, but necessary and productive life of the earthworm, he makes the following observation:

Thus then they [earthworms] mightily co-operate with the Creator in supplying His image with an abundance of wholesome food, notwithstanding or rather owing to their leading so humble and despised a life, and the thought or sight of them should increase our practical faith in the maxim or "Useful Document" of the Spiritual Directory of St. Francis de Sales, which says, 'God loves to behold that which is despised.'" (*Echo*, Vol. II, 62- 63).

He is implying here that the practice of the Directory makes us co-creators with God, an insight coming originally from Fr. Brisson.

Comments and observations on the Spiritual Directory, in one form or other, are pervasive in the first volumes of the *Echo*. We will note some of the more important ones. An exhortation on the First Particular Wish of the Directory is introduced by a poem of Henry Vergeiner, paraphrasing this wish. This wish is that we have no other bond than the bond of dilection, which is the bond of perfection. Interestingly enough, this is an exhortation for the Oblates to be faithful to the practice of the Spiritual Directory and stresses above all the centrality of achieving this bond of love by the practice of the Third Article, The Direction of Intention. H. D.<sup>10</sup> states: "If we open our book of life, our little Directory, that book which contains treasures unknown in the beginning, but which unfold little by little and reveal themselves to our hearts, we find therein on every page, springs of love and of dilection for God" (*Echo*, Vol.II, 88). This same volume contains a conference delivered by Fr. Brisson (Oct. 26, 1887) on the Second Wish. (See pp. 200-203) and was continued in another volume.

To further promote the Spiritual Directory, the *Echo* published a series of meditations on the *Spiritual Directory* (pp. 162, 163, 164, 235, 251) in response to the request of several readers who say "they would practice it more fervently and, therefore, also more fruitfully if they understood it better. Indeed, notwithstanding its unassuming simplicity, the Directory is an inexhaustible source of spirituality for persons in every station of life, and to go by the test of our Blessed Savior, 'by their fruits you shall know the trees,' what exquisite fruits of the Directory were not St. Francis de Sales himself and St. Jane de Chantel [sic]!" (*Echo*, Vol.II, 162). The meditations deal with the article on Rising and are continued in several issues. The structure of the meditations follows, for the most part, the structure that de Sales sets forth in the *Introduction to a Devout Life*, viz. three points for considerations to prepare for a conversation with the Lord, which are to lead to affections and the affections to resolutions, followed by petitions. No specific petitions are given, but are left for the individual person to apply to his/her own concrete situation.(See *Echo*, Vol. II, 162, 163, 164, 235 and 251).

By stating that the considerations have as their purpose to prepare one for conversing with God, Fr. Isenring is echoing the teaching of Fr. Brisson. In one of his very first - recorded retreat conferences dealing with the article on meditation, we note the emphasis that Fr. Brisson places on prayer as being essentially a conversation with God. So rather than insisting on carefully following each step in the method de Sales recommends in the *Devout Life*, Fr. Brisson wants the Oblates to learn how to converse with Jesus in a simple, unaffected way.<sup>11</sup> Conversations by their very nature are unstructured. However, the conversation is to lead to practical resolutions which de Sales insists are necessary if the meditation is going to be profitable for deepening our spiritual lives. So without deviating from de Sales' teaching, Fr. Brisson prefers to put the emphasis on the dialogic aspect of the prayer of meditation.

This is just one instance of how Fr. Brisson's ideas on the Directory have played a preponderant role as to the extent of the Founder's creating and forming the tradition of

this little book in the United States. We have already pointed out several significant observations of Fr. Brisson on the absolute importance of the Spiritual Directory for the Oblate. To get a better understanding of this tradition, it will be helpful to give additional examples.

Understanding full well, that the Directory proposes a multiplicity of interior actions, Fr. Brisson, reflecting the mind of St. Francis de Sales, explains the purpose of this multiplicity: "All of us, especially the beginners, must be formed in this mold [that of St. Francis de Sales] and get accustomed to this method. Later on the multiplicity of these actions will not be a burden to us because everything will be reduced to a simplicity which will encompass all the acts in question" (Chapters, Vol. I, 4-5).

For Fr. Brisson, the article on the Direction of Intention expresses the very essence of the purpose of the Directory and is interwoven with every other article. We often hear it said that "the devil is in the details." Well, the Oblates' Founder believed, so to speak, that "God is in the details." The practice of the Direction of Intention is not just another pious practice but *the* means whereby we take our entire lives, which often consists of routine daily actions, and unite them to God. "Thus the most insignificant acts become acts of perfect charity, acts of great worth in the eyes of God, because God no longer considers them as coming from us, but as emanating from the Savior and consequently worthy of the complacency which He has in the acts of His son." In this way, "the mystery of the Incarnation continues, radiates through our lives according to the promise of Holy Scripture."<sup>12</sup>

In a sense, Fr. Brisson saw the practice of the Spiritual Directory as an obligation of love, much as the covenant bound the Ancient Israelites to God through love.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, this practice will "spiritualize the material" since it is not confined to the spiritual realm and puts us in harmony with God's creation. (Commentary, 13-14, 24). It makes us live in the present moment, is accessible to all, and makes us lead a beautiful life. (See Commentary, 12).

Fr. Brisson points out that all the marvelous virtues which St. Francis de Sales practiced were the fruit of his constant union with God, which made the Savior appear once again on the earth. The Directory is the inheritance of his spiritual children and "is a summary of the means he had employed for his own sanctification." (Commentary, 43-44). Its practice, as Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis, promised makes "the Savior...walk anew on earth with us" (Ibid., 44-45). But it is a treasure to be shared. Speaking of the care the Oblate teachers must have in dealing with the families of their students, Fr. Brisson stresses that these contacts are intended to be occasions for sharing our spirituality with others. Commenting on Article 1, The Third Wish in Imitation of St. Paul, he amplifies this idea by saying: "Our goal [in all of our apostolates, undertakings, contacts, etc.] is to preserve these souls in our way of life, to make them participate as fully as possible in our patrimony and our riches, namely, the spirit of St. Francis de Sales" (*Ibid*, 16).

In spite of the great admiration that Fr. Brisson had for St. Francis de Sales, on at least one occasion, he disagreed with a specific practice recommended by the Spiritual Directory on the way to assist at Holy Mass:

St. Francis de Sales also indicates many practices during the Holy Sacrifice. He will certainly permit me to disagree with him on some points in that chapter. To succeed in doing what he recommends would require such excessive effort as may perhaps have led to his own premature death. I prefer - as your Founder, I believe I have the right to give you my opinion - that you be attentive to the prayers and ceremonies of the Church. (Commentary, 98-99).

He does explain that Francis recommended many thoughts while assisting at Mass because he wrote this section for women, most of whom, did not understand Latin, the language in which the Holy Sacrifice was celebrated in those days.

### **Formation of the first Oblates in America**

At the very outset, the first Oblates in America were imbued with the teachings and spirit of the Spiritual Directory of their Founder and considered it as the defining element of their vocation. Instruction and practice in the Directory was an essential part of the formation of novices and seminarians. For example, J. Francis Tucker, the first American Oblate, was received in the Oblate Novitiate in September, 1904 and spent " a year of intensive training in the religious life with emphasis on the *Constitutions and Directory* of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, under the direction of his Novice Master, Father Isenring..."<sup>14</sup>

The first Oblates in America eagerly espoused its practice and dissemination. Fr. Tucker became widely known as an outstanding preacher, who gave numerous retreats to thousands of high school students and to many priests, both Oblate and diocesan, throughout his active priestly ministry. Many of these centered on Salesian spirituality, in particular, the *Spiritual Directory*, in one form or another. Here is how he explains the importance of its practice:

The Oblates who practice the *Spiritual Directory* of St. Francis de Sales have a Way with them, a Way of their own, proper to the common mode of thinking and acting that the Directory suggests, that Directory which St. Francis de Sales himself practiced with so much edification for souls and good for the Church ... The practice of the Directory forms the intention, commands that attention, and moulds the character of the Oblate according to the pattern set for him upon the Mount. <sup>15</sup>

Another very influential Oblate who helped form the early American Oblates was Fr. Charles Fromentin, the First Provincial of the English-Speaking Province, as it was then constituted. His Oblate formation was in France, and he knew Fr. Brisson. "Among the



various offices Father Fromentin held during his years at Northeast Catholic [High School] was Master of Scholastics. The Chapters which he gave on the Directory are still remembered by many of the scholastics who were under him" (Dougherty, 89).

### **Spiritual Directory for People in the World**

We have seen that Fr. Isenring translated Fr. Pernin's version of the Directory for lay people and that it apparently enjoyed good success. As the years went by, there appeared to be a need to revise this work. Father Francis Fox, a highly regarded physicist at the Catholic University of America who helped to develop sonar for the U.S. Navy used in World War II and who was also deeply involved in giving spiritual guidance, published *A Spiritual Directory for People in the World* (Baltimore, MD: Carroll Press, 1950. Subtitle: *A Spiritual Guide for People in the World*). The reasons Fr. Fox gives for his work are as follows: (1) The original English translation was out of print, (2) extensive revisions were necessary in this version, (3) "the need of bringing certain sections ... in line with modern liturgical practice." ( xiii-xv). Fr. Fox does not include the Exercise of Union with God, which de Sales wrote for a married woman (Isabel Blondeau, See OEA 26, 330-333) nor the Exercise of Stripping Oneself, which is among the spiritual counsels given to St. Jane (See. OEA, 26, 278-279) nor the Exercise of Complete Abandonment of Self, also among advice given to Jane (See OEA, 26, 272-276) nor anything from the *Treatise*.

Feeling the need for a commentary to accompany the Directory for lay people, Fr. Joseph E. Woods published *The Spiritual Directory for People Living in the World* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1960). The emphasis of this commentary was to show how the practice of the Directory effectively makes one live de Sales' motto - Live Jesus! - which he describes as "the summation of Salesian Spirituality." (Woods, 1).

### **The Adequacy of the Directory for Disseminating Salesian Spirituality**

This enthusiasm for disseminating Salesian spirituality principally by means of the Spiritual Directory was not universally shared. Doubts about its authenticity and sufficiency began to be raised. One Oblate argued that, since the Directory is primarily a compilation of the writings of St. Francis de Sales drawn up by St. Jane and some of the early sisters of the Visitation and also an adaptation, we should not seek to adapt the Directory to lay people but rather give them the *Introduction to a Devout Life*.<sup>16</sup> This argument seemed all the more plausible with the ready availability of this work along with the *Treatise* in paperback editions as well as an increase in articles dealing with Salesian spirituality and new theological trends.

Questioning Fr. Brisson's assertion that the "*Directory* is everything for us," this author asks, "Is it really?" He sees the need for demonstrating the wisdom of St. Jane and the Visitation sisters and the wisdom of the Founders of the Oblates in the selections they made for the Directory. "To put it another way, what is needed," he states, "is a correlation between Salesian spirituality in general and its summary embodiment in the Directory" (Lange, 34). To a certain extent this correlation has been done in the

numerous commentaries beginning with Frs. Brisson and Pernin. They have shown how the Directory is the "embodiment" of Salesian Spirituality and helps to create a distinctive attitude or outlook on God, oneself, and the world.

Nonetheless, with the ferment in theological and biblical studies occurring during the 1950s and 60's, preparing the groundwork for Vatican II, some Oblates felt the need of deepening the theological and biblical grounding of the Directory. This is especially seen in the De Sales Movement which flourished for about a decade. The leaders of this movement were Frs. Joseph Woods, OSFS, and Thomas McHugh, OSFS.<sup>17</sup> To show the compatibility of Salesian spirituality with recent biblical research, Fr. McHugh states, "The Salesian conception of holiness is basically biblical and emphatically Christocentric. Its *object* is the total consecration of our humanity, interior and exterior, to the sacred humanity of Christ. Its *method* is to create first of all a great love for Jesus Christ in the soul, and then to allow Him to remake the whole man from within. Its great *means* is the *Spiritual Directory*" (McHugh, 64).

In a conference at the De Sales Movement meeting in August, 1963, Fr. Woods gave advice on how the Oblate facilitators in the De Sales Movement should teach the Spiritual Directory. He suggested that they "give members of the groups a little background "on this book. "Realize that it will overwhelm many persons at first," he advises. The facilitators should let them see it as a whole in the beginning to appreciate its unity. Naturally, he referred to appropriate sections in his commentary on the Directory. ("Spiritual Directory," *Salesian Studies*, Vol. II, No. 2, (Oct. 1963), 28-30).

The entire conference on the De Sales Movement was intended to situate Salesian spirituality as especially enunciated in the Spiritual Directory in the modern writings on Christian spirituality and biblical studies in general and to show how the two are mutually enriching. A select critical bibliography of books and periodicals available at that time to assist Oblate facilitators in preparing their presentations is given at the end of Fr. McHugh's conference. (See McHugh, 125-134).

### **Vatican II and the Directory**

Notwithstanding the excellent work of the De Sales Movement to reenergize the Directory, more was required following Vatican II. As an integral part of the Rule of life of the Oblates, the Spiritual Directory along with Constitutions was to be revised in keeping with *Perfectae Caritatis* nos. 2 and 3. The General Chapter of Allentown-Troyes 1967-68 laid down the following principles or criteria to guide the work of a team of Salesian scholars in the revision of the Spiritual Directory:

- This team was to prepare a critical text which would determine those elements of the Directory that came from St. Francis de Sales himself, those added by the Visitandines and by Fr. Brisson. The team would also determine what was omitted, added or changed.

- This critical text was to be sent to all the committees on the Directory of the various Provinces for their feedback.

In one of a series of well-thought out position papers done in chapter form, Fr. Roger Balducelli, OSFS, explained the reasons for the diminished interest of some Oblates in the Directory. In an unpublished paper entitled, "Why a Commentary on the Directory," he attributed this malaise to "modern man's sense of time and history, and the relativizing of the past that results" (Chapters 1, 4). A second aspect of modernity is spiritual pluralism, a conviction that no one particular brand of spirituality can be effective for all. (*Ibid.*, 5) For these reasons and others, the Directory Commission in July, 1972, saw the need for a Commentary on the Directory that would have the following objectives:

The main purpose of the Commentary ought to be the interpretation of the revised text of the Directory. The Commentary should also define the status, authority and role of the Directory within the Salesian tradition. It should endeavor to meet the questions of our time, and possibly contribute to the resolution of the contemporary religious crisis. Finally it should help each Oblate to achieve the goal of the Directory itself. (*Ibid.*, p. 13)

The revised edition was approved by the 1973 General Chapter of the Oblates. The English translation was published in 1975. When this edition appeared, some of the American Oblates "felt that much of the material that had been removed should be preserved in some fashion, since, for many, that material had been 'a useful devotional aid'."<sup>18</sup> Fr. Edward Carney satisfied this need by publishing in 1977 *The Appendix to the Spiritual Directory of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales*. After the Constitutions had received final approval from Rome, the two American Provinces jointly published *The Constitutions, The General Statutes and the Spiritual Directory of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales* in 1990 to commemorate the centenary of the Oblates in the United States.

### **Current Status of the Directory**

The critical edition of the *Spiritual Directory* included in this publication is the one used in the current formation program of the two American Provinces. In the Wilmington-Philadelphia Province, each article is studied in detail and Fr. Brisson's commentary as well as several other commentaries by Oblates, spanning the entire Oblate history, is used. The *Introduction to a Devout Life*, the *Treatise on the Love of God* and the *Spiritual Conferences* are utilized to explain and complement various parts of the Directory, especially the article on Meditation. The Novice Master includes his own comments and demonstrates how the Directory is practiced today and can be adapted to any situation.

In his work with the Daughters of St. Francis de Sales, Fr. Lewis Fiorelli, OSFS, frequently gave talks on various articles of the Directory. At the request of one of them, he published the critical text on the Spiritual Directory with brief reflections for the laity.<sup>19</sup> The Directory has no official status among this Society but is used on an

individual basis for devotional purposes. This is also what prevails in the De Sales Secular Institute, which uses a version of the Directory drawn up by Fr. Reisinger, OSFS, Founder of the Institute, and recently shortened by Fr. Franz Wehrl, OSFS, of the Austrian-South German Province. Fr. John Conmy, OSFS, the first National Advisor to the De Sales Institute in the United States, recently wrote a brief article on the "History of the Directory" in the Institute's American newsletter to make its members more conscious of this valuable legacy.<sup>20</sup>

Courses in Salesian Spirituality on both the college and high school levels do not treat the Spiritual Directory *ex professo* but incorporate some of its basic principles, in particular, the Direction of Intention.

### **The Role of the Directory in the Third Millennium**

Although the Directory had a rocky time during the period shortly following Vatican II, the careful study and scholarly work done on the critical edition should assist the American Oblates in utilizing this little work to disseminate Salesian spirituality in its many varied ministries. No doubt, the Directory, as a distillation of St. Francis de Sales' spirituality, especially as put forth in Books 9 and 12 of the *Treatise*, cannot simply stand on its own but will need to be elucidated in the light of the excellent scholarly work in Salesian studies accomplished in recent years. The centerpiece of the Directory is, of course, the Direction of Intention. Reflecting a common sentiment among the American Oblates, Fr. Roger Balducelli speaks of it as "the mystique of the Direction of Intention:"

It is no exaggeration to say that there exists among us Oblates, and perhaps in the whole Salesian family, a mystique of the Direction of Intention. I mean "mystique" in the respectful sense of the word. In this sense, a practice is named mystique when those who engage in it experience a peculiar fascination in relation to it, in awe, if you will, akin to the awe experience in the presence of the spiritually significant whenever this significance has something of the mysterious, the uncanny, the irresistible about it. In our spiritual experience, the Direction of Intention appears to have this peculiar kind of significance. Even today, in spite of the fact that we Oblates have developed our own brand of pluralism - pluralism of graces and pluralism of aesthetic tastes - it would be difficult to find an Oblate unwilling to admit to having been touched by the mystique of the Direction of Intention." (Allentown Retreat Notes 1984, 22).

He explains that we owe this fascination for this practice to the fascination that Fr. Brisson had for it who in turn was sensitized to its pre-eminent value by Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis. (Ibid., p. 23). The case he makes for the theological validity of this practice is based on the statement of Fr. Brisson. He sets forth three basic propositions for this theological demonstration: (1) Its validity is rooted in Sacred scripture, (2) this

practice continues the Incarnation, and (3) It is the only means of achieving self-sanctification.

The Oblates of the Wilmington-Philadelphia Province believe that the practice of the Spiritual Directory and sharing this treasure with their lay collaborators is essential to the Salesian charism. So much so that they have enshrined it in the Province's mission statement issued by its Chapter of 1987. The opening paragraph of this statement reads as follows:

The Charism of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales is to live Jesus according to the *Directory*, whose end and means are union with the will of God. The Province's Salesian Spirituality Commission was given the task by the Chapter to articulate all of the key elements of the Oblates' charism in such a manner that all of the Oblates as well as their co-workers "to appropriate as their own these key elements of the Salesian Spirit."(p.1)

The Salesian Spirituality Commission under the leadership of Fr. Lewis Fiorelli, OSFS, accomplished this task in a booklet entitled: *God and the Human Family: A Salesian Perspective* with the subtitle *An Exposition of the Oblate Salesian Charism*. There are concrete suggestions on how the booklet can be used in the various Oblate apostolates. (See pp. 29-31).

There are a number of perennial theological truths upon which the practice of the Directory is based that should not make it lose its appeal in the third millennium. Certainly the insight that this practice continues the Incarnation should resonate in our day because it affirms our active and necessary participation and collaboration in the work of sanctification. Joined closely to this truth is the belief that when we perform all of our actions primarily out of love for God, we are in reality co-creators with God fashioning our destiny and completing the work of creation. Just as the work of God's creation is done freely out of love, so by loving we continue to exercise our freedom and become more aware of the fact that true freedom cannot be separated from true love.

The practice of the Direction of Intention makes us, to borrow the words of Duns Scotus, " 'co-diligente' co-loving with God"<sup>21</sup> The entire Directory should still have the validity that St. Francis de Sales originally intended it to have when he gave this advice to Mother Favre in response to how she was to apply the Directory. He replied: "Remain calm and apply this document wisely, prudently, not harshly or rigorously.... The Directory ...proposes a number of exercises, it's true, but it is still profitable and worthwhile in the beginning to keep minds regulated and occupied..." (OEA., XIX, 147). I would add that it can sensitize us to the workings of the Holy Spirit so that our spirituality, in the words of Sr. Thea Bowman, becomes for us "God-awareness, self-awareness and other awareness" (As cited in *Magnificat*, May 2000). "In the Near East there is a wonderful saying: 'the eyes see only sand, but the enlightened heart can see the end of the wilderness and the fertile land'" (Schalück, 46). The Spiritual Directory, especially the practice of the Direction of Intention, can give us this enlightened heart.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Echo of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (September 1906), 43. We will say a great deal more about the importance of this publication and Fr. Isenring, its editor, in developing and disseminating the tradition of the Spiritual Directory in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> See Elio Gambari, "Directoires Spirituels," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité: Ascétique et Mystique, Doctrine et Histoire* (Paris: Beauchesnes, 1957, Vol. 3, col. 1216-1217). Also Vol. 23, col. 1219 and 1220.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Dougherty, OSFS, "Pioneers of the American Province of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales," unpublished work in ditto format circulated in 1972, 1.

<sup>4</sup> It is instructive to note the reason why Mother Alexandrine wanted an Oblate who had the spirit of the Institute and was thoroughly acquainted with the Directory. Fr. Celestin Rollin, OSFS, the first Master of Novices of the Oblates, gave frequent conferences to the Visitandines in Annecy and the topics were always on some article of the Directory. The Circular letters sent out by the Annecy Visitation allotted most of its space to these conferences. One of the sisters who attended these conferences was Mother Alexandrine.

<sup>5</sup> See William Buckley, "Foreword," *The Spiritual Directory of St. Francis de Sales: A Spiritual Guide for the Laity* with a commentary by Joseph E. Woods, OSFS, vii.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. viii. Fr. Buckley states that this first translation coincided with the religious profession of Mother Elizabeth McQuail, who during her whole religious life was an ardent promoter of the practice of the Spiritual Directory. This points to, I believe, a collaborative effort, in the first years of the Oblates in America with the Wilmington Visitandines that was to continue down through the years.

<sup>7</sup> Bishop Monaghan's approval praises the Oblates (read here Fr. Isenring) for making the Directory available for priests:

We cannot help recognizing in this little book a wonderful depth of spirituality, and at the same time it cannot fail to appeal to priestly hearts by its beautiful simplicity. The comments added to the Directions of your holy Father are so appropriate and so conformable to the spirit of St. Francis de Sales that they too, may be well termed Salesian

It may almost seem superfluous to give our imprimatur to this charming little Guide especially as it has already received such a hearty welcome from the French - and the German-speaking clergy. May it endear itself likewise, as it deserves, to the English-speaking priests of this and other countries. It will certainly be the guarantee of ever-growing holiness to them and through them in the souls confided to their care, for we may apply to it the words of our Lord Himself: "*Qui sequitur me non ambulat in tenebris*. [Whoever follows me does not walk in darkness] (*Echo*, Vol., III, 107).

<sup>8</sup> The reason for the difference in numbering is that the original French does not have an Article VI

<sup>9</sup> See no. 136 of *Les Constitutions des Oblats de Saint -François de Sales*, p. 46. Rome, 1956.

<sup>10</sup> The author only identified as "H.D" is very likely Henry Dupouy, OSFS, an Oblate seminarian

<sup>11</sup> "Chapters by the Venerable Father Louis Brisson, OSFS," trans. from the French original (Maison Ave Maria Tilburg, Holland, July, 1967) by Joseph D. Bowler, OSFS, Vol.1, 5-6. "Although the Directory says

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that one forms himself for meditation according to the instructions given in the *Introduction* and the *Treatise on the Love of God*, our Father Superior [Fr. Brisson] reminded us there is no method, properly so-called, for meditation.

Since meditation is a dialogue and conversation with God, it is done simply and without affectation... If, even in St. Francis de Sales, mention is made of preparation for meditation, considerations, affections and resolutions, etc., we must not believe that we have to pass successively from one part to the next and be afraid of omitting the considerations and go directly to the affections.

All this is not spoken of because it all comes about in a conversation with God. It is not necessary to adhere to a model... Since our life is a life of union with God, the Holy Spirit will be in us when we are making our meditation, and He will direct us according to His will." These observations are in perfect accord with what de Sales teaches both in the *Devout Life* (II, chap. 8) and the *Treatise* (Bk. 6, chap. 1)

<sup>12</sup> Cited in *Salesian Studies*, Vol. III, No. 4 (autumn, 1966), 21. This more scholarly publication of the American Oblates was also one of the organs used to communicate the value of the Spiritual Directory.

<sup>13</sup> See *Commentary on the Spiritual Directory of St. Francis de Sales*, Washington, DC, 1954. Compilation made from conferences given by Fr. Brisson by Frs. Pierre Berthet and Fr. Louis Jonneret and translated by Angeline Bouchard, p.11 Commenting on Article I, Second Wish: In Imitation of the Wish Job made (23:35-37), Fr. Brisson says: "The day we inscribe our name in the book of profession we make a pact." The word "*alliance*" here is more properly translated as "covenant" with all of its biblical connotation. This work, which was widely used in the formation of novices and scholastics over a number of years, will be simply cited as "Commentary."

<sup>14</sup> Anthony J. Dougherty, OSFS, *Oblates of St. Francis de Sales in America*, *Salesian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3, (Fall 1963)54.

<sup>15</sup> Today's St. Francis de Sales," *The Catholic Life*, March 1939, 12-13. *The Catholic Life* was "published quarterly by the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales to spread the Catholic Ideal and Salesian Spirit." The first issue appeared in March 1939 under the editorship of Fr. Francis E. Fox, OSFS. Each issue contained a brief article under "Salesiana" written by various Oblates among them, Thomas O'Connell, Joseph Woods and Edward Carney, and contained some aspects of the Spiritual Directory, but not *ex professo*.

<sup>16</sup> "The question is: should the laity be provided with still another version of the Directory, or should we use with them the book that St. Francis de Sales did write for them, the *Introduction*." Joseph Lange, "Towards a Study of Salesian Spirituality," *Salesian Studies*, Vol. II, No. 1 (Oct. 1963), 33.

<sup>17</sup> "The purpose of the De Sales Movement is to provide our Catholic laity with an organizational framework within which they may study and discuss the basic aspects of authentic Christian spirituality under the guidance and direction of St. Francis de Sales. Special attention is given to a conceptual presentation of God's word as revealed to us in the Old and New Testaments, together with our practical response to this word and envisioned and delineated by Saint Francis de Sales in the *Spiritual Directory* and the *Introduction to a Devout Life*. Thomas McHugh, OSFS, "The De Sales Movement", *Salesian Studies*, Vol. II, No. 2, (January, 1964), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Richard T. Reece, OSFS, "Foreword," *The Constitutions, The General Statutes and the Spiritual Directory of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales*, Wilmington: Del., De Sales Publishing, 1990, p. 235. This is a foreword to "A Supplement to The Spiritual Directory of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales."

<sup>19</sup> *Spiritual Directory of St. Francis de Sales: Reflections for the Laity* by Lewis S. Fiorelli, OSFS (Boston: St. Paul editions, 1985).

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<sup>20</sup> *Salesian Light*, (January-February, 2000), 1.

<sup>21</sup> As cited by Herman Schalück, "Religious Life on the Threshold of the Third Millennium," *Theology Digest*, 47, No. 1, (Spring 2000), 45.