

## **The Congregation of the Oblate Sisters of Saint Francis de Sales**

The Congregation of the Oblate Sisters of Saint Francis was founded in 1866 by Saint Léonie Aviat, (canonised in 2001 by Pope John Paul II) and by Blessed Father Louis Brisson, (beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in 2012).

It is therefore a Congregation that was born in this period of efflorescence of religious congregations, in the heart of the 19th century, a great century of missionary zeal. In the 19th century, Don Bosco (1815-1888) wanted to place himself under the patronage of Saint Francis de Sales to found a Congregation dedicated to the service of the youth of Turin in disarray. He found in the Bishop of Geneva a model of gentleness and humility to imitate in order to touch the hearts of these disadvantaged, unloved and violent youth. Reaching out to these wounded young people by loving them and restoring their dignity is the charism of the Salesians of Don Bosco. In France, lesser-known contemporaries Blessed Father Louis Brisson (1817-1908) and Saint Léonie Aviat (1844-1914), under the impetus of Mother Marie de Sales Chappuis (1793-1875), Superior of the Visitation Monastery in Troyes, founded the Congregation of the Oblate Sisters of Saint Francis de Sales. They created hostels to welcome young women workers who arrived from the countryside to work in the factories of Troyes. At the same time, they chose to run schools. However, if Saint Leonie and Blessed Father Brisson placed themselves under the patronage of the Holy Bishop of Geneva, they did so differently from Don Bosco. They will adopt the spiritual Directory of Saint Francis de Sales for daily actions, the spiritual legacy of the Visitandines. Our Congregation will preserve from this heritage a strong monastic base by maintaining, within realistic limits, those monastic customs which give a contemplative dimension to our life. The Spiritual Directory gives great importance to the direction of intention. Furthermore, the respect for silence to guarantee and intensify union with God is a significant means. Action on souls and good will depend less on our personal charisma and natural gifts than on our close union with God. Offering oneself to God does not prevent joy and apostolic inventiveness in reaching out to the children and young people of every age. The fruitfulness of the apostolic action of the members of our institute therefore derives essentially from their gift of themselves to God. We will first present to you very briefly the circumstances of the foundation of our Congregation and the apostolic intuitions that presided over the birth of this new religious institute. Then, in the second part, we will explain the current challenges that our Congregation is trying to meet.

1. Foundation of the Congregation of the Oblate Sisters of Saint Francis de Sales :
  - 1.1. In what circumstances was this new institute born?

In the 19th century, Troyes was an industrial city in full expansion. Industrialists were looking for cheap labour in the textile factories. Many young girls from the countryside were hired in the workshops. Their life was precarious and exposed to all kinds of dangers. After their day's work, they often had no place to stay and no age-appropriate leisure activities to enjoy. One day, Father Louis Brisson, a zealous priest from the diocese of Troyes, was approached in a shop by a group of young maids who did not know what to do with their time on Sunday. Seized by their distress, he opened oratories and hostels, places where, in a family atmosphere, they could live and relax in complete safety. These hostels were more than just accommodation, but a place of human and spiritual formation. Little by little, these girls will learn to become responsible women. To ensure the future of his homes, Father Louis Brisson founded, with Léonie Aviat and Lucie Canuet, the Congregation of the Oblate Sisters of Saint Francis de Sales. Very quickly, he also opened schools to contribute to the intellectual formation of these young people, most of whom were illiterate. He saw the support offered in these homes and the teaching given in the schools as a work of evangelisation to fight against de-Christianisation and the moral and spiritual misery of young people and their families.

1.2 What is the charism of this institute, which claims to be based on Saint Francis de Sales?

The charism of our Congregation is supernatural. Indeed, it is not so much the works dedicated to youth that define our charism as the interior attitude that we are invited to adopt at the very heart of our apostolic action. Moreover, youth is not the only target audience. The elderly are also the object of our apostolic solicitude. Our charism is thus enlivened by the practice of the Spiritual Directory of Saint Francis de Sales. What is this spiritual directory? It is a small book written from the texts of Saint Francis de Sales. Saint Joan of Chantal, together with the first Visitandines, completed it and "put it into shape". Through the dispositions that the Directory suggests in each circumstance, it helps the soul to take God's point of view in all things, it supernaturalizes all the moments of life. Fidelity to the present moment and attention to God's presence thus become more effective means of apostolate and sanctification than many elaborate pastoral projects. The Spiritual Directory therefore governs each moment of our day inwardly. What is important is our correspondence to grace and thus to the will of God in the present moment.

2. The current challenges that the Congregation is trying to meet:

2.1. The places of mission in which we are established:

Our Congregation is therefore pursuing its mission on several continents. First of all, on the European continent: in France, Italy, Switzerland and Austria, where we have works in schools, in students' homes and even in a home for the elderly. On the African continent, in South Africa and Namibia, the sisters work in schools, some of which have boarding facilities. Some sisters also run crèches and nurseries. Some are sent on diocesan mission

stations to offer education to children living in very precarious contexts. In Europe, due to the decline in the number of vocations, some institutions are now run by lay people. A tutelage service accompanies the heads of the schools so that they carry out their mission in fidelity to our charism.

In the countries of South America, the establishments are still run by sisters. Vocations are more numerous. In the USA, for a number of years, we have not had any vocations, but our two establishments are still run by sisters.

Here are our mission locations:

In South Africa :

- CERES (NURSERY)
- KOELENHOF (SECONDARY SCHOOL)
- MATJIESKLOOF (SECONDARY SCHOOL)
- MOSSELBAY (PARISH WORK)
- PELLA (DIOCESAN MISSION)
- VREDENDAL (SCHOOL)

In Namibia :

- GABIS (SCHOOL WITH BOARDING FACILITIES)
- KARASBURG (KINDERGARTEN)
- KEETMANSHOOP (KINDERGARTEN - SECONDARY SCHOOL - BOARDING SCHOOL)

In Ecuador and Colombia, we also have schools with the aim of educating poor children. As in South Africa, the sisters are also involved in diocesan missions, sharing some diocesan responsibilities with lay people and clergy. A beautiful work in Colombia takes in children who are victims of violence within their own families. The children learn or relearn to live in a caring, loving and supportive environment:

In Colombia :

- MEDELLIN (SCHOOL-COLLEGE-HIGH SCHOOL)
- SABANETA (RECEPTION)
- MANIZALES (STUDENTS' HOSTEL)

In Ecuador :

- ALAUSI (SCHOOL-COLLEGE-HIGH SCHOOL)

- GUAYAQUIL (HOME)
- MANTA (SCHOOL-COLLEGE-HIGH SCHOOL)
- PUERTO (SCHOOL-COLLEGE-HIGH SCHOOL)
- QUITO (SCHOOL-COLLEGE-HIGH SCHOOL)
- ROCAFUERTE (SCHOOL-COLLEGE-HIGH SCHOOL)
- SAN PLACIDO (SCHOOL-COLLEGE-HIGH SCHOOL)

In Europe, here are our houses:

In Austria first:

- Linz (PROFESIONAL SCHOOL - STUDENTS' HOME)
- WIEN (STUDENT HOSTEL)
- OBERNEUKIRCHEN (REFUGEE FAMILY HOME)

In France, also :

- TROYES- MAISON MÈRE (GENERAL COUNCIL OF THE CONGREGATION)
- TROYES- COURS SAINT-FRANÇOIS DE SALES (SCHOOL-COLLEGE-HIGH SCHOOL)
- TROYES - LA HALT'LOUIS BRISSON (GITE)
- TROYES - CITÉ AVIAT (PRIMARY SCHOOL AND PROFESSIONAL HIGH SCHOOL)
- PLANCY (PARISH CATECHETICAL MISSION AND RECEPTION AREA)
- SAINT-PARRES-AUX TERTRES (GÎTE)
- TAIZÉ (FIRST AID POST)
- GRASSE (PARISH CATECHETICAL MISSION)
- PARIS (COLLEGE - HIGH SCHOOL - STUDENTS' HOSTEL)
- MORANGIS (PRIMARY SCHOOL)
- SAINTE-SAVINE (SCHOOL-COLLEGE)
- SEZANNE (RETIREMENT HOME)
- VOIRON (PRIMARY SCHOOL)

2.2. Educational challenges :

The challenges we face are educational and missionary challenges in a context of secularisation. We seek to promote an integral education of children and adolescents. Our founder, Saint Leonie Aviat, recommended: "Trust attracts trust, but it cannot be ordered... Great prudence, charity and discretion are needed. Children must feel that their little secrets are respected. Respecting children and adolescents in their integrity must be a priority, all the more so in the current context of denunciation of abuse in the Church. In this respect, we are very careful in our educational approach. Since the origins of our Foundation, we have decided to be polite to them (except for the children of the kindergarten and the elementary school). By this educational choice, we intend to show the young people that we have a certain reserve with regard to their dignity which we want to honour. Such an attitude preserves us from possible familiarities and from an educational positioning that could be ill-adjusted. Freer relations can result from this educational distance that the formal form of address imposes quite naturally.

Saint Leonie also gave this other advice: "With regard to children, act with patience, gentle firmness and prayer. When a child is won over to the side of the heart, you can ask her anything you want, she will do it... Never make things, even important and serious things, a matter of state." Patience and gentleness are therefore the two great virtues that we seek to cultivate in our educational approach. It is a pedagogy of small steps, based on the trust we place in each young person. This is precisely God's pedagogy for us. God is always patient with us without becoming discouraged.

### 2.3. Societal challenges :

The emotional instability in which a number of the young people we receive and their families find themselves is a source of suffering. The trivialisation of divorce is the main cause of this. Even if most of them can live with this situation as it is now so widespread, the emotional wounds are no less real and deep. We must therefore learn to accompany these young people and their blended families. On the other hand, societal phenomena such as addiction to digital technology, alcohol, so-called "soft" drugs, pornography, gender and trans-identity issues require training that must be constantly updated in order to respond to these questions with acuity and professionalism. This is not easy because the countries to which we are sent on mission do not always share our anthropological vision based on that of the Church. But these are challenges that we have to face, in the spirit of Saint Francis de Sales, that is to say, by respecting the freedom of each person, in the way that God himself honours ours. Indeed, God is infinitely respectful of our free will. Francis de Sales states this with conviction in his Treatise on the Love of God: "Grace has powers not to force, but to entice the heart; it has a holy violence not to violate, but to make our freedom loving. So we want to imitate the pedagogy of God who loves us too much to try to impose himself. But if Saint Francis de Sales emphasised God's profound respect for our freedom, it is because he assumes an anthropology based on the concept of the person and not on a kind of good-natured and consensual humanism.

#### 2.4. . The Salesian anthropological vision based on the concept of "person": good news for today!

We take up again what St. Francis de Sales said: "Each person has his own gift, one so and one so, says the Holy Spirit". To fulfil one's vocation in the Christian tradition is to become truly human. But how can such a vocation be realised if not by identifying with the One who is most human, namely Jesus Christ? Basing ourselves on a rather unexpected formula taken from the Treatise on the Love of God: "God made himself in our image and likeness through the Incarnation", we understand that for Francis de Sales, the Creation of man is primary, not so much in the chronological time of history as in the intention, that is, in the eternal plan of the Father. It is because man is great that God chose positively to become incarnate. St. Francis de Sales reminds us that it is because of the eminent dignity of man that God wished to take flesh. Redemption must be understood as an increase in love. By this the Bishop of Geneva also wants to indicate that sin did not condition the incarnation in any way.

#### Conclusion:

Also, it is because Saint Francis de Sales carries such a positive vision of man that we pursue our apostolic mission with determination, with this conviction at the heart (which we hold from Saint Francis de Sales) that there is indeed a "convenience" between man and God. At a time when we are facing an unprecedented period characterised by a massive secularisation of our societies, by major political crises, by unprecedented anthropological upheavals, Saint Francis de Sales appears as a solid spiritual figure because of the balance and realism of his spirituality. Francis de Sales, who affirms the providential action of God, recommends to us the only attitude to adopt in order to accomplish our mission: trust in God.

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